

## **Improving Public Schools An Action Kit for Municipal Leaders**

Mayors and city council members all across America know that our communities' success depends on the health and well being of the nation's children, youth, and families. Now is the time to act on this knowledge. As a municipal leader, you have the ability to focus the attention of your community on the needs of children, youth, and families. Working with your colleagues in local government, you can strengthen municipal policies, support effective programs, and bring diverse partners to the table in order to make things happen.

The quality of public schools and the long-term prospects of cities – almost every local elected official knows that these two things are closely linked. The connection is based in part on the central role that schools play in building stable communities and shaping residents' perceptions of the quality of community life. Municipal leaders also understand that a strong public education system is a great asset as their cities compete for new jobs and industries. An NLC survey found that local officials view improvements in the quality of elementary and secondary education as one of the three most effective strategies for promoting local economic development and reducing poverty.

No school district by itself can do all that needs to be done to improve our public schools. Good schools are the shared responsibility of many partners: school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, families, community and faith-based organizations, cultural institutions, business leaders, and elected officials at all levels of government. Francis Keppel, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, put it succinctly: *“Education is too important to be left solely to the educators.”*

**Mayors and city council members are essential partners in improving public schools, and they can play key roles even when they have no direct authority over local school districts. This action kit outlines a wide range of ways that municipal leaders, working in partnership with school officials and the community as a whole, can help ensure that our public schools work for all children.**

### ***Advice from the National League of Cities***

In most American cities and towns, education is not viewed as a municipal responsibility. But local elected officials around the country are demonstrating that local governments *can* make a positive difference in improving schools — and not necessarily by exerting greater administrative control over the educational system. The work of these elected leaders is based on their recognition that they have an important stake in the success or failure of local schools. They understand that:

- The health and well-being of our communities are undermined when schools fall short of ensuring student success.

- Successful schools contribute to community quality of life, economic development, and a strong citizenry.
- With education reforms placing schools and communities under increasing pressure to improve student performance, mayors and other local officials are uniquely positioned to strengthen community capacity and public will to address key education challenges.

In the course of their participation in the Municipal Leadership in Education project, elected officials and their local leadership teams in the project's six cities learned a great deal about what works — and what does not — to strengthen and support public schools. The following “lessons learned” are drawn from extensive interviews by staff of NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families with mayors and team leaders in each of these cities.

1. Vigorous and sustained mayoral leadership yields big dividends.
2. Contentious debates or fears regarding changes in school governance can quickly derail school improvement efforts.
3. Strong city/school district partnerships depend on both personal relationships and institutional capacity.
4. A commitment of city resources towards education builds trust and goodwill and enables schools to overcome barriers to student achievement.
5. Well-focused data analyses build consensus and support to ensure that all children — regardless of their racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds — have a chance to succeed.
6. The involvement of business, faith-based, and other community leaders can enhance the credibility and the effectiveness of joint city/school district initiatives.
7. Ongoing public engagement is essential to the sustainability of school improvement efforts.
8. There is no substitute for a community-wide plan that defines clear goals and holds city leaders, school officials, and other key stakeholders accountable for results.

Note: All of this information was gathered from two National League of Cities publications:

*Stronger Schools – Stronger Cities*  
*Improving Public Schools: Action Kit for Municipal Leaders*

These can be found at:

[http://www.nlc.org/topics/index.aspx?SectionID=youth\\_education\\_families](http://www.nlc.org/topics/index.aspx?SectionID=youth_education_families)