



# The Conditions for Success: Executive Summary

Ensuring great public schools in every neighborhood



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In the summer of 2013, The Missouri Board of Education posed the question: what is the appropriate role for the state in the support of and possible intervention in unaccredited school districts, if the goal is achieving dramatic student achievement gains? This draft report provides recommendations to answer that question, and represents a comprehensive vision for an urban school system that fosters the conditions schools, educators, parents, and students need for success. While we focus here on the Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS), these recommendations could also guide state intervention in other unaccredited districts.

## The Conditions for Success

This project has been informed by one daunting fact: Individual urban schools in America are achieving incredible results for students from low-income communities, but no urban *school systems* are achieving incredible results for all — or even most — children in an entire city.

Our team scoured research and data from across the country to identify these individual schools of excellence. We then identified the **conditions** that have enabled these schools to succeed where so many others have struggled. Simultaneously, we conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with teachers, parents, union leaders, community leaders, and district leaders to better understand the history of education in Kansas City, and to get their ideas for how a school system could create the conditions through which every neighborhood has a great public school.

Based on this research, and the results of our interviews and focus groups, we have prepared a draft plan for how the State Board can help Kansas City and other unaccredited districts create those conditions for every school system-wide, in order to move from schools of excellence to a system of excellence.

**Two core conditions** unite most high-performing urban schools:

1. **Educators Run Schools:** In the high-performing urban school our research identified, educators and school leaders are in charge of the major decisions. They control the staffing, curriculum, school culture, calendar, and budget. They are free from the bureaucratic constraints of a one-size-fits-all central office. This broad professional autonomy enables educators to meet the needs of the students that they know better than anyone else. And it makes it possible for schools to attract and keep the best possible leaders and teachers, who crave the opportunity to create schools that help students succeed.
2. **Schools are Held Accountable:** While empowered educators run great urban schools, the system also holds them meaningfully accountable for achieving ambitious results with students. The high-performing schools we studied viewed strong but fair accountability as central to keeping them focused on driving student achievement gains.

## Listening to Stakeholders

We wanted to tailor the plan to Missouri, with a special focus on Kansas City, to reflect the unique and important perspectives of the stakeholders who participated in our focus groups and interviews and to respond to the data we gathered about Kansas City. The focus groups revealed several commonalities.

- ✱ There is broad agreement on the need for universal access to **high-quality pre-K** so students come to school ready to learn.

- ★ There is near consensus that **schools and educators should have more autonomy to run schools**, as long as they have shared performance goals and are held meaningfully accountable.
- ★ There is a shared desire for the system to have the **flexibility to spend resources on wrap-around services**, so students can go to school, healthy, well fed, and well-supported.
- ★ Parents and teachers were particularly interested in having a **system that fostered multiple types of school programs and themes** — such as Montessori, African-Centered, or Science and Technology.
- ★ Most stakeholders believed that parents should have the option to send their child to the public school in the city that best meets their needs, but that **every neighborhood should have a great public school**.
- ★ There was near consensus that schools should be held **meaningfully and fairly accountable**, and the system should provide parents with better information on school performance and more support selecting the best school for their child.

## Breaking out of the Box

Our plan addresses these priorities with a comprehensive vision for a new public education system. Through our research, we have sought to harness the creativity of the community, align it with national best practice research, and suggest a new way of structuring a school system that is far more likely to achieve results than the outdated model that has failed generations of urban schoolchildren.

Despite decades of reform efforts, despite the hard work and passion of incredibly talented educators and district leaders, and despite education budgets that have more than doubled in today's dollars since 1970, student achievement results are still disastrous.

While Kansas City Public schools is not the only Missouri district in need of improvement, it serves as a central illustration of both the need and the opportunity. As described more fully in Chapter 1:

- ★ 70 percent of KCPS students are below proficient in math and English Language Arts (ELA).
- ★ ELA proficiency rates have *declined* in some recent years, despite improved management and operations.
- ★ Very, very few students graduating from KCPS are ready for college based on their ACT scores.
- ★ While science and social studies scores have improved this past year (mirroring statewide trends), proficiency rates in those subjects are *still* below 30 percent.
- ★ And average KCPS student achievement growth is lower than state predictions based on similar districts' results, meaning that KCPS students could fall further behind their peers over time.

While some argue that the system has been stabilized after years of dysfunction, one must ask: **what good is stability if most students still cannot read, write, or do math proficiently, or graduate from high school ready for college or careers?**

Today's operationally stabilized system masks the historical reality that there have been **26 superintendents in the past 45 years** — all presiding over KCPS schools with profoundly low student achievement results. Nationally, the average tenure for an urban school superintendent is under four years. In light of the overwhelming evidence, despite decades of effort from talented leaders and educators, our

conclusion is that **it is not the people in the system that is the problem; it is the system itself.**

Simply put, the traditional urban school system does not work. It is not stable. It does not serve the needs of its students. It does not, nor has it ever, produced the kind of results all children, families, and taxpayers deserve. And it **does not create the conditions that research shows enables great urban schools to thrive.** It is time to think outside the box and have a robust community conversation about how to build a new and different school system that is structured for success.

## Plan Overview

This plan describes how this new school system should be structured. In the draft full report we profile high-performing urban schools — the kind of schools every child in Kansas City and other struggling districts deserve — and discuss the conditions that enable their success. We describe how to create a school system that empowers its educators; holds schools accountable; creates new and different school models to meet the diverse needs of diverse students; returns power to the community; and gives schools budgetary flexibility so they can provide wrap-around services, pay teachers more, and invest in city-wide pre-K.

Under this plan:

- ✳ Educators and community members would gain the power to create and operate **nonprofit schools** that meet the needs of the students they serve.
- ✳ Millions of dollars would be unlocked to pay for the highest priorities, such as: **paying teachers substantially more**, funding city-wide access to **high-quality preschool**, and offering **wrap-around services** to meet children’s out-of-school needs.
- ✳ Students would gain access to **high-quality schools within their neighborhoods** and beyond.
- ✳ Educators would be able to **collectively bargain at the school level** if they so choose.
- ✳ The school system would **shift its focus from operating schools directly to finding the best possible nonprofit operators**, empowering them to run schools, and holding them accountable for results. Schools that succeed would grow to serve more students. Those that continually fall short would be replaced with better options.
- ✳ The school system would **continue to perform critical central functions** such as operating facilities, providing transportation, ensuring that all students have access to great schools, and serving as a steward of the public’s funds.

Below we profile the key elements of this new system.

## The Community Schools Office

A **Community Schools Office (CSO)** would oversee public education across the community and function as the community’s Local Education Agency (LEA). In each community with one or more unaccredited school districts in need of state intervention, the state would establish a CSO — led by an Executive Director who is appointed by the State Board of Education. The CSO would also have a Community Advisory Board of local leaders and stakeholder appointed by the State Board of Education.



Like a conventional school district, the CSO would serve as the governing authority for public education in the community; take responsibility for ensuring that every child has a place in a public school; and handle certain core administrative functions that make sense to be housed centrally, such as overseeing school facilities, running a city-wide transportation system, and managing a common enrollment process.

Unlike a conventional district, the CSO would not, after a transition period, directly operate any of the community's public schools. Instead, **it would carefully select a variety of nonprofit school operators that each run public school in the community — for-profit operators would not be eligible to participate in the system.** Each operator would have a “performance agreement” with the CSO — a legal agreement that specifies exactly what the operator must accomplish with students in order to continue operating the school. In return for agreeing to meet those expectations, the operator receives assurance that its educators can operate the school as they see fit, to meet the needs of its students.

The CSO's central responsibility would be selecting the nonprofit organizations that receive performance agreements to operate one or more schools within the community. Operators could include teams of educators currently working within a public school in the community; nonprofit organizations within the community; surrounding school districts already operating successful schools serving similar student populations; existing successful charter schools in the community; or existing successful charter schools from other communities.

If operators are successful, they could continue doing their good work. Indeed, the CSO could ask them to take on additional students and campuses, spreading their excellence if they so choose to even more students within the community. Expansion would be purely voluntary for schools, which could elect to stay at their current size or grow. If, on the other hand, operators fall short, the CSO could replace them with new operators. Through this process, the CSO could ensure that over time, a greater number of students in the community have access to a great school.

### **More Money to Schools Without Raising Taxes**

As explained in Chapter 2, one of the critical conditions enabling great schools is a empowering educator, the people closest to the action of teaching and learning, to allocate resources in ways that meet the needs of their students. In most school districts, by contrast, the central office controls most of the resources. Missouri districts are no exception. In Kansas City, for example, our analysis found that only 52 percent of total district funds were part of school budgets in FY13, and *only 5 percent of expenses were truly controlled by principals.*

As a result, a key part of this plan shifts a significant amount of funds from being centrally managed to school-controlled. Our financial analysis of Kansas City Public Schools suggests that a CSO in that city would be able to make **more than \$10,000 in per pupil funding** available to school operators. This change would allow educators to use funds in ways they see best for improving student achievement, including the flexibility to **pay teachers more and offer a variety of wrap-around support services.**

Shifting responsibility and funding for most services to school control in Kansas City would allow close to **65 percent of funds to flow directly to schools and classrooms** and be controlled by educators, in contrast to only 5 percent truly controlled by

school leaders in FY13. **That represents a shift of more than \$143 million a year into the hands of the educators closest to the students.**

## Preschool for All

The need for high-quality preschool for all emerged as a central theme of our interviews and focus group discussions in Kansas City. And decades of research by Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman and others makes clear that academically oriented preschool helps students succeed in school and even has long-term benefits for their employment, income, health and other outcomes.

In our financial analysis, one of our goals was to identify resources that could be freed to devote to providing **universal access to high-quality preschool — again, without raising taxes.** In the Kansas City example, the analysis suggests that \$28 million annually could be reallocated for preschool, while still leaving ample resources for the CSO’s functions and for school-controlled expenditures. **That would allow all three and four year olds in the city to be served in quality preschool programs.**<sup>1</sup>

## Transition Authority

While our plan centers on the idea of independent nonprofit organizations operating public schools throughout a community, a CSO could not simply shift to that kind of system immediately. A multi-year transition — described in more detail in Chapter 4 — is needed. The primary reason for a multi-year transition is the need to grow a “supply” of high-quality school operators. Some already successful public schools — such as Lincoln College Prep or Academie Lafayette, or high-performers in surrounding school districts — already exist and could participate in the new system immediately. These operators may be able to run 10 to 20 percent of the system’s schools on day one. Reaching the other 80 to 90 percent would require time to cultivate local school operators and, if needed, attract those from other cities.

During this transition period, the CSO would house an entity called the “Transition Authority,” charged with operating all schools not yet in independent operation. In the first year or two of the transition, this unit would operate a set of schools directly. It would provide a set of centrally run services for those schools and select the leaders and teachers for those schools.

But even from the start, the Transition Authority would be quite different from most conventional school districts, in two respects. First, for the schools it operates, it would shift almost all its focus to one priority: **making them the most attractive possible places for teachers and leaders to practice their craft.** The Transition Authority would revamp itself and its schools to make them magnets for talent, where educators could work in selective teams, develop on the job, and have substantial opportunities to earn more and advance in their careers by teaching and leading in the community’s schools.

Second, the Transition Authority aims from the beginning to “put itself out of business by **shifting all of its schools to independent operation over time.** This is one reason for the “talent magnet” strategy; as schools increasingly become led and staffed by high-performing teams and meeting expectations for improvement, they would become eligible for independence.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on live births in 2009 and 2010 in zip codes where KCPS has elementary schools.

Not all schools, of course, would rise and transition in this way. Research on turnarounds in schools and other sectors suggests that many of the attempts would fall short. As a result, the CSO works with partners to **cultivate the supply of additional operators that can assume the management of schools**. Over time, this process would lead to a mix of schools in the system: some previously successful schools, some newly successful schools, and some schools that are under the leadership of new nonprofit operators.

## Community Schools Fund

One advantage of the Community Schools Office is its ability to focus on a limited set of core functions, at the center of which is selecting independent school operators and holding them accountable for performance. To complement the CSO's work, we also recommend that leaders in any community with CSOs establish a "Community Schools Fund" that sits outside the system and aggregates funding from local and national foundations to support school success.

The Community Schools Fund could play a number of roles depending on the community's needs, but the following roles are the most important to the success of this plan:

- ✳ **Cultivating school operators.** The Community Schools Fund would aim to boost the supply of great school operators as rapidly as possible. Drawing on experiences from cities that have sought rapid scale-up of an independently operated school sectors, the fund could invest in local educators and community groups to design and launch new schools; invest in and grow already successful school operators, or recruit to the community high-performing operators from other cities and states.
- ✳ **Fueling the supply of teachers and school leaders.** While school operators would play the lead role in staffing their schools, the Community Schools Fund would help by raising funds and forging partnerships with organizations that can help with this supply. The Fund could support local institutions of higher education, teacher unions, non-profits like Teach For America or Leading Educators, and other teacher organizations to give schools the best chance of filling teaching positions and leadership slots with top-notch candidates.
- ✳ **Providing families and the community with useful information about schools.** To empower families and community members, the Community Schools Fund would work, perhaps in partnership with other local organizations, to provide a useful base of information about school options within the community. The CSO would produce reports showing schools' results on a variety of measures. The Fund would supplement these data with qualitative information about each schools' offerings and, over time, feedback and insights provided by families themselves about each school.
- ✳ **Catalyzing "wrap-around services."** The plan outlined above would provide schools with substantially more control over their resources. One way they may seek to use that flexibility is by obtaining out-of-school services their students need, often referred to as "wrap-around services." The Community Schools Fund could help facilitate this process in various ways, such as identifying common needs across schools; creating an inventory of existing providers of needed services; catalyzing investment to create or expand services that are not currently available or adequate; and helping school operators collaborate through joint purchasing or the formation of cooperative service agreements.

While the Community Schools Fund would work in partnership with the CSO, it would need to remain independent of the CSO. In this way, it would serve as both a support and an agent of community-based accountability. To maintain its independence, the Community Schools Fund would finance its activities with contributions from local and national donors.

### Statewide Support for CSOs

If Missouri establishes multiple CSOs across the state, it would need to build some capacity at the state level to oversee and support the network. We do not recommend the creation of a large unit at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to do this work, but rather a lean office with only a small number of employees and three primary purposes.

First, the office would hold CSOs accountable for improving their schools' performance. For accountability purposes, the CSO would hold a performance agreement with the state specifying the student achievement gains and absolute performance levels required for the CSO to return to local control (as described below and in more detail in Chapter 5).

Second, the office would report on the progress of CSOs to the state board of education, the legislature and the public.

Finally, the state office would provide a limited set of supports for CSOs in cases where a statewide activity appears beneficial. For example, one key activity would be recruiting successful school operators from other regions to operate within CSO-led systems. Many successful operators are looking for geographies in which they can achieve considerable scale, which often means operating in more than one city. As a result, the state could organize an initiative to recruit operators to Missouri, holding out the possibility of working in multiple cities over time.

### Governance

During the period of state intervention, the state would have governance responsibilities for the CSO. The State Commissioner of Education would appoint the Executive Director of the CSO. The State Board of Education would appoint a Community Advisory Board for the CSO. While local parents, stakeholders, and educators would serve on the governing boards of the non-profit school operators that are running schools within the CSO — giving new, and deeper meaning to “local control.”

Once performance levels for the school operators within the CSO reach a sufficiently high level — as spelled out in the CSO's performance agreement with the state — then the CSO would be returned to local governance oversight. Once again, local residents would vote for a board of education to govern the CSO. However, neither the CSO nor the local board would directly operate schools or make decisions about what happens within schools. Instead, they would focus on the core areas of the CSO's authority, including accountability and the provision of central services such as common enrollment, transportation, and the publication of system-wide performance information.



## What is Not in this Plan

We explain all of these ideas in greater detail in the full draft of the report. But we also want to address upfront what this plan is *not*.

- ★ This plan is **not about privatizing public education**. This is about reimagining **public** education so that the system is structured in a way that it creates the conditions through which a great public school emerges in every neighborhood. In fact, since the CSO could only enter into performance agreements with nonprofit school operators, we ensure that public schools *could not* be privatized by for-profit operators.
- ★ This plan **does not call for an all-charter system**. We believe there is an important role for a central system (a Local Education Agency or LEA) that unites all public schools, but that role is substantively different than the role that the school district currently plays. In our plan, **the CSO would serve as the Local Education Agency** and non-profit school operators would have performance agreements with the CSO to run schools. However, more than 30 percent of Kansas City students are currently enrolled in public charter schools. Many of these schools are low performing. Charters clearly are not the answer in and of themselves. But any citywide plan must address existing charters since they serve so many students; thus, we have developed clear strategies for how to ensure that existing charters improve and future schools are higher quality. To be clear, we don't believe in a totally decentralized, all-charter school system.
- ★ This plan is **not anti-labor**. On the contrary, a key focus of our plan is enabling teachers in communities like Kansas City both to earn substantially more than they do now, and to take control of their schools in ways that are impossible in most districts. We believe that teacher's unions can be strong allies for improving schools. And, we explicitly recommend that **educators should be able to organize and collectively bargain in all public schools** within our new proposed system.
- ★ This plan is **not the State Board of Education's plan for intervention**. This is one of several plans that the State Board will consider in 2014 to help guide its interventions in unaccredited districts, including Kansas City Public Schools. DESE has consistently said that it will not make accreditation recommendations to the State Board of Education until there are multiple years of MSIP5 data showing performance trends in districts. **If KCPS is able to improve its performance in 2013-2014, it could gain accreditation and not be subject to state intervention**. However, the State Board needs to prepare for the possibility that KCPS will not make sufficient progress. And the Board also needs to consider strategies to guide its interventions in other unaccredited districts across the state.

## What this Plan Means for Students, Educators, and the Community

There would be significant, important benefits for educators, students, and the community in this new plan.

### Benefits for Students

- ★ Access to any public school in the city that best meets their needs

- For schools that are oversubscribed, the system would host an open lottery, with students from the school's neighborhood having a special weight to their lottery number
- ★ Access to transportation services that allow students to attend whatever public school in the city that best meets their needs, even if they move within the city during the school year
- ★ Access to pre-k and wrap-around services to ensure they can be productive while attending school
- ★ Access to schools where educators are treated and paid like true professionals

#### Benefits For Educators

- ★ Control over all the important decisions about what happens in a school
  - Curriculum
  - Calendar
  - Schedule
  - Culture
  - Budget
  - Staffing rules
  - Whether to collectively bargain or not
- ★ Control over 13 times more resources than under the current system, with the ability to pay for wrap-around services (like health care and food security) if the school believes that they would help its students
- ★ Access to significantly higher pay for teachers within existing budgets
- ★ Being held meaningfully accountable for helping students achieve results, while being given wide latitude for *how* to achieve those results

#### Benefits for the Community

- ★ A clear path for system-wide school improvement
- ★ Higher-quality schools attract residents back into the city, reversing decades of enrollment decline and tax-base disruption
- ★ Higher-quality schools attract more business investment and strengthens the local economy
- ★ This type of system would be more attractive to the nation's best non-profit school operators, making it more likely best-in-class schools would come to Missouri
- ★ Higher-quality schools increase graduation and college enrollment rates, subsequently decreasing the burden of social service expenses, and improving the life outcomes of the community's young people