What makes Houston so special that its former superintendent would rise to become the U.S. secretary of education, a political plum normally reserved for noneducators such as former governors Lamar Alexander and Richard Riley? In short, Houston is a rare breed: an urban-school-reform success story.

Houston is one of the few urban school districts to have pursued a sharply defined, consistent set of goals and reform initiatives for a sustained period. The Houston school district and school board have kept their eyes on the same ball for more than a decade. Moreover, the school system has shown itself to be remarkably open to evidence of whether its reforms are working. The school board, superintendent, and civic leadership evaluate their initiatives and adjust their tactics in light of the results. They have operations that are more efficient and increasing student performance to show for it all.

These features should not set Houston apart but, tragically, they do. Most big-city districts try many reform initiatives, some mutually contradictory, all at once. Many districts simply fail to define their theories of reform—in some cases because superintendents and school-board members cannot agree on what should be done; in other cases because officials don't wish to make specific promises about actions and results. Finally, few big cities have the ability to track how their reforms are being put into practice or whether they are ultimately improving student learning.

Chicago is probably the only other urban school system with an explicit set of goals and a plan to attain them. It also has pursued its plan of action consistently over a considerable, certainly not long period, and it has likewise paid attention to results. Like Houston's, Chicago's efforts are still far from wholly successful. As recent events have shown, Chicago must also find new superintendents from time to time. Nevertheless, a combination of consistent purpose and openness to evidence has allowed Chicago and Houston to survive transitions and to make steady progress rather than to gyrate at random. In Houston, as in Chicago, the glass is definitely not full, but it is at least not empty.

Laying the Foundation
Perhaps the Houston school system's greatest accomplishment has been to create a widely understood strategy for improving school performance. Houston's strategy starts with its acknowledgment that many children are not being adequately prepared to participate fully in the community's economic and political life. The goal is to strengthen schools so that all children learn.

The school system is engaged in a three-pronged strategy of school improvement. First, Houston has increased the autonomy and freedom of action of its principals and teachers, so that they can use their time and talents effectively on behalf of the individual students they serve. Second, the central office...
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has been steered away from monitoring compliance and toward providing high-quality materials and assistance to schools. Third, the efforts of the school board and superintendent have been focused on the accountability function: supporting schools that perform well, assisting schools that are earnestly struggling to improve, and creating alternatives to failed schools and ineffective central-office initiatives.

Houston, particularly former superintendent Rod Paige, has found a way to use central authority strongly but for limited ends and within defined boundaries. When schools lack key resources, or when particular schools or programs are performing badly, central authorities look for alternatives. However, they minimize the use of one-size-fits-all mandates, understanding that these drive out initiative and a sense of responsibility at the school level.

Houston has been unusually clear about its strategy for school improvement. The board has constantly and publicly renewed its commitment to its strategy of change, and Paige aggressively publicized the reform strategy and tied his reputation to its success. Though individuals like Paige and Donald McAdams, a school-board member, have become extremely well known, they have emphasized the strength of the strategy rather than the magic of their own personalities. This is a sharp contrast to the practice of hero superintendents like the late John Stanford of Seattle, who inspired hope and loyalty, but was never clear about his plan.

Clarity about strategy has led to continuity. The school board has frequently held retreats for personnel to renew their commitment to Beliefs and Visions, the board's early statement of reform goals and strategies. These retreats have also been used to socialize newly elected members of the board. Long tenures for several school-board members as well as Paige's background as a board member and author of Beliefs and Visions have also ensured continuity. Paige's knowledge of Houston and established connections with key groups ensured the effectiveness and staying power of Houston's reforms. Paige worked well with the unions throughout his tenure. Of course there were tensions, but they never erupted into strikes or firm union opposition to his initiatives. Here Paige's political skills and knowledge of the community were crucial; he avoided any conflicts on which civic elites would side with the union. The fact that Texas is a right-to-work state also meant that the union had less leverage than in most other large districts.

Houston is not alone in benefiting from a superintendent who is an important local political figure: superintendents with their own local knowledge and base of support also lead the Chicago and San Diego school systems. New York City Community School District #2, whose reforms are widely touted as a national model, also benefited from the fact that its superintendent had a virtuoso's grasp of community and school-system politics. In San Diego, Alan Bersin, a former U.S. Attorney, sets a broad strategy and works to sustain it politically. To lead the day-to-day execution of the strategy, Bersin selected an expert in educational leadership, Anthony Alvarado, architect of the reforms in New York City District #2.

Most big-city school districts hire superintendents who know nothing about the city in which they work. Driven by the need to find someone of the right race or ethnicity, or to hire someone who in no way resembles the previous superintendent, school boards draw at random from a weak pool of itinerant school administrators. Even if these individuals have good ideas about how to improve schools, the vast majority run afoul of community politics and quickly fail. On average, superintendents hired this way survive less than three years, cycling through a brief honeymoon, a longer period of deadlock, and a final decline. Houston and a few other localities have taken to heart Tip O'Neill's dictum that all politics is local.

Houston's business and civic leaders also deserve credit for recognizing the need for a sustained and highly public school-reform strategy. In most cities, civic leaders pay attention to education—for only a few months every few years, long enough to get rid of one superintendent and recruit another. Houston's elites, including visible minority leaders, were committed both to Beliefs and Visions and to Paige as the person who could make the plan a reality. Paige was not a man on horseback or a magician with a secret plan. He was a leader with a mandate, one who expected to be scrutinized and understood the grounds on which he would be judged.

Overall, the leaders of Houston's school reform have demonstrated the responsible use of power. Rod Paige personified this: he was comfortable with author-

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ity, but disciplined enough to use it only to support a defined strategy. In my experience, the responsible use of power is all too rare at the top of big-city school systems. Many district leaders fall at one extreme or other, either hiding behind rules and regulations and eschewing strong actions, or taking strong actions but failing to explain how these stem from a broader strategy.

Building the Home

Clearly, Houston students are learning more than ever before. The school system has succeeded in taking what scholar Anthony Bryk calls the first step in school reform: it has moved from little or no teaching to some teaching. However, it is now struggling to take the second step, to good teaching everywhere. The challenge for urban schools is to build on their success rather than resting back complacently. How can a city like Houston build on what has been accomplished?

• First there must be follow-through. Too often urban school systems begin initiatives and never perfect them, preferring new initiatives that attract publicity and give the appearance of doing something. In Houston, this means completing the decentralization of funds and spending decisions to individual schools begun under Paige. It also means eliminating the spending inequities between schools in richer and poorer parts of town. In Houston, as in so many urban districts, the accounting system pretends that every teacher earns the average salary of teachers in the district rather than accounting for the actual costs of the salaries at a particular school. Schools in poorer areas are often saddled with the youngest, most inexperienced and thus lowest-salaried teachers, yet they’re charged as if they have a veteran squad. This creates the illusion of spending more on poor schools and less on wealthy schools than is actually being spent. Houston and other urban districts must also increase their use of chartering to create new options in neighborhoods where schools consistently fail to educate students to state standards.

• Second, inevitable transitions in leadership must be planned for. Urban school districts tend to lose their focus, hopping from reform to reform, as new leaders with ideas of their own take the helm. Such as Houston, not only the superintendent and school board but also elected officials, civic groups and foundations, and religious and business leaders must prepare to recruit superintendents and school board members who remain committed to the district’s reform strategy. The reform strategy itself must be regarded as larger than the people executing it. Rod Paige has already moved on, and within a short time—between a few months and three years—the remaining board members who were present at the creation of Beliefs and Visions will leave their posts. This will be a challenging time for the reform strategy that has taken Houston so far.

Sound strategies do not perpetuate themselves, and new leaders have little incentive to study or maintain what went before. New superintendents must...
be thoroughly educated about what has been done to date and why. Likewise, potential school-board candidates must be screened and supported (or opposed) on the basis of their grasp of and commitment to the strategy. Incumbent board members can help socialize newly elected colleagues, but there is no substitute for an aggressive recruitment process. New leaders should know that their selection and continued support depends on continuing and extending a district’s school-reform strategy.

**Principals who hope to make their high schools into bridges to the fast-changing high-technology economy battle tradition and faculty indifference.**

Though Houston business leaders have played important roles in developing and supporting school improvement, they now have a deeper role to play: protecting the basic reform strategy from erosion or careless abandonment. The business community might also need to work on the city’s behalf in the state capital, lobbying for the amendments and waivers to regulations necessary to allow Houston public schools to operate as an all-charter district with school-level control over hiring, staffing structure, use of time, and spending.

In the future cities such as Houston will need to push the boundaries of their strategies even further. Reform leaders in Houston readily admit that their initiatives have not gone far enough—that some schools and groups of students are still waiting to benefit and that there are still assets in the broader Houston community—people, organizations, and ideas—that have not been fully exploited. Houston’s reform strategy is on the right track, but it must expand to include some “outside-the-box” initiatives, such as:

- New options for secondary-school students. Houston’s reforms to date have scarcely touched high schools. As in cities throughout the country, high schools are far less responsive to the needs of students, especially the disadvantaged, and more resistant to change than elementary schools. Imitating universities, high schools are typically organized according to academic departments, and faculty members often associate only with those who teach the same subjects. This makes it extremely difficult to create a sense of shared mission. Principals who hope to make their high schools into bridges to the fast-changing high-technology economy battle tradition and faculty indifference. The city needs to create new options for students and to use chartering to create schools that link young people to the real world. San Diego’s High Tech High is an example of the secondary school of tomorrow. It has a small permanent faculty, and its instructional program is constantly evolving, but with a consistent goal: to help students see for themselves how intellectually demanding their world will be, via placements, internships, and visiting practitioner-teachers.

- New uses of online instruction to give all students access to world-class presentation of ideas and materials. Although teaching and learning must always be individualized and caring, there is no substitute for excellent teaching. This is particularly true in quantitative, scientific, and linguistic disciplines in which few current teachers can claim mastery. Houston and other big-city systems need to experiment with new ways of combining on-site teaching and tutoring with world-class online coursework. This is now available for certain Advanced Placement courses. Within a year, similar coursework will be available for many of the most demanding subjects taught in secondary school.

In the future, secondary schools will need to become brokers of learning opportunities—some
provided by teachers in the classroom, some available through internships and other out-placements, some available on the web—rather than fixed structures of traditional departments and permanent staff.

New approaches to the recruitment and training of teachers. Houston’s alternative certification program, which brings people from nontraditional backgrounds into teaching and prepares them to succeed in the classroom, is a model for the rest of the country. More is needed, however. Teacher shortages are likely to continue growing. In an economy where the most-talented young people have many remunerative options, teaching cannot be set apart as a lifetime, low-paying occupation. A college graduate expects to have several careers; some even anticipate making high incomes during some periods of their lives and trading income for satisfaction during others. Many of them express interest in episodes of teaching throughout their careers. The current teaching occupation, viewed as a lifetime commitment to civil service, is unattractive to the best candidates.

Houston and other cities need to find ways to attract the best candidates to teaching, especially those who have mastered scientific, technical, and managerial skills that are rare among current teachers. A possible approach is to hire teachers through contracts with professional cooperatives. These cooperatives could recruit and train teachers and provide their salaries and benefits. The school district would pay for teachers on a contractual basis. Individuals could be assigned to work in one school or many (for example, advanced physics teachers might be able to work in two or three high schools instead of just one), and to work full or part time. Some recruits might keep jobs in other industries while working part time as teachers. Individual teachers’ pay and benefits could be based on the scarcity of their skills and their individual performance rather than on seniority.

Some dedicated teachers might prefer permanent civil-service-based teacher contracts. But arrangements like the one described above could give urban schools and students access to the entire human-resource pool of a city such as Houston, not an arbitrarily limited part of it.

New, independent local institutions to support school reform. Nationally, school districts have been unable to develop some resources that are needed for sustained school reform. Such resources might include an incubator for new schools; a network of organizations willing to provide management consulting and other services in return for fees paid by individual schools; organizations to analyze and publicize school performance information; and an independent inspectorate to assess the performance of individual schools in light of the challenges they face. There must be ways of creating new schools to meet new needs and to replace failed schools. Schools that control their funds and are accountable for performance must be able to find the kinds of assistance they need. Public officials who intend to hold schools accountable for performance must be able to look beneath test scores to judge whether a given school is capable of improvement. Parents who have choices need valid and timely information about school performance. An independent real-estate trust could own all school buildings and have the authority to lease and develop properties so that all schools, including charters, would have access to publicly subsidized space.

Following the Blueprint

Leaders in other cities can and should learn important lessons from Houston’s experience. However, other cities should not kid themselves about how complex Houston’s strategy is or how much commitment is necessary to make it work. Localities that pick one or two easy-to-implement initiatives that resemble Houston’s, but ignore the rest, will not get the results they anticipate. If community and business leaders think the work can all be left to educators, they will soon find that their initiatives are pale imitations of Houston’s and not worth the time and money spent on them.

This is true of other promising reform initiatives as well. Many localities trying to imitate Anthony Alvarado’s striking success in New York City are finding that it is easier to adopt some of the surface elements of a strategy than to reproduce all its active ingredients. Other cities cannot clone Houston’s history, nor are they likely to have exact counterparts of the people who are the heroes of Houston—active and engaged business leaders, career educators, and community activists called to serve on school boards. But they can recruit and support their own counterparts. Investing in the election of a knowledgeable and responsible school board, creating a workable strategy that can be widely understood and handed along as new leaders succeed old ones, and finding a superintendent who can lead effectively in the local context—these things can be done, but it takes a city to accomplish them.

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