

Highlights from Education Week Leadership Forum: *Powering through the Recession*

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David Rust, Partner

Sandhill Consulting Group LLC

General information

- This is first time in some years (if ever) that Education Week has hosted such an event; a similar conference is scheduled for May 15 at Newport Beach, CA. Sandi White will attend.
- Approximately 250 registered attendees for Jersey City were split evenly between vendors/outside organizations and school system administrators.
- Two contrasting topics motivated all the sessions:
 - How to deal strategically with funding cuts necessitated by the recession
 - How to take most advantage of the federal stimulus funds.
- Major presenters included
 - Current and former top state and district school officials (e.g., Joel Klein, Chancellor-NYC; Paul Vallas, former Chicago & Philadelphia CEO, now Superintendent-Louisiana Recovery School District); James Notter, Superintendent-Broward County FL; Cliff Janey, Superintendent-Newark NJ; Pedro Martinez, CFO, Chicago; Lucille Davey, Commissioner of Education-NJ)
 - Dan Domenech, AASA Executive Director
 - Union (ATF), universities, external organizations assisting schools

Major themes and observations

(Remember that these are primarily views from successful high-profile big-district leaders. Views from smaller districts or those with more muddled track records may differ considerably.)

- Lots of different perspectives over whether the demand that the \$115b *stimulus monies show evidence of performance improvements* is realistic or feasible. There is a growing acceptance of interim or proxy measures (e.g., attendance; subject grades; college admissions) that can show performance improvement. No one believes high-stakes test scores will jump in 2 years as a result of stimulus.
- Biggest needs are *better quality teacher preparation and better distribution of quality teachers*. Klein is especially vocal on this. Many strategies discussed. Not a lot of hope for improvement from teacher's colleges in near term, so continue mining alternative certification sources (e.g., Teach for America), support young teachers better once they start, and fight for better control of teaching force from union contracts, especially reform of tenure system.
- *Assessment systems* are improving by migrating toward longitudinal growth models. Everyone feels they continued gradual moves will satisfy USED because they are not starting from zero.

- Now they need to adapt some of same principles to *track teacher performance* using appropriate metrics, and use outputs in ways both formative (teacher feedback to improve performance) and summative (retain, promote, dismiss). Requirement if unions are going to consider more pay-for-performance or loosening restrictions on tenure and firing.
- Ultimate adoption of *national standards* is taken for granted; perhaps ultimately a national test.
- After many years of trial-and-error, schools are still focused on getting more and better *educational technology*, with most of the emphasis on *on-line courses and on-line support*. This theme is supported by USED, frequent citations of Clayton Christensen's book *Disrupting Class* (who says the transformative innovation of technology in K-12 will be when online courses become the dominant method of instruction).
 - Notter/Broward County (nation's sixth largest school district) is clear about how his experience has changed the goals for technology in schools:
 - From: every child gets a laptop (they end up in closets)
 - To: the "digital classroom":
 - Classroom by classroom, selected on basis of classroom teachers who are facile with the technology
 - Classroom gets broadband, wireless and all appropriate technology tools (whiteboard, laptops, handhelds)
 - 3-5 classrooms per school and growing.
 - Whiteboards (almost always called by the brand name SMART Boards) seem to have produced the biggest a-ha moment for top leaders: they see them as the new focal point of classrooms, getting high-poverty kids engaged and doing incredible things with video, animations and the internet.
- *High school* gets more focus than any other grade range. Districts feel they've made great strides in elementary; very little is said about preschool (despite the research and policy pressure, this felt like a somewhat expendable part of the agenda). Marcia Lyles/NYC admits they've frozen preschool funding.
 - In high school, helping kids with "college readiness" and taking AP courses generate the most excitement. Dropout prevention is dismissed as taken for granted and inadequate to the goal.
 - Serious efforts are being made to follow these kids into the first 2 years of college to ensure they succeed, and working collaboratively with community colleges to increase support so that they stay in college.
- *Math* is the most mentioned subject; *science* second; reading issues are very little cited.
 - How do we attract more math teachers who have the content knowledge?
 - How do we shift more funding from electives to core subjects esp. math?
 - How do we provide more math and science support to our challenged high school kids striving for college?

What's the range of experience so far in dealing with the extraordinary push-pull of recession and stimulus?

- It's surprising how some previously troubled districts (e.g., Newark) and districts in troubled states (Broward) view the challenge.
 - Newark, Chicago and others: this is a great time to be more strategic about how we spend our dollars. Make the unconventional choice to improve teacher and student performance.
 - Broward FL: Superintendent Notter is the most excited he has ever been in his 35-year career with opportunity brought by the stimulus. He is determined to show that after 2 years, progress against certain metrics will be clear against their 5-year plan.
- No one expects states to try to micro-manage how funds are spent or difficult choices (e.g., layoffs) are made.
- Notter/Broward says for first time he is going to use Title I for high school because that's where the need is. He's not sure how many others are making this decision but says it's crucial if he's going to avoid losing lots of kids from his system due to NCLB choice provisions.
- Many cite the fat in big ineffective professional development budgets as great source of savings to fund more productive things.
- Most innovative suggestion: ensure that good formative (benchmark, ongoing) assessment systems are in place, then organize ongoing professional development about how teachers can generate and use these data to improve instruction. Much more purposeful/news-you-can-use PD.
- The move from quantity (manipulating numbers) to quality (improving effectiveness) makes it okay to consider saving money by modest reductions in class size as long as some of the savings goes toward strategies proven more effective, like getting more subject-area coaches and tutors. Recession can force productivity improvement (although no one uses word "productivity").
- Several claim that limited-time stimulus can fund the transition from poor past practices to more strategic methods and organization.