



# URBAN SCHOOL BOARD EXCELLENCE

URBAN ADVOCATE: 2004 AWARD EDITION

## 2004 CUBE ANNUAL AWARD FOR URBAN SCHOOL BOARD EXCELLENCE

Schools in many of the nation's largest cities are thriving. Their students are learning and growing, and school board leadership plays an important role in that success. The Council of Urban Boards of Education's Award for Urban School Board Excellence was inaugurated to recognize outstanding leaders and highlight the crucial connection between urban student achievement and successful board governance.

Boston Public Schools has been named the winner of the first annual award, which will be presented at the CUBE Annual Conference in San Antonio. California's Chula Vista Elementary School District and Virginia's Norfolk Public Schools were selected as finalists.

All three school boards have been recognized for their leadership and efforts to improve student achievement, narrow the achievement gap, and bring their diverse communities together. Boston will receive \$5,000 for its student scholarship fund from sponsor McGraw-Hill Education.

As the urban initiative of the National School Boards Association, CUBE works to promote best practices that showcase excellence in school board governance. With the Award for Urban School Board Excellence, which will be presented annually to a member district, CUBE has created an opportunity for urban school board leaders to showcase their knowledge and skills as policymakers.

The judges cited Boston as a "wonderful example of distributive leadership" and praised the district's efforts to engage the community and maintain a student-focused agenda. Boston's School Committee, one of the most respected in the state, is appointed by Mayor Thomas M. Menino following an extensive community nomination and interview process.

Among the finalists for the CUBE award, the judges noted that Chula Vista's board has been particularly responsive in setting policy to address rapid population growth. Norfolk's multiyear plan to assess student performance and align district goals was also noted.



Applicants had to describe a governance vision and show that the board had implemented a strategy to narrow gaps in achievement between groups of students. Also, the board had to demonstrate leadership in creating a learning environment conducive to achievement and show it had successfully strengthened community support for the district.

The finalists were selected by a panel of distinguished judges based on materials submitted by the school districts and independent follow-up research. The judges were Arnold Fege, Public Education Network; Audrey Hutchinson, National League of Cities; Michael Usdan, Institute for Educational Leadership; and JoAnn Yee, California School Boards Association. ■

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# BOSTON

## SHOWCASING THE BEST IN URBAN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Serving on the frontlines of urban education, where the vast majority of students—more than 74 percent—are overwhelmingly poor, Boston Public Schools (BPS) faces seemingly insurmountable odds.

But the city, which is home to some of the world's finest institutions of higher education and the nation's first public school district, has risen to the challenge.

Considered a pioneer in public education reform, BPS has remained steadfast, focusing its energy and resources for more

### BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

#### Board members

(as of June 30, 2004):

Elizabeth Reilinger, Chairperson;  
Marchelle Raynor, Vice-Chairperson;  
Angel Amy Moreno, William Boyan,  
Alfreda Harris, Susan Naimark, Dennis  
Wright

#### Governance structure:

Board members are appointed to four-year terms and serve at-large.

#### Superintendent:

Thomas W. Payzant

**Number of students:** 60,300

**Number of schools:** 139

**Number of staff:** 7,950

#### Percentage of students by race/ethnicity:

African-American: 47%

Asian-American: 9%

Hispanic: 30%

White: 14%

#### Percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced-price lunch:

74%

#### Percentage of students in special education:

19%

**Percentage of students who are English language learners:** 30% (1/3 of whom are enrolled in academic programs for English language learners)

#### Average per-pupil expenditures:

\$10,739

#### Website:

[www.bostonpublicschools.org](http://www.bostonpublicschools.org)



Strengthening literacy is part of the Boston Public Schools' Focus on Children plan.

than a decade on increasing academic success for all students. Leading that focus on academics has been Thomas Payzant, who has been superintendent since 1995.

The results are impressive for this minority-majority school system, where 19 percent of students receive special education services and 30 percent are English language learners.

Third-grade reading scores are high, with 79 percent of students passing state tests. Scores on the seventh-grade English language arts test are even higher, with 84 percent of all students performing at or above grade level.

At a time when achievement levels for secondary school students have stagnated or dropped in many urban areas, Boston students are posting high marks on a variety of measures. More students are graduating from high school, performing well on the SAT, and attending college.

Just five years ago, the majority of Boston's 10th-graders failed to meet state standards. Last fall, more than 64 percent of students passed the mathematics exam, while more than 70 percent passed the

English language arts test.

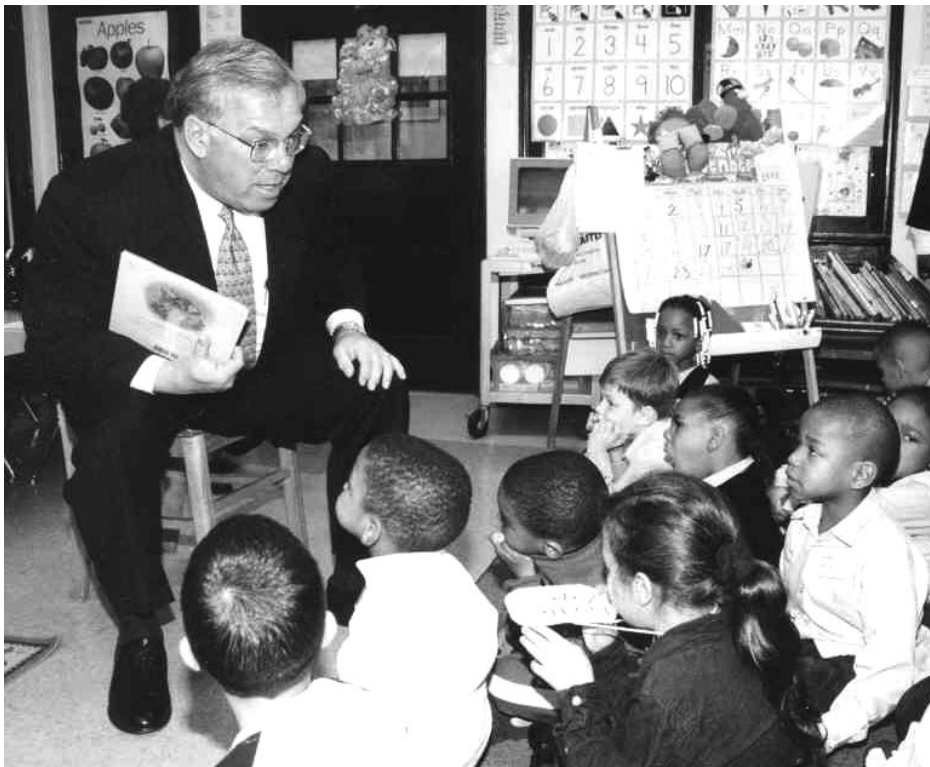
"These results show what an urban district can do when concentration is placed on instruction," says Payzant. "The gains that we've seen from our students on state exams across the subjects are a credit to our students and all of the adults who support them in and out of the classroom every day."

#### Focus on education, not politics

Getting adults actively engaged in the work of the schools just may be the district's secret weapon.

"The leadership of the school committee, along with Superintendent Payzant and his staff, has allowed this district to make great improvement in student achievement," says Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who is responsible for appointing board members. "We have worked very hard to find the most qualified and dedicated people to serve on our school committee, and I am very pleased with the work they have done."

"One thing that has really helped the



Mayor Thomas M. Menino, a strong advocate for public education in Boston, reads to students in an elementary school.

school committee focus and function effectively is that we take the time on an annual basis to go through our strategic plan, identify whether we're on track with our priorities, and identify the issues we're going to deal with as a collective body," says veteran chairperson Elizabeth Reilinger.

Having led the committee for the past six years, Reilinger admits she's something of a stickler when it comes to maintaining board focus on policy issues rather than on operations.

"By taking the time to reach consensus, the agenda in terms of priorities is really predefined," says Reilinger. "This has really helped facilitate positive and productive work between board members, and has helped us focus on system priorities and an educational agenda rather than personal priorities or political agendas."

The current structure and clear division of roles also helps promote a collegial rather than adversarial approach to board-superintendent relations, according to Reilinger.

"We have very strong ties among the superintendent, the school committee, and the mayor that allow us to have very frank conversations—and even disagree-

ments—about the work that needs to be done," says Reilinger. "The point isn't to agree all the time; the point is to move the agenda forward. The point isn't to demonstrate who's in control. The focus really is on improving teaching and learning."

### Planning with the community

Reflecting the district's demographics in ethnicity, race, gender, and neighborhood, the Boston School Committee has worked diligently to engage the larger community to improve educational results for children.

Committee members relied heavily on community input in setting district priorities and in recruiting Payzant. Over the past several years, the committee has continued to engage parents and other stakeholders in two iterations of its strategic plan.

Called Focus on Children, the plan provides clear direction regarding district goals, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the superintendent and his staff in designing and executing new, data-driven approaches to teaching and learning.

As part of this initiative, BPS has zeroed

in on strengthening literacy and mathematics while increasing academic standards and expectations for all students. The school committee also has guaranteed full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds and has opened three new early education centers.

Long before the advent of No Child Left Behind, Boston also established city-wide learning standards in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

The school committee has also moved aggressively to improve academic achievement at all schools by investing more than \$15 million to reduce class size at every grade level, approving a rigorous new student promotion policy and developing a new accountability system to measure school and student progress and to track improvement against annual goals.

Even though a large percentage of Boston's high school students are passing state tests, many still are not performing on grade level. To ensure a continued focus on academics, the district is one of the few in Massachusetts to endorse and advocate for state proficiency exams as a graduation requirement. To meet those requirements, the district has emphasized using a balance of quantitative and qualitative measures for performance, believing that all students can and will rise to the challenge.

### Smaller, better high schools

Concerned that its large high schools were disenfranchising too many adolescents who were already on the margins in terms of academic achievement, Boston is reorganizing all of its secondary schools into smaller learning communities.

Using a "school within a school" concept, Boston is changing both the way students move through high school as well as the grading system. The goal is to offer students a more personalized education with ample opportunity to build the kind of meaningful relationships with adults that help teens navigate safely to adulthood.

High school restructuring was made possible in part by the district's groundbreaking, three-year contract with the Boston Teachers Union. The contract also paved the way for pilot schools and

improved teacher accountability and evaluation.

Since the contract was approved, the board has opened 11 in-district charter and pilot schools that serve as laboratories for educational innovation, including Boston's first public high school for the visual and performing arts.

Struggles and challenges for the district remain. The school committee is working to close the achievement gap for minority students, addressing changes to its long-standing student assignment plan, and trying to balance the competing needs of choice for students and equal access to educational resources. To meet those three difficult goals, committee members have embarked on a well-publicized community process to foster dialogue from multiple perspectives and to develop support for a plan of action.

Thus far, the district has held more than 30 community meetings as it wrestles with the achievement gap—one of the most difficult issues facing urban education systems today—and struggles to over-

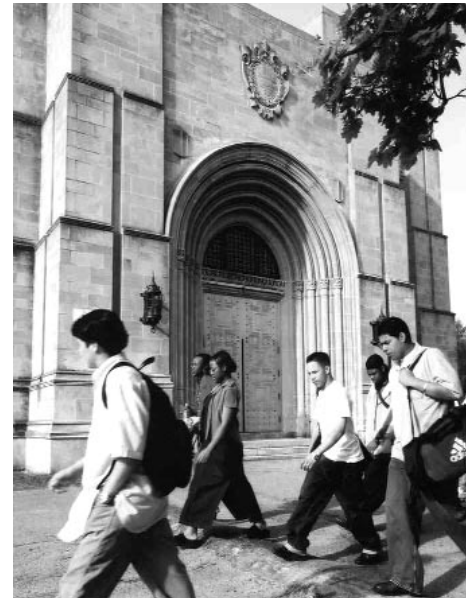
learning are part of a very holistic process and it's in everybody's best interest to assist us in that process."

Demonstrating their commitment to BPS, for example, chief executive officers of major institutions in the region shadow principals for a day to learn first-hand about the high-quality programs available in their local public schools.

Partners in the region's cultural community have also helped Boston restore arts to its schools, providing classroom experiences, access to performances, and interaction with artists.

The district also partners with a local nonprofit organization to augment and strengthen the district's professional development program for teachers, thanks in large measure to a \$30 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation. A \$13.6 million investment grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is being used to transform the district's comprehensive high schools.

Whether it is with the business sector, the community at large, the unions, or



To increase student achievement, Boston is reorganizing all of its high schools into smaller learning communities.

## "WE WANT OUR EFFORTS TO SERVE AS A CATALYST FOR THE NATION."

come the "legacy of distrust" created by the segregated schools of the past.

"While the ultimate decision for how to move forward on this controversial issue lies with the Boston School Committee, the painstaking process of building community consensus has proven effective in the past," says Reilinger. "I'm confident that by listening to the community and by engaging in extensive dialogue, we can develop a shared vision that will move us toward our goal of improving academic excellence for all students."

### **Bolstering resources, results**

Boston Public Schools and the Boston School Committee also have a strong relationship with the Boston business community, which provides students and schools with additional financial and human resources.

"There is a clear understanding on the part of the school committee and district leadership that you cannot do the work alone," says Reilinger. "Education and

parents and families, the Boston School Committee believes in the power of collaboration.

"We want our efforts to serve as a catalyst for the nation, to show the rest of the country that better high schools are within reach," says Menino. "It takes hard work, strong partnerships between the public and private sectors, and widespread community commitment to change."

The school committee also works hard to help parents become true partners in their children's education. BPS recently created a deputy superintendent position for family and community engagement and revamped the district's family resource centers to better meet the needs of today's families.

Principals and headmasters are held accountable as part of their annual performance reviews regarding how effectively they engage parents in their children's education, and the board has strengthened the role of parents in decision-making processes by establishing instructional

leadership teams and site councils that include parents, family members, teachers, and community members at each school.

Family liaisons at each school help connect parents and family members to the school and school staff, as well as to community organizations and district-level resources.

Teachers and principals also receive professional development in providing top-notch customer service and communicating effectively with diverse families, many of whom do not speak English.

The goal is to make sure schools use a variety of strategies to help families and community partners feel welcome, invited, appreciated, and engaged in the educational process.

Sharing information isn't enough. BPS wants parents actively involved. Details about how each member can support student learning are outlined in the School/Family Compacts developed by the site councils at each school.

"We want open schools that are welcoming and where parents have easy access to the classroom, to school counselors, teachers, administrators, and other staff," says Reilinger. "It's a constant struggle, yet we know that when parents get involved at the school level, we often see dramatic results in terms of student performance." ■

# CHULA VISTA

## FOCUS ON STUDENTS UNIFIES BOARD AND COMMUNITY

In the fast-growing Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD), students come first. By focusing on the needs of children and decentralizing its organizational structure, CVESD has managed to steadily improve student achievement while weathering the worst financial crisis in California history.

Serving a 26,000-student body where 63 percent of the students are Hispanic, 47 percent are poor, and 34 percent are English language learners, CVESD's recent gains in academic achievement have made it one of the top five most improved school systems among the 42 that serve San Diego County.

### CHULA VISTA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT

#### Board members

(as of June 30, 2004):

Cheryl S. Cox, President; Patrick A. Judd, Vice President; Pamela B. Smith, Clerk; Bertha J. Lopez and Larry Cunningham

#### Governance structure:

Board members are elected to four-year terms and serve at-large.

#### Superintendent:

Lowell J. Billings

**Number of students:** 26,051

**Number of schools:** 42

**Number of staff:** 2,502

#### Percentage of students by race/ethnicity:

African-American: 5%

Asian-American: 4%

Hispanic: 63%

White: 18%

Filipino: 7%

Pacific Islander: 1%

**Percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced-price lunch:** 47%

**Percentage of students in special education:** 12%

**Percentage of students who are English language learners:** 34%

**Per-pupil expenditures:** \$7,370

**Website:** [www.cvesd.k12.ca.us](http://www.cvesd.k12.ca.us)



Board member Larry Cunningham presents students with certificates for their hard work.

Board members credit the district's bottom-up organizational structure, which places the emphasis on students and the community first.

As they consider options and make decisions, board members ask four key questions: 1) Will the decision improve student learning? 2) Is it legal, ethical, and moral? 3) Will it impact adversely on others? and, 4) Are individual needs balanced with group needs?

#### Keep 'adult agendas' at bay

Chula Vista's board members see their primary role as setting policy and executing the district's strategic goals. "The board doesn't micromanage," says Superintendent Lowell Billings.

Shared values, developed in partnership with the community, shape the board's work. The focus is on improving literacy, equity, collaboration, and technology while creating a safe, supportive environment for student learning.

During board meetings, for example, agendas focus primarily on school-based reports that use data to convey how well

students are learning and whether schools are achieving their goals. Fiscal and personnel matters are secondary. As a result, the "adult agendas" that so often divide and distract urban school boards rarely become an issue.

"Teamwork is the key," says board member Bertha Lopez. "Mutual respect and accountability best describe how the board works together as a group."

Board members—called trustees—brock connections between the district and the community, attract resources, and introduce creative ideas.

"The board represents the entire community and a broad range of interests and viewpoints," Billings says. "Trustees pride themselves on engaging in a process of listening attentively to each other and considering multiple points of view in a non-defensive manner."

Lisa Cohen, chief executive officer of the Chula Vista Chamber of Commerce, agrees. "District leaders are highly visible in the community," says Cohen. "They are

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# NORFOLK

## WHERE LEARNING FOR ALL TRULY MEANS 'ALL'

**A** laser-like focus on instruction from the classroom to the boardroom is yielding strong gains for students in the Norfolk Public Schools (NPS).

At a time when urban education has never been more complex, the Norfolk school board's goals have never been simpler. In fact, it has only one goal: "Improving the quality of teaching and learning for all."

And all truly means all in NPS. Since 1999, test scores for the minority-majority district's 36,000 students have risen across the board, with the vast majority of students performing on grade level in all core subject areas.

"Having only one goal has allowed us to adopt a laser-like focus on instruction,"



Thanks to focused instruction, student achievement in Norfolk has risen across the board.

### NORFOLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

#### Board members

(as of June 30, 2004):

Theresa Whibley, Chair; Barry C. Bishop, Anna G. Dodson, Wilson B. "Chip" Dodson III, Alveta Green, Marlies Landry, Lillian P. Wright

#### Governance structure:

Board members are appointed to two-year terms and serve at-large.

#### Superintendent:

John O. Simpson

**Number of students:** 36,724

**Number of schools:** 49

**Number of staff:** 4,650

#### Percentage of students by race/ethnicity:

African-American: 68%

Asian-American: 2%

Hispanic: 3%

White: 27%

**Percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced-price lunch:** 60%

**Percentage of students in special education:** 13.7%

**Percentage of students who are English language learners:** less than 1% (.006%)

**Per-pupil expenditures:** \$7,398

**Website:** [www.nps.k12.va.us](http://www.nps.k12.va.us)

says Superintendent John O. Simpson.

"There are only so many hours in the day. At some point you must begin to prioritize what you will attempt to accomplish."

#### Decisions based on data

NPS' high school scores—often a weak point for urban districts—are particularly impressive, with 95 percent of all students testing on grade level for English, 86 percent on grade level for writing, and 87 percent on grade level for algebra II.

Long before the passage of No Child Left Behind, NPS began to focus on narrowing the achievement gap by instituting a research-driven early childhood program and focusing on literacy skills during the early elementary school grades.

NPS has also shifted more than \$1 million from the central administration to the classroom to lower class sizes, introduce a literacy-based curriculum in grades K-3, and strengthen professional development for teachers and principals.

As a result, the achievement gap among and between various subgroups of students has narrowed significantly, including a nearly 18-percent drop in fifth-grade English and 16 percentage point

reductions in fifth-grade math and high school algebra II.

The key, school officials agree, is a district-wide focus on improving teaching and learning.

Embedded within the goal of high-quality teaching and learning for all students are three primary objectives:

- Ensuring continuous growth in academic achievement
- Providing a safe, secure, and disciplined environment
- Actively engaging parents, business leaders, and community members in the educational process for students.

Using data to drive decision making, the district has created a comprehensive accountability system that enables teachers, principals, administrators, and board members to track student achievement and shift human and material resources when needed.

#### One goal unifies the district

The strong consensus is that having one major goal, with clearly stated objectives and roles for each team member, has had a powerful, unifying effect on NPS. Board members have a collegial, supportive rela-

tionship with each other and with the superintendent.

"Even when they disagree with each other, they are willing to listen to and treat each other with the utmost respect," Simpson says. "The willingness to listen to all sides of an issue allows them to better understand competing needs and come to an equitable compromise."

Clear goals and effective governance clear the way for the staff to focus on the truly important work of improving student achievement, according to board members and the superintendent.

The board emphasis on accountability begins at the top. In addition to evaluating the superintendent, each year the board issues an NPS School Board Performance Report, which includes how much time at meetings is devoted to improving student achievement.

"As we talked about improving academic achievement for all our students, we became convinced that an accountability system was going to be a critical need," says Theresa Whibley, school board chairperson. "But we also knew that we

couldn't ask our public school employees to do something that we weren't willing to do ourselves.

"We are accountable to students, parents and community members. We needed to be out in front showing that we could walk the walk and not just talk the talk."

### **The board as catalyst**

For NPS board members, walking the walk also means regularly seeking input from parents, business leaders, civic groups, and other stakeholders.

Serving as a catalyst, the board formed a community engagement task force in 2003 to recommend ways to build and strengthen partnerships that support student learning.

Striving to make the schools more "parent and community friendly," board members eat dinner with parent representatives from each school to discuss issues and literally roll out the red carpet for them at school board meetings. As the board and administration began focusing on high school reform, a series of town hall meetings were held across the city.

Rather than simply providing a forum for airing grievances, the meetings were structured in a way that brought students, parents and community members together to discuss what the ideal high school experience would look like.

"We heard some powerful comments and gained some great insight," says Whibley. "This fueled our desire to have community members in our schools more often. That's why we're gearing up to make our buildings more inviting places for the public and broadening volunteer opportunities with our new mentoring program."

The red carpet treatment for parents and community members is paying off. Community involvement in Norfolk schools has jumped from 8,026 hours to 18,954 hours in just one year.

"From the moment we moved here in 1997, we were welcomed into the community and schools," says Toni Wynn, an NPS parent. "Norfolk Public Schools has really been my partner. Whatever I put in, I get back almost immediately, and more in return." ■

### **Chula Vista**

*Continued from page 5*

actively involved in our education committee and work harmoniously with the chamber."

### **Seeking innovative solutions**

Although CVESD has won accolades for sound fiscal management and steady gains in student achievement, room for improvement remains. On state tests, only 36 percent of all students perform on grade level in language arts and 42 percent in math, leading school officials to seek new solutions.

Partnering with the Ball Foundation, for example, CVESD provides ongoing and intensive professional development aimed at helping principals serve as true instructional leaders and as the chief executive officers of their schools.

While goals and accountability are standardized across the district, the board recognizes that there are different pathways to achieving those goals, and has given principals the authority to make site-based decisions that benefit student learning.

Data is disaggregated and looked at from a variety of perspectives, while the district's sophisticated information technology system can provide a snapshot of achievement at the district, school, grade, classroom, and student levels.

Data isn't used to punish, but to inform. "When boards are governed well, districts celebrate their gains, own their achievements, see progress, and are honest in their examination of areas that need improvement," says Billings. "They eliminate blame and embrace aim by targeting their next steps."

### **Growth presents challenges**

In addition to upgrading the district's data and accountability systems, the board has also launched such innovative initiatives as a mobile pediatric clinic, six family resource centers, and new partnerships that provide high-quality after-school care and enrichment opportunities.

"Change doesn't take place overnight, but over time in an incremental fashion," says board member Patrick Judd. "We see significant academic improvement for students who have sustained instruction in

our district over time where language acquisition and the cumulative effect of instruction produce higher performance."

The district's rapid growth continues to challenge CVESD, which has earned an A+ bond rating and has been recognized by a local taxpayer group and a national building trade association for its efficiency in managing its extensive (and ongoing) facilities program.

Earning taxpayer trust through sound fiscal and operational management is critical for the district, which is already planning for 12 additional schools. The city expects to grow by an additional 37,500 homes during the next 15 years.

Voters have responded by overwhelmingly approving a \$95 million bond measure for capital improvements. School officials say, however, that the district's reorganization in 1993 remains its single most courageous and important act.

"We're proud of our unity of purpose, one that focuses on students and not on adult agendas," says board member Larry Cunningham. "Keeping the focus on children ensures that there are clear goals and eliminates divisiveness." ■

The CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence recognizes successfully governed school districts. The award is presented to the school district that best demonstrates excellence in board governance, closing the achievement gap, academic achievement, and community engagement.

Each CUBE member will receive the application form for the 2005 award for Urban School Board Excellence next April. All applications received by May 27, 2005, will be considered in the next judging process.

The 2005 award for Urban School Board Excellence will be announced at the CUBE Annual Conference banquet in Las Vegas, Nevada.



#### **ABOUT CUBE**

NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban initiative of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 106 member school boards and the almost 9 million students they serve. Through legislative advocacy, conferences, workshops, seminars, and publications, CUBE has been in the forefront of cultivating excellence in urban public schools for more than three decades.

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#### **ABOUT NSBA**

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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