Early Lessons from the Annenberg Challenge

Barbara Cervone
Annenberg Institute
Brown University

This article summarizes some important preliminary lessons emerging from Ambassador Annenberg's $500 million "challenge" to improve the nation's public schools. The Challenge, which encompasses the country's biggest urban school districts, along with grants for rural school reform and arts education, is the largest private effort in U.S. history to reform public schools. Unique to the Challenge, beyond its size, is its embrace of pluralism: multiple strategies for bringing good schools to life. This local ownership and the diverse strategies it has spawned are valued as strengths, and one lesson from the Challenge is that local context and design are crucial to a reform effort's success. Another lesson is that to improve, schools need an "intermediary organization"-a partner that is neither of the system nor wholly outside it-who can inspire vision, supply focus, lend support, and apply pressure. Finally, a third lesson is that reform demands resilience in the face of changing circumstances. Although each Challenge project began with its own theory and strategies for improving student achievement, all share a commitment to organizational learning: to assess their efforts on an ongoing basis, and then learn from and respond to that learning.

The Annenberg Challenge began in December of 1993, when Walter H. Annenberg announced a gift to public education of a half billion dollars, the largest such grant in philanthropic history. He said he especially wanted his gift to benefit the poorest American children, and to foster reforms that might save public schooling where it is most threatened, particularly in the nation's largest cities. The gift - to be matched in most cases two to one - ignited a flurry of collaborative planning in a handful of large cities as groups received the "invitation" to apply for Annenberg Challenge funds. A consortium of rural educators stepped forward too.

This planning resulted in an initial set of major grants by the Annenberg Foundation during 1995 to support reform plans in New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay area, greater Los Angeles, and rural America. The grants ranged in size from $25 million to $53 million.

In 1996 and 1997 a second set of major urban grants were awarded Boston, Detroit, southeastern Florida, and Houston, ranging in size from $10 million to $33.3 million. Three large arts projects and several smaller urban efforts fill out the grants list, which totals 18.

Overall, approximately 2,500 schools in 35 states have been funded, with the potential in 1999 alone to affect nearly 1.5 million children. More than $487 million in matching local funds were raised by the end of 1998.

But beyond the big numbers, what is unique about the Annenberg Challenge?

Many would say its pluralism: the Challenge embraces a singular vision of good schools but multiple strategies for bringing good schools to life. These diverse strategies have grown from the urban and rural places invited to apply for Challenge funds. They are the product of local conversation and circumstances, local priorities and leadership. They are the product, as well, of differing assumptions about how organizations and the people within them change, along with a multitude of actors, ranging from county or regional alliances to school districts to business groups to funders to university faculty to citizens groups - to name some but not all.

The Challenge is built on the hypothesis that this local ownership and the diverse strategies it has spawned are strengths.

This does not mean, though, that Challenge sites are united only by a common vision of good schools. Like members of a family, they share a genetic inheritance reflected in a set of core beliefs. They believe in school-level inventiveness and investing heavily in professional development. They believe in linking schools in networks

and in personalizing instruction through small learning communities. While all sites value setting high academic standards, they diverge in their views about who should set these standards. While they all value hard-nosed accountability, they vary in their definitions of what constitutes meaningful evidence. While all sites believe in balancing district-level leadership with school-level autonomy, they differ in how they strike this balance.

The Annenberg Challenge, in sum, embraces many different routes to the same goal: schools with high standards, where all children are known well and stand a decent chance of succeeding; schools with a clear vision of where they are headed and how to get there; schools in which there is a professional climate of teacher collegiality and reflection; schools that include parents and the community as valued partners.

How is the Challenge faring? Preliminary evaluation reports from each project suggest the program is making a difference in schools and communities. It has set in motion promising structures and strategies for changing schools and improving student learning. It has brought diverse voices forward, and seeded new alliances supportive of reform. It has ignited an unusual level of energy among citizens and school people alike. It is leaving small but significant footprints in the larger education system. As such, it offers a compelling alternative to the two strategies for school reform that are gathering steam these days: centralized control and privatization.

But as important as the question, "What is the Challenge's impact?" is the question: "What are we learning?"

The Challenge - now at its mid point with most projects winding down in 2002 - teems with lessons. Some are familiar: translating standards into changed classroom practice requires abundant time and support for teachers; good leadership is crucial; the institutional constraints on developing teachers' capacity to teach well are profound. Yet several new lessons have also emerged from the independent evaluations that are closely following the Challenge projects. Here are three:

1. Local context and design are crucial to a reform effort's success.

Many school reform efforts emphasize implementing a program adopted from another site or a national "vendor," or generated by a granting organization. The Challenge, instead, required that those wishing to receive Annenberg funds convene local planning coalitions. These coalitions had to name the problem they wished to tackle; plan solutions; and gain local support from a large array of participants, including funders, civic leaders, school leaders, reformers, universities, and elected officials.

Each Challenge project thus created a *design for change that emerged from its particular local context*, and that had its own starting point.

- New York City's Challenge, for example, aimed to create a critical mass of good small schools, networked to each other and with substantial autonomy, legitimacy, standing, and influence in the larger system.

- With a new and reform-minded superintendent, Philadelphia's Challenge launched a sweeping whole-district plan aimed at raising standards and attracting state support and funding for the ailing city schools.

- So many different school reform efforts competed in the San Francisco Bay Area that its Challenge initiative aimed to bring more coherence to the region's initiatives, helping them collaborate, focus their efforts, and engage in sustained inquiry and action concerning the results.

- As rural schools and communities struggled for their survival, the Rural Challenge aimed to revitalize both, by nurturing a mutual effort among schools and their communities to strengthen and draw on local cultures, environments, histories, and economies.

This emphasis on local context and design, to be sure, invites a keen appreciation of the volatility and dissension in big urban school districts today. Five years ago, when Annenberg announced his challenge, few foresaw the political charge that American public education would soon take on, with vastly different theories for improving public schools competing for primacy and often colliding.

Despite this turbulence, the Challenge's encouragement of local design and ownership has proven a powerful stimulus for collaboration, innovation, and action. For example:

- New York City's Challenge (the New York Networks for School Renewal) began in 1995 with 82 small schools. It has since added 58 new schools and, with some 50,000 students attending its 140 small schools, is now bigger than most of the nation's school districts. Concurrently, the city's school chancellor has embraced small schools as a key part of his strategy for improving public education, and has established a special office to oversee their creation. When he recently selected six city schools for a new charter school program, five of the six were from the New York Networks project.

- Despite a rigorous admission process that requires portfolio evidence of each applicant's work, the "learning community" at the center of the San Francisco Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) has attracted members from throughout the region. It currently includes 220 schools, 60 of

the area's 114 school districts (representing 77 percent of the region's students) and 29 organizations focused on helping schools improve. Its yearly Collaborative Assembly gathers nearly 1,000 educators, foundation and business representatives, school reformers, and community organizations to share their progress in changing schools. It has united a critical mass of around 20 Bay Area funders into an ongoing group focused on funding school reform, and it has spawned numerous regional research and development initiatives.

- The Rural Challenge has brought together 32 rural sites - from Alaska to Alabama, Maine to Texas- that ask students, teachers, and local citizens to create a "curriculum of place." Students draw upon their surroundings as sources of learning and learn by doing, in the process making real contributions to their communities. In Parish, Alabama, for example, students discovered high concentrations of lead in the school water supply, then found similar levels in municipal water. As a result of their two-year investigation, the town installed a new water system. Students in five rural Colorado schools are collecting and cataloging historical artifacts, creating guided nature trails, tutoring community members in computer use, and building a town library. At a remote crossroads of two communities fifteen miles from the Mexican border in south Texas, the schools responded to a dearth of medical services by training students and local residents for entry-level jobs in health occupations.

Each of these examples has a "tailor-made" quality that derives from the perceived needs of its particular community, and which depend on local coalitions for its design and implementation.

2. To improve, schools need an "intermediary" that offers vision, focus, support, and pressure in equal amounts.

School reform does not happen on its own. The business of improving schools requires intense, ongoing facilitation and one cannot expect this help to come from within. Caught up in the dynamics of the status quo, conventional organizations like schools, districts, professional groups, and universities cannot easily act as catalysts for redefining it or for refocusing policies and reform agendas that include their own. In the case of districts and schools, their leadership is predictably unstable, and their policies highly subject to political turbulence.

Challenge projects have stepped up to play this facilitator's role. While they may have started as temporary foundations awarding grants to schools, they have grown into change agents in their own right. Being neither of the system or wholly outside - it each project is run by an independent nonprofit public-private partnership - they cross organizational boundaries to intervene at critical points both up and down the educational system. They galvanize new resources from public and private sources. And they educate, advocate, develop programs, and coach people in managing change.

Most important, they use their insider-outsider status to provide four essential ingredients our experience tells us are crucial to large-scale reform: vision, focus, support and pressure. That is, they inspire vision, supply focus, lend support, and apply pressure. How do they do this? Let us look at the Bay Area Challenge:

- The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative has set out a two-pronged vision. Because it believes that schools will improve only when those working in and around them learn new, different, and better ways of operating, it has created a regional learning community - a Collaborative - of schools, districts, support providers, and funders that engage in inquiry and reflection, leading to new approaches for improving schools. Concurrently it has laid out a vision of whole-school change and identified leadership schools that might exemplify this vision. It strives to champion these beliefs and ideas in what it does and says.

  Within this larger vision, though, BASRC has demanded that schools within the Collaborative pick a "focused effort" to which they will apply themselves diligently: improving literacy, for example, - figuring out which children are lagging most in their learning, why they are lagging, and then creating strategies to address their needs.

  BASRC then provides support in countless ways: summer institutes for school teams coupled with monthly "workdays" during the school year; links to technical assistance providers and classroom coaches; electronic communication among schools; research and development initiatives tied to issues confronting all schools.

  But it also holds schools accountable to the high expectations it has set. Schools must demonstrate each year, before a rigorous review board of fellow educators, that they are making progress against a common set of rubrics. They must annually involve parents and other members of the community in a day-long accountability event where they share and review evidence of progress. Teachers, administrators, and parents form cross-school Critical Friendships, then visit one another during the year to offer critical feedback as well as support. BASRC recently made headlines when it withdrew funding from one of its Leadership

Schools.

To act as an agent of reform, one must have authority. Where have Challenge projects, standing as they do outside the traditional hierarchy, gained their authority? In the case of Philadelphia, it has come from being aligned directly with the superintendent. In other projects, the authority began as philanthropic: they were the ones with the money. But it has grown to include moral, political, and practical authority as projects have gained influence by doing good.

3. Reform demands resilience in the face of changing circumstances.

Many school reformers speak of constancy and faithful implementation of a so-called "proven program." And many education researchers, in turn, look for constancy as evidence of a program's success. In our experience, though, effective school reform efforts evolve and change in response to changing circumstances and new information. This resilience helps them confront the inevitable dilemmas of implementation without sacrificing their core principles.

Although each Challenge project began with its own theory and strategies for improving student achievement, all shared a commitment to organizational learning: to assess their efforts on an ongoing basis, and then to learn from and respond to that learning. As they work with partners and schools to carry out their plans, Challenge projects consider when and how to adapt and when to hold fast. This reasoned flexibility - made all the more possible and necessary by the Challenge's encouragement of local design nested in local context - has been a source of strength, not weakness. For example:

- Initially, some Challenge projects overestimated the readiness of schools and partner organizations to take advantage of opportunities and resources for change. They underestimated the time and support needed to reach that readiness point. In response, creating energy and vision for reform became part of the early assistance they offered schools.

    - When the second round of proposals from newly formed school networks in Chicago fell considerably short of the first, the Chicago Challenge temporarily suspended its grantmaking and diverted its energy to building the capacity of schools to assess their needs better and create bolder plans. Once it resumed grantmaking, the proposals it received were far more promising. Similarly, when the supply of external partners able to help schools did not meet the demand, the Chicago Challenge added to its agenda the task of building the capacity of external partners.

    - Few of the portfolios schools submitted for entrance into the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative met its high standards, so the Collaborative provided schools with coaches to help improve their portfolios, encouraging schools to reapply until they were admitted. This investment and process ended up strengthening not only portfolios but also schools. In the words of one teacher, the portfolio review process "was the best professional development experience" she and her school had ever had.

    - The Rural Challenge employed a cadre of regional "scouts" as it began the search for schools and communities ready to enact its vision of place-based learning. But even these forerunner sites needed help making real the hoped-for partnership between school and community, so the Rural Challenge turned its corps of temporary scouts into a group of permanent, experienced "stewards" able to support and assist these sites.

- Some Challenge projects started by seeking breadth in the changes they sought and the places they worked. Others began by working more deeply in fewer schools. All have learned that they must provide for both breadth and depth, and that one does not lead necessarily to the other. Reform initiatives must spread broadly enough to touch a substantial number of schools, yet root reforms deeply enough to make a significant difference in every school. As they aim for whole-school change, they must also help schools focus and sequence their change efforts, tackling only a few areas at once.

    - The Los Angeles Challenge began by casting a wide net, providing grant support to 28 School Families in the 4,000 square mile Los Angeles basin, encompassing 247 schools and 200,000 students. The learning plans submitted by School Families were equally ambitious. However, this initial emphasis on breadth, the Los Angeles Challenge soon realized, might not yield the substantial and lasting changes it also sought. It began supporting deeper work in a handful of School Families, coupled with a demand that all School Families narrow their focus, concentrating on literacy and one or two other areas.

    - The Rural Challenge, in contrast, purposely decided to develop a small though diverse set of exemplary sites that could prove possible its vision of school-community integration. Yet the Rural Challenge always aspired to create a broad grassroots movement of rural schools and communities "getting better together." To ignite this movement, it launched a state and national policy program and reached out to new partners. It added to its portfolio schools and communities far

less prepared than its initial grantees to create a "curriculum of place."

These, then, are a few early lessons from the Annenberg Challenge. Local context and design are critical to a reform effort's success; they not only create a sense of ownership but unleash tremendous energy and determination. To improve, schools need an intermediary that offers vision, focus, support and pressure in equal amounts. And third, reform demands resilience in the face of feedback and changing circumstances.

However, it's one thing to formulate lessons. It's another to present them so that they inform the policy debates today. And, to be frank, getting a fair hearing for the sorts of lessons I've just traced here is becoming tougher these days, as politicians, the media and others with advice for schools lose patience with talk of the complexity and messiness of improving schools and speak instead of "shock therapy." End social promotion. Mandate summer school. Fire teachers. Close failing schools.

Amid this hard talk, the Challenge's embrace of local citizens coming together to change their schools, its eschewal of magic bullets, its efforts to bring vision, focus, support and pressure to school reform remain, I am convinced, the right choice. But it suddenly feels like we're swimming upstream.

A visitor from England recently asked me, What guides my work? Here is the answer I didn't give him but should have. One is the hopeful evidence, especially the stories emerging from schools and communities striving to fundamentally improve learning for children.

Another is a young boy I met last spring in an elementary school in Chattanooga - a school whose decaying playground bordered a Superfund toxic waste site. I found him crouched up against a wall opposite a stunning mural of African American heroes, likely painted by students. "Can you tell me something about the mural?" I asked. He told me a bit about it. "What's the best thing about this school," I pushed on. He said there was nothing good about this school, that he hated it. "Is that why you're hiding?" I wondered. "You got it lady," he said. I then asked him what brought him to school. "I come to school to get some breakfast and lunch and to stay outta way of my dad who wups me," he explained. "If there was one thing you could tell your teachers here at school about yourself, what would that be?" I asked. "That I ain't bad, just scared."

Barbara Cervone is the National Coordinator of Ambassador Walter Annenberg's $500 million "challenge" to reform the nation's schools.