



# THE TENNESSEE ACHIEVEMENT SCHOOL DISTRICT: RACE, HISTORY, AND THE DILEMMA OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In January 2010, Tennessee passed the First to the Top Act, a sweeping reform of the state's education policy that was the cornerstone of its successful Race to the Top application. The Act created the Achievement School District (ASD), a state-run education authority with the power to directly run eligible schools and to authorize charter management organizations to operate schools. ASD leaders set an extraordinarily ambitious goal of moving schools from the bottom 5% into the top quartile of performance within five years, but they rely almost entirely on external providers to design and implement plans for curriculum, instruction, and school leadership.

Since its inception, the ASD has generated considerable controversy. This is not surprising since the power to take over schools and make wholesale changes in faculty—both integral to the ASD strategy—are invariably contested and emotionally charged. Yet the dissent about the ASD, especially in Memphis where all but two of its schools are located, has risen to increasingly high levels. The ASD's immediate survival may not be

threatened, but ongoing community backlash has led to instability and the diversion of resources from the ASD's extraordinarily difficult educational mission. A broad-based coalition of supporters seems key to the ASD's longevity and success.

The controversy surrounding the ASD includes more than the typical debates about charter schools and local control that dominate headlines in many cities. Deeply divergent views about the ASD are rooted in the historical experience of Memphis, and particularly the region's highly charged racial dynamics that extend back into the 19th century. The experience of Memphis' African American community with issues like discrimination, segregation and desegregation, white flight, and the recent departure of six counties from the district shape the lens with which many local residents interpret and understand the ASD's mission.

One consequence of this is that supporters and critics see the ASD in entirely different ways. Advocates see an initiative dedicated to improving learning outcomes for students that historically have been poorly served

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by the traditional system. They also see the ASD as placing needed pressure on local districts that have failed to improve, and that they perceive as mired in an inefficient bureaucracy and paralyzed by interest group politics. In addition, advocates view the charter management organizations that operate ASD schools as representing a “hyperlocal” approach that privileges the needs of parents and students over other adult interests and keeps decision making and funding at the school level.

In stark contrast, detractors see an enterprise motivated by profit, paternalism, reckless social

engineering, and racism. Several critics noted the ASD’s adverse financial implications for the Shelby County School district, which is already under financial strain.

Other community members expressed skepticism about the agenda behind the philanthropic investments that have played a key role in establishing and supporting the ASD. They suspect that the real purpose is to discredit the local system and to promote charter schools.

In addition, the replacement of mostly African American teachers with what critics perceive as a disproportionate number of young, white teachers has stoked fears about job security and middle-class status in a city where stable employment opportunities

are scarce. Moreover, several respondents expressed indignation at the implication that students will be better served by young (and often white) college graduates than by experienced, local (and often African American) teachers. Other critics claim that the ASD lacks a nuanced feel for the unique culture and historical narratives of individual neighborhoods and that this has led to poor decisions and mistrust. They resent the presumption that Memphis can “be fixed” by outsiders.

The inability of the ASD to meet its performance objectives, thus far, has drawn increased attention to these criticisms, and has left the ASD vulnerable

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to further attacks. For example, the perception of poor performance has motivated arguments from groups such as the Black Caucus and the Shelby County Board of Education that question the legitimacy of additional ASD school takeovers.

ASD leaders are attuned to these dynamics, and realize the importance of building a broad coalition that will support its work over time. In a significant change in strategy, this year the ASD established Neighborhood Advisory Councils (NACs) that were empowered with greater decision-making authority over the controversial process for matching schools and providers. These councils wielded more control than the ASD had previously granted local advisory groups. They also increased the representation of parents to at least 50%

of each council. However, initial experience suggests that the NACs neither defused the perception of a hostile takeover of neighborhood schools nor arrived at decisions that completely align with ASD priorities. The new councils appear susceptible to the same dynamics of democratic localism that critics of traditional districts have long bemoaned.

The ASD's centralized approach has enabled it to define a clear line of authority and to focus on a

remarkably coherent set of goals. But coherence and focus have come at a price. Avoidance of local political institutions has left the ASD vulnerable to the perception that is committing an aggressive takeover of neighborhood schools. Its conception of hyperlocalism may eventually lead to high performing schools, but in adopting this approach, ASD leaders have placed their legitimacy in the hands of providers whose success is dependent on their ability to overcome an array of formidable challenges.

## I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

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In January 2010, Tennessee passed the First to the Top Act, a sweeping reform of the state's education policy that was the cornerstone of its successful Race to the Top application. Among its provisions, the Act authorized aggressive intervention in the state's lowest performing schools. A key component of the plan was the establishment of a state-run education authority—the *Achievement School District (ASD)*—with the power to directly run eligible schools and to authorize charter management organizations to operate schools. The ASD hired its first superintendent in August 2011 and entered into full operations with five schools in the fall of 2012. By 2015, the number of ASD schools had grown to 29, with four additional schools selected for conversion in 2016. All but 2 of these schools are in Memphis.

As a state-run district, the ASD represents an unusual system of governance in US education. It has the legal responsibilities of a local education agency (LEA), the approval powers of an authorizing agent, and an

enrollment policy that allows a segment of students to choose among the schools in its jurisdiction. It has set an extraordinarily ambitious goal of moving schools from the bottom 5% into the top quartile of performance within five years, but it relies heavily on CMOs to design and implement plans for curriculum, instruction, and leadership.<sup>1</sup>

Since its inception, the ASD has generated considerable controversy. This is not surprising since the powers to take over schools and make wholesale changes in faculty—both integral to the ASD strategy—are invariably contested and emotionally charged. Yet level of dissent about the ASD, especially in Memphis where most of its schools are located, has reached a level that has surprised even seasoned observers of school reform. During the 2015 legislative session, 22 bills were filed that sought to limit or abolish the ASD, and several new anti-ASD bills were submitted in 2016. The process for converting schools into the ASD has become increasingly contentious and at times hostile.

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of five schools that the ASD runs directly, all schools are managed by charter management organizations.

A segment of local representatives, district officials, school board members, and community leaders has reported growing anger and frustration about the ASD.

The immediate survival of the ASD does not appear to be threatened by these dynamics. The ASD is enshrined in state law, and the governor and many members of the state legislature see it as an important component of the state's education strategy. Of the twenty-two anti-ASD bills submitted in 2015, all but two were easily defeated, and another law was enacted that allowed ASD schools to expand enrollment. The recent turnover in the commissioner of education office and the departure of Chris Barbic as ASD superintendent are sure to bring changes, although a fundamental shift in strategy seems unlikely at this time.

But survival does not ensure stability, and a turbulent environment portends future challenges for the ASD. For example, the greater the level of community resistance, the more difficult it is for the ASD to establish collaborative relationships with community organizations, local districts, and the Department

of Education. ASD leaders see these relationships as critical to their long-term agenda, but productive relations will be difficult to accomplish under a barrage of community resistance. In addition, the perception of volatility could make it harder to attract new providers that are wary of stepping into a hostile environment. More importantly, the educational challenges that the ASD and its providers confront are so large, and the demands on organizational learning so great, that the diversion of resources to "non-educational" matters threatens to undermine the ASD's primary goal.

This report seeks to explain the social and political dynamics that underlie the political turbulence surrounding the ASD. Our analysis is informed by 41 interviews with a purposefully chosen group of state legislators, school board members, Shelby County district leaders, Memphis city council members, Tennessee Department of Education officials, leaders of non-profit organizations, leaders of charter management organizations (CMOs), and the ASD leadership team.

## II. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF STATE-RUN, TURNAROUND DISTRICTS

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Traditionally, the role of state education agencies (SEAs) has been to funnel federal money to districts and schools and to oversee compliance with regulations regarding the use of those funds. Compliance and regulation, not reform and improvement, have been the primary activities of most SEAs. Even as some state leaders placed curriculum reform and student achievement at the center of their agenda in the 1990s, the organization and function

of SEAs received relatively little attention, and SEAs rarely received additional funding.

SEAs were thrust into the limelight during the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era when their limited capacity to perform key aspects of the legislation became evident. Several analysts pointed to SEAs as a key weak link in the logic of NCLB. As one commentator noted, "it is almost impossible to exaggerate just how unprepared these departments are" (Tucker & Toch, 2004, p.32). More

recently, the Race to the Top competition spurred some states to pass laws that increased SEA authority and reach.

### A Nontraditional approach to governance

Since 2003, state-run districts have been established in Tennessee, New Orleans, Michigan, and Nevada.

These districts represent a significant departure from the SEA's historical role. The reasons

for this shift are clear. Few local districts have demonstrated sustained success in improving large numbers of chronically underperforming schools, and many have struggled to make even incremental progress. Moreover, many urban districts continue to exhibit characteristics that have hindered

improvement; they are highly politicized, under-resourced, fractured, and subject to rapid leadership turnover. Even reforms that have demonstrated effectiveness, such as some comprehensive school reform programs, have failed to make a significant dent in the problems of large urban districts.

To achieve their goal of stronger outcomes for a small group of poorly performing schools, state-run districts have chosen nontraditional strategies for educational governance. The most obvious example is their reliance on CMOs to convert neighborhood schools to charter schools and improve them. In New Orleans and Tennessee, the SEA directly operates a few schools, but its predominant role is to oversee and monitor the CMOs. The reliance of state-run districts on philanthropic and federal grants also represents a notable shift away from traditional financial arrangements in which state and local funds support the bulk of day-to-day operations. For example, there

is no line item in the state budget that supports the Tennessee ASD central office, and it has relied heavily on federal and private funds to sustain operations.

State-run districts bear little resemblance to traditional districts in other ways. They have no equivalent to a locally elected school board that sets policy and hires

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district leadership, and they are not directly involved in determining curriculum and instruction, textbook adoption, professional development, or hiring practices. Moreover, state-run districts employ a fraction of the staff of a typical district, in part reflecting a commitment to push resources and decision making down to the level of the school. These districts, in other words, do not simply recreate local governance structures at the state level. Rather, they are new and lean systems that seek to reduce the uncoordinated involvement of multiple layers of government, strengthen parental choice, and incentivize performance among non-government agencies.

For these reasons, state-run districts also represent a reorganization of governing authority among political institutions. In this new balance, the state assumes considerable control over local schools but allocates much of its decision-making prerogative to CMOs.

Advocates of this system refer to it as “hyperlocal,” in that it allows school operators to focus attention and resources on the needs of students and parents without the distractions and competing agendas that traditional schools must manage. Further, the system grants parents the right to choose a school and potentially serve on a local charter board.

But while this conception of “localism” is meant to make schools more responsive to parents and students, it minimizes the role of the local community in setting education policy. Heightened parent voice may potentially make schools more responsive to student needs, but the power of local citizens to influence

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### The centrality of continuous learning in the ASD

Even the most ardent supporters of ASD-like reforms agree that changes in governance do not automatically lead to better outcomes. Improvements in practice will

occur only if the organizations charged with operating schools design and deploy effective systems of teaching and learning. Consequently, the capacity and performance of providers is critical to the success of state-run districts. The state can try to establish supportive environments, but only providers can deliver the results.

Several factors contribute to the capacity of providers to develop robust school-level programs, including expertise, experience, money, and strong leadership. But for even the most well-resourced organizations, two additional factors-- time and a stable operating environment-- are critical. Providers need time to assess what is working, make strategic adjustments, and determine whether those adjustments are producing desired changes (Glazer, Massell, & Malone, 2015; Peurach & Glazer, 2012). Indeed, the first years of the ASD have shown that even operators who bring considerable experience and institutional knowledge are unlikely to produce dramatic gains in student achievement in the first years. Nothing in the history of educational reform suggests that the difficult process of organizational learning and improvement can be circumvented.

School operators are not the only ones that need to learn and improve. Oversight agencies like the ASD also need time to reflect on past decisions and develop their capacity. There is little precedent for state-level agencies of this sort, and basic organizational functions, such as managing complex inter-governmental relations, establishing internal staffing patterns, and monitoring operators, need to be established and refined. Moreover, the ASD will need time to identify and reward successful operators while removing ineffective ones. Even in the best case

scenario, it will take several years to solidify a cohort of high-performing operators.

### Building a broad-based coalition of supporters

As this overview suggests, initiatives like the ASD require the stability, time, and resources to allow both providers and oversight agencies to learn and improve. A stable operating environment, in turn, requires a stable political environment that eschews the quick-fire policy cycles in which new reforms are discarded after a few years. Instability and impatience have long plagued efforts to develop robust and effective educational programs. Even those rare initiatives that have demonstrated measurable success have been

highly vulnerable to instability in the policy environment, shifts in philanthropic spending, and changes in public priorities (Rowan, 2002).

For these reasons, a broad base of support among multiple constituencies and stakeholder groups is critical to the stability, longevity, and success of the ASD. While controversy and dissent are staples in this era of education politics, a broad social and political base can mitigate the worst consequences of changing policies and an unstable environment (Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001). The remainder of this report examines the mix of historical, social, and political factors that help and hinder the formation of such a coalition.

## III. THE ASD IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MEMPHIS

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All educational reforms have their supporters and detractors. Even the most innocuous-sounding programs may attract criticism from parents, teachers, legislators, or competitors who are troubled or threatened by some aspect of the proposed change. So it is neither surprising nor remarkable that opinions about the ASD vary greatly. Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss local concerns about the ASD as just another example of the tug and pull of American education politics. To do so would be to misunderstand how the controversy about the ASD is rooted in the historical experience of Memphis.

One central thread in this history is the highly charged racial dynamics of the region, which extend back to the 19th century. This does not mean that all African Americans oppose the ASD or that all white citizens support it. This is clearly not the case. It does mean, however, that the discussions about the ASD occur against a sharp backdrop of the experience of

Memphis's African American community with issues like discrimination, segregation and desegregation, white flight, and the recent departure of six counties from the district. This history, which we briefly discuss here, animates the social and political dynamics surrounding the ASD.

### From the Civil War to desegregation

On the eve of the Civil War, Memphis was a notably cosmopolitan and international city. The economic opportunities afforded by its proximity to the Mississippi River attracted a sizeable population of German, Irish, and other European immigrants. The Germans, in particular, brought values and customs such as trade unionism and commerce that set Memphis apart from other Southern cities of that era. The city was also home to almost 4,000 African Americans most of whom were slaves.

Memphis fell quickly to the Union army at the outset of the war, and subsequently became the center of a large federal Freedmen's Bureau that provided aid to former slaves. The bureau attracted a large number of former slaves, black Union soldiers, and bureaucrats, many of whom remained after the war. By 1870, 38% of the city's population was African American and by 1900 the proportion was 50% (Pohlmann, 2008).

Devastating epidemics of yellow fever permanently changed the city's demographics, as the German population and other wealthier groups died or fled. The remaining population was predominantly Irish and African American, groups that lacked the means to move. Between 1880 and 1920, the city rebuilt its depleted population, but in the process lost much of its international and cosmopolitan character. The majority of newcomers migrated from the rural areas of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, bringing with them highly conservative values that were reinforced by an equally traditional economy. Historians depict the Memphis of that era in terms of a small but dominant group of wealthy whites, a politically feeble white working class, and an all-encompassing effort to exclude the city's African Americans from participation in civic life (Pohlmann, 2008).

In the century following the Civil War, race relations were marred by riots in which blacks were killed, raped, and assaulted, and their property stolen or vandalized. Beginning around 1900, one of the country's most pervasive systems of segregation took root, leading to separate buses, schools, parks, theatres, and other public spaces. Even as the courts forced the dismantling of Jim Crow style laws, Memphis remained one of the nation's most segregated cities for the

entirety of the 20th century. One account noted that "in the Memphis of the 1960s, blacks had virtually every disadvantage imaginable to discourage them from seeking their rights as citizens" (Hoppe and Speck, 2007, p.25). Another historian of the city wrote that after a century of discrimination, "black Memphians ended up disproportionately poor, disillusioned, and militant, as well as suspicious of political leaders, including many of their own black leaders" (Pohlmann, 2008, 32).

### Desegregation and white flight

Nowhere have race relations been more fraught than in the six-decade effort to desegregate schools in Memphis and the surrounding Shelby County. Prior to the Brown Decision, the Shelby County education system was divided into four distinct sub-units: Memphis City Schools (MCS) served the students within the city limits of Memphis; Shelby County Schools (SCS) served students outside the city but within municipal boundaries; and both systems had separate schools for white and black students.

The decades following Brown saw a combination of ongoing legal battles, court supervision over desegregation plans, fiercely contested busing arrangements, and a large migration of whites out of the city. But despite all the conflict, desegregation efforts never made much progress. In 1970, 85% of MCS's 155 schools had student populations that were more than 90% single race. In SCS, less than 2% of African American students studied in white majority schools, and no white students attended majority African American schools (Kiel, 2011; Pohlmann, 2008).<sup>2</sup> The next 30 years brought more judicial action, boycotts by white parents protesting mandatory busing,

and organized protests from African Americans seeking equal representation on the Memphis City Board of Education.

Yet neither protests nor judicial action could change the fact that “many whites simply refused to be bussed” (Pohlmann, 77). During the summer of 1972, close to 10,000 white students abandoned the city’s public school system, and by 1978 the total rose to 40,000. Many of these students attended private schools that had sprouted up to meet skyrocketing demand, while scores of families moved beyond the city boundaries. According to the 2000 census, only Detroit ranked ahead of Memphis in residential segregation.

By 2010, desegregation, white flight, and the city’s annexation of surrounding areas had combined to create two school districts that were markedly different in geography, demography, and academic achievement (Kiel, 2011). MCS served an overwhelmingly (85%) African American population, while SCS was more diverse, although the majority (52%) of students were white. MCS served a slightly larger percentage of Hispanic students (6.5%, versus 4.6% in SCS), but a much larger share of students with limited English proficiency (6.3%, versus 2.8% in SCS). Over 85% of MCS students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, compared with 37% in Shelby County. Of particular educational significance is the fact that just over 80% of Memphis schools had concentrations of poor students of more than 90%, while SCS had no such schools

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### The merger and demerger of Memphis and Shelby County Schools

In 2009 and 2010, the politics of racial integration once again dominated local headlines. This time the issue was not school desegregation but the merger of the Memphis and Shelby County school systems. The impetus for the merger was both economic and political. As the population of suburban Shelby County continued to grow, and as Memphis became increasingly populated by low-income residents, a growing number of Memphis leaders worried about the city’s capacity to fund its own education system. In addition, the city council’s reluctance to continue providing 10% of the city’s education budget (as it had historically done) and the growing Republican dominance in state government further convinced city leaders that

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion of the legal battles concerning desegregation, see Kiel (2011).

<sup>3</sup> At least 125 of the 187 schools in MCS in 2010 had poverty concentrations of 90% or higher and 34 did not have data on the proportion of disadvantaged students. Therefore, 82% of schools with available data had concentrations of 90% or higher. <http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:1:605389123314357::NO::>

<sup>4</sup> In 2010, 40.8% of MCS schools were designated as “in good standing” according to the state’s criteria for NCLB accountability, compared with 90% of the schools in SCS; and 33% of K-8 students in MCS scored proficient or better on state tests in reading, compared with 61% of SCS students. The graduation rate for MCS was 62%, whereas SCS boasted a rate of 96% (Kiel, 2011, p. 816)

the time had come to merge the administration and governance of the two districts (Kiel, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

The merger was intended to combine the finance and governance of the two systems, but was not meant to alter the racial composition of schools. What remained unchanged, however, was the desire of many Shelby County residents to keep their schools separate—financially, administratively, and educationally—from those of Memphis. The spectrum of declining property

values and the threat of a new episode of white flight once again surfaced in public discourse (Kiel, 2011).

A group called “Save Our Students” formed in protest of the merger.

The efforts of Shelby County leaders to prevent the merger were thwarted not by

the courts but by the decision of the MCS board to surrender its charter, effectively dissolving the Memphis City School system. For many Memphis residents, the fearful response from the surrounding suburbs harkened back to the days of mandatory bussing.

The merger’s detractors cited a wide range of reasons for opposition, including a loss of local control, racial integration, and socioeconomic differences. A Shelby County district official put it this way<sup>6</sup>:

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*I think that race and socio-economics, the fear that somebody one day would do a bunch of busing and integrating—I think that was a concern. I also think [it was] just a perception of Memphis City Schools, and everything that is Memphis. The suburbs just want no part of that.*

In the end, the merger was completed but not without a change in state law that allowed six suburban municipalities to create their own independent districts,

administratively and financially separate from Shelby County. Legally, these are traditional districts but the intensity of debates surrounding the episode echoed back to an earlier time. As Daniel Kiel (2011) writes in his analysis of the merger, “many of the same sentiments

and strategies—educational equity from consolidation supporters and denial, delay, and disengagement from opponents—found in the story of desegregation have reemerged as the consolidation debate has unfolded” (p.822).

In the following sections, we show how this history helps to explain the starkly contrasting interpretations of the ASD among individuals and groups in Memphis.

<sup>5</sup> Some groups within the city opposed the move, seeing it as a threat to African American control of the schools. See (Kiel, 2011).  
<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations in this paper are from our interviews.

## IV. ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

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The complexity and history of the Memphis social environment has not been lost on ASD leaders. Former superintendent Chris Barbic was clear from the outset that the ASD strategy would need to be a collaborative effort between the ASD and the local community: “The only way it’s going to be sustainable is if we’re doing this as much as possible with communities, with the district, with the folks in the school.” Moreover, Barbic realized that the ASD’s sizeable authority enhanced the need for strong community relations: “The fact that you don’t have to invest stakeholders in what you’re doing is all the reason why you must.”

Likewise, Superintendent Malika Anderson, who arrived with Barbic and served as the ASD’s chief portfolio officer, has written about the ASD in context of her family’s connection to the civil rights struggle in Tennessee:

*My family helped lead the civil rights movement in Tennessee from the 1950s through the ‘70s, and demanding access to equitable, high quality education for all students was central to the movement. ...When my aunt integrated her elementary school as a frightened first grader, and when my mother and her parents fought a suspension when her principal singled her out as the only black child in class who didn’t address him as “sir,” the fight for social justice through education became the lifeblood of my family’s experience in and love for Tennessee.<sup>6</sup>*

Anderson, who worked under Michelle Rhea, the highly contentious chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public

schools, is aware that alienating large swaths of the community can quickly undermine reform even in cities where schools are in desperate need of improvement. The experience in DC strengthened her resolve that the ASD must work in collaboration with the community it aims to help: “I refuse to do any kind of school turnaround without the needs and voice of the parents and the students at the center of this. I think it’s the only way to make this a sustainable effort.”

A key part of the initial strategy involved the formation of a community-based body, the Achievement Advisory Council (AAC), to play an advisory role in “matching” priority schools (those eligible for state takeover) with ASD authorized providers. The AAC began in 2012 as a small advisory group but quickly evolved into 25 person body. Margo Roen, who at the time was the ASD’s director of new schools, depicted the AAC as follows:

*It’s a wide range... from people who know all about the ASD and love it, to people who know nothing, to people who are huge skeptics. It’s a very diverse set of opinions which gives great perspective and input. The whole point is to help get more feedback from neighborhoods.*

In 2014, the AAC was further divided into four quadrants. Volunteers were selected, briefly trained, and then assigned to one of the quadrants. A former ASD staff member who worked closely with the community described the council’s role in this way: “Listening to parents and connecting parents with operators, and based on the information that they

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<sup>7</sup> <http://achievementschooldistrict.org/a-letter-from-malika-anderson-newly-named-asd-superintendent/>

capture, they make a recommendation to the ASD.” In assembling a diverse group of community members, ASD leaders hoped to gather collective community input while still prioritizing parents’ voices in the matching process. This would prove a difficult balance to strike.

The initial efforts at community engagement seemed to enjoy some early success. A little more than a year after his arrival, Barbic described the local response to the ASD in positive terms:

*In assembling a diverse group of community members to serve on the ACC, ASD leaders hoped to gather collective community input while still prioritizing parents’ voices in the matching process. This would prove a difficult balance to strike.*

*I think a really interesting part of this job is all of the work that goes into building relationships with the local districts and superintendents and district teams, to community leaders, to teachers and folks that are impacted by us coming in and operating the school...I think there’s a respect for the fact that we’ve really sat down and tried to build a partnership and work together. Same thing in the communities: I think we’ve really tried to work hard to build relationships with key community leaders, explain who we are, why, what we’re doing.*

Three and a half years after the ASD had been signed into law, the political and social environment seemed relatively stable. Despite some critics, the ASD seemingly had avoided the strong local resistance to governance changes that had afflicted cities like New Orleans and New York.

Still, there were signs of impending trouble. Despite extensive recruitment efforts by the ASD, only a relatively small number of people applied to serve

on the AAC. Among those who did join, many did not represent the neighborhoods that their recommendations would ultimately affect. As one

former ASD staff member put it, “community members were saying that these people claim they’re representing our neighborhoods but we don’t know who they are.” Particularly

missing, it seems, were the voices of parents, a group that both the ASD and CMOs wanted to play a central role in decision making.

Providers also expressed concern about the overall engagement strategy. As the director of one ASD provider remarked, “This needs to be a community engagement process that happens all year long... It just feels very disjointed, finite, and short-term and ‘get it done’...It doesn’t feel like it’s authentic. There are no parents involved.” Other CMOs shared similar dissatisfaction with the matching process.

Some ASD providers also questioned the capacity of the AAC to make informed decisions about the optimal fit between an operator and a school. Bobby White, who grew up in Memphis and whose recently formed CMO operates an ASD high school, noted that the AAC did not undertake the difficult and time-intensive task of soliciting parent opinions: “They weren’t out engaging the community, knocking on doors and so on; they weren’t showing up at different meetings. They would have a meeting or two.” Another CMO leader remarked that the process created an untenable level of uncertainty for operators who had a lot at stake: “It’s

too much work for it to all rely on the hands of just that group.” At least one ASD staff member shared these concerns, noting that the group was “just all over the place in terms of what they already know and don’t know.”

Moreover, as a broadly representative body without designated leadership, the AAC embraced an agenda

that went beyond its formal mandate. This, in turn, led to shifting priorities, ambiguous roles and, from the ASD’s perspective, unfavorable outcomes. Margo Roen described this phenomenon and the consequent problems:

*The community support that Barbic perceived in August 2013 evolved into growing turbulence over the next year, as resentment toward the ASD became increasingly loud and public. Leaders came to understand that the strategy for community engagement required rethinking and renewed energy.*

*This past year it was a lot more grandstanding and they played into that a lot more and some of them got very...opinionated, and lost sight of what the end game is. .... [They were] getting wrapped up in these broader issues that are very important but aren’t something that they control.*

One such issue concerned the “phase in” of charter schools and their co-location with district schools. Several ASD operators preferred to take over schools one grade at a time, gradually assuming control of an entire school over several years. In these situations the charter operator and the district school would either “co-locate” a building until the charter eventually took over all grades or, conversely, transfer students not included in the phase-in grade to other schools. The strategy made sense from the perspective of operators, but proved controversial among district officials who saw co-location as harmful to the morale in the district

side of the building. “It’s like attending your own funeral,” said one district official. Though the AAC’s mandate did not include the issues of phase-in and co-location, the council was drawn into the controversy and refused to sanction an operator whose strategy included a phase-in approach. As the conflict grew in

intensity, the operator eventually withdrew from the ASD, citing a lack of community support as a key reason for its exit.

Other operators echoed these criticisms of the AAC. Some reported that their neighborhood

councils had members whose primary motive was to build an anti-ASD coalition. One CMO leader observed that “the AAC can either make or break the situation... We had an AAC member that...spent her whole time talking to teachers and the principal about how we can fight [the ASD].” Barbic and other ASD leaders eventually concluded that the council required a different approach.

The community support that Barbic perceived in August 2013 evolved into growing turbulence over the next year, as resentment toward the ASD became increasingly loud and public. Leaders came to understand that the strategy for community engagement required rethinking and renewed energy. This ultimately led to new Neighborhood Advisory Councils (NAC) that were given more careful guidance for assessing CMOs’ applications to run ASD schools in the 2016-2017 school year. We discuss these new councils further below.

## V. VARYING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ASD

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In this section, we report on the highly divergent views of the ASD's agenda and purpose. These data are based on interviews with community leaders, heads of nongovernmental organizations, district and state education officials, and elected representatives. While our interviews do not capture the full diversity of opinions in Memphis about the ASD, they do provide compelling insights into the historical and social context that shaped these varying interpretations.

### Supporters' views

The ASD does not lack supporters in either the state of Tennessee or the city of Memphis. Indeed, a coalition of local and national foundations, advocacy groups,

*So to me this is an opportunity where we can break the cycle that had been going on for 30 and 40 years in the standard monopolistic school system that we had.*

*– Representative Mark White*

state politicians, and reform advocates provides the ASD with money, legal backing, and legitimacy. This support spans Memphis and Nashville, Republicans and Democrats, and racial and demographic groups. At least two African American-led organizations work with the ASD.<sup>8</sup>

Virtually without exception, these supporters see the primary purpose of the ASD as dramatically improving educational outcomes for students at serious risk of academic failure. Supporters also agree that the ASD,

in addition to helping students and schools, represents a state intervention in local districts that have failed to improve their chronically underperforming schools. While this implicit criticism of local districts is not written in official ASD documents, it is nonetheless an understanding shared by many supporters. State Representative Mark White, chair of the Education Administration and Planning Committee, stated this point unequivocally:

*If your school is performing in the bottom 5% in that district, we have the right to come in and take it over. We're going to hire our own teachers, we'll put in our own principal, we're going to set our own school hours. So to me this is an opportunity where we can break the cycle that had been going on for 30 and 40 years in the standard monopolistic school system that we had.*

A senior official from Shelby County Schools, the district from which the ASD has drawn most of its schools, conceded that the task of improving schools in a district where more than 80% of the students live in poverty, and where proficiency rates in math and reading barely reach 40%, overwhelms the capacity of the district:

*I think that just because of the sheer number of schools that are here, we need some help. The need is greater than the resources that we have. So, I think, in theory, if you have partners ... coming in to help, to improve the educational quality for some of the most fragile students, then it is a great proposition.*

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<sup>8</sup> These include the Black Alliance for Educational Options and Memphis Lift.

This district official sees the need for a partner, but others see value in the competitive pressures the ASD places on the existing system, as summarized by this comment from Representative White:

*It's my opinion that you've got to do anything you can to put competition in the system to where that which is not working will eventually go away. That's something you learn as a business. If I don't provide customer service for my customers, they go to the guy down the street—just go on for a better product and a better service. I believe that same thing works in the education system.*

Other community leaders see the ASD as not only providing services to students, but creating an incentive for parents and community members to become more involved with and aware of local educational issues. Senator Reginald Tate, who grew up in Memphis, put it this way: “Is it working? I think so. I think that it does help the system and it gives support that you never would have had. It even has a human element because now you are forced to confront a community and make a community become involved.”

Like Senator Tate, many supporters see the ASD as having a catalytic effect on the overall effort to improve underperforming schools in Memphis. They claim the ASD has contributed to an increase in resources, attention, and community understanding that, together, have disrupted a status quo that was seemingly imperious to reform.

Even Shelby County officials admit that the ASD has placed pressure on the district in ways that have been constructive (though they see negative aspects,

too). This is particularly true in regard to the district-managed iZone, a federally funded program run by the district that provides additional resources and autonomy to poorly performing schools. Many people in Memphis view the iZone and the ASD as competing programs that vie for schools and bragging rights. An independent research study found that over the course of the first three years iZone schools performed relatively better than ASD schools on the state assessment (Zimmer, Kho, Henry, & Viano, 2015). The comparative research has further fueled the perception

*Is it working? I think so. I think that it does help the system and it gives support that you never would have had. It even has a human element because now you are forced to confront a community and make that community become involved. – Senator Reginald Tate*

that the two programs are in competition. But while district officials exhibit pride in surpassing the ASD, they are quick to note that the ASD has provided iZone leaders with motivation and a sense of urgency. Dr. Sharon Griffin, regional superintendent of the iZone, made this point unequivocally: “The ASD has caused us to really look in proactive ways how to better support schools...So, thank you for the pressure, because it's making us take a hard look at what we thought we were doing right.”

Finally, advocates of the ASD see it as empowering local communities that have been poorly served by school systems unable or unwilling to respond to their

needs. Indeed, several members of the ASD leadership team reiterated the point that the ASD is hyperlocal and that it gives schools back to the community. Chris Barbic described the situation in this way:

*[W]e're taking schools out of local control and actually giving them back to the community, through nonprofit organizations that are running... hyperlocal networks of schools where folks in the neighborhood actually have the ability to participate in the governance of the school by being a member of a nonprofit board.*

This is a familiar argument for advocates of charter schools. The public bureaucracies and school boards that run traditional schools respond to a variety of constituencies and pressures including but not limited to parents. ASD leaders and advocates believe that by minimizing the role of central bureaucracies and creating a new political calculus tied to student outcomes, they are empowering schools to focus above all on the needs of students and families. Some Memphians agree. Senator Tate sees it as a beacon of transparency and responsiveness:

*The ASD is one of the most open entities in the system right now. They will receive comment or they will receive criticism. Actually, they are the ones that are seeking the community...that have*

*to physically go out and involve people, which is unlike the regular public school system.*

At least some evidence suggests that many parents see the ASD as focused on meeting their children's learning needs. Despite the often-turbulent school conversion process, in which an ASD operator takes over a Shelby County school, CMO leaders report satisfaction among parents and students who attend newly-converted ASD schools. One CMO leader reported little in the way of resistance once the

conversion is complete: "We've gotten no negative push back. They trust us. They want to give us a chance. ...They have bought in. And it's just customer service, respect. We serve the families in this building." According to surveys conducted by the ASD, 83% of responding parents report a high level of satisfaction with their children's schools.

*While supporters recognize that implementation of the ASD agenda has been inconsistent and slower than expected, they nonetheless see an ambitious strategy to shake up a system that has underperformed for too long. The language they use to describe the ASD varies—partner, competitor, change agent, policeman—but they share an understanding that the ASD seeks to improve learning outcomes among the most disadvantaged segment of Memphis society.*

In sum, while supporters recognize that implementation of the ASD agenda has been inconsistent and slower than expected, they nonetheless see an ambitious strategy to shake up a system that has underperformed for too long. The language they use to describe the ASD varies—partner, competitor, change agent, policeman—but they share an understanding that the ASD seeks to improve learning outcomes and life opportunities among the most disadvantaged segment of Memphis society. They believe the ASD

is an effective lever for improving underperforming schools throughout Memphis, and that ASD schools will continue to improve over time.

While this narrative resonates strongly among ASD staff members and supporters, it is not shared by all. Other members of the Memphis community expressed starkly different views of the ASD, its underlying agenda, and its consequences for the communities affected.

### Detractors' views

It is remarkable how diametrically opposed the perspectives of ASD detractors are from those of supporters. Whereas supporters see a bold, innovative effort to improve the educational experience for students who have been inadequately served for decades, others see an enterprise motivated by profit, paternalism, reckless social engineering, and racism.

For example, critics were quick to note the ASD's adverse financial implications for the Shelby County School district, which is already under financial strain due to the departure of six counties from the district, budget cuts, and a shrinking student population. Several respondents noted that for every school converted by the ASD, the district loses the dollars tied to those students. A SCS board member made this observation:

*I think that all of this new reform has to do with money—the ASD and certainly charters...the directors who run those. That is money that otherwise would have gone traditionally for Memphis City schools, and now Shelby County schools, that is going to a separate entity as salaries, as operations, and a number of things.*

The actual extent of financial hardship the district has incurred as a result of the ASD is not clear. A Shelby County administrator noted that while the ASD does drain some funds from the district, the loss has not been overly burdensome since the district is no longer responsible for educating those students. Yet the loss of district resources to the ASD has at least symbolic importance. Several respondents argued that Memphis historically has been deprived of adequate state resources, and they see the ASD as the latest incarnation of this trend. A former member of the Memphis Board of Education articulated this point clearly: "It was almost like a deliberate set up...you didn't give them the resources they needed, you took the kids who were in the community and bussed them to other schools instead of putting the resources they could have used there."

Of course, supporters see the reverse side of this situation. Representative White expressed exasperation at the education system's seemingly insatiable appetite for money, absent any indication that it was capable of using additional funds to improve performance: "They would say, well, if we just had more money. And you can look around, money is not the answer...The same people were doing the same thing year after year. We began to realize that that's not going to work."

Other community members wondered about the actual agenda behind the philanthropic investments that have played a key role in establishing and supporting the ASD. Shelby County Board member Chris Caldwell noted that the influx of private funds creates an unfair advantage for ASD schools over district schools:

*[T]here are a lot of wealthy individuals that refuse to put any more money in public education, and you can't argue with them because it's their money. So to the extent that they want to do that through charter schools on their own, that's fine. But when they include legislation that makes it an uneven playing field, that's not what this should be about.<sup>9</sup>*

In addition, the replacement of mostly African American teachers with a seemingly disproportionate number of young, white teachers has stoked fears about job security and middle-class status. Here, too, the importance has been as much symbolic as practical. Teachers of schools taken over by the ASD can apply for positions in that same school; if they are not accepted, they are

*Beyond concerns about employment, the implication that students will be better served by young (and often white) college graduates than by experienced, local (and often African American) teachers inflicts psychological wounds in a community that has been described as having a low self-esteem.*

assigned somewhere else in the district. This is surely an improvement over New Orleans, where thousands of local teachers and district employees were unceremoniously removed from their positions.

Nonetheless, experience in cities such as Baltimore (Orr, 1999) and Washington, D.C. (Henig, 2004) have shown that even a symbolic threat to the employment provided by school systems will engender fierce

resistance. In Memphis, where the poverty rate is nearly 30% and secure, middle-class jobs are scarce, a fierce reaction from local teachers should be of little surprise. A district official noted the tension caused by the perception of potential job loss: "Every year you have a cohort of teachers and administrators who are going to be out of a job... That just creates tension. Again, it is such a small community; people use that as another way to paint the ASD in a negative way."

Beyond concerns about employment, the implication that students will be better served by young (and often white) college graduates than by experienced, local (and often African American) teachers inflicts psychological wounds in a community that has been described as having a low self-esteem. One SCS board member made this point clearly:

*They say these teachers you have known all your life, they are not good enough. We are getting rid of all of them. We are bringing in some twenty-two year old who can do all these great things for your kids and, by the way, the majority of them are not going to look like you. I think that is destructive and offensive.*

Another common refrain among critics is that the ASD lacked a nuanced feel for the unique culture and historical narratives of individual neighborhoods, and that this led to mistakes in judgment, misunderstandings, and ultimately mistrust. Sharon Griffin, the regional director of iZone who has deep ties to the community, noted that those who come from another neighborhood, let alone a different city or state, are invariably labeled as outsiders:

<sup>9</sup> ASD officials note that while the ASD has received extensive philanthropic support, the Shelby County iZone has also benefitted from philanthropic contributions, including a recent three-year \$10 million grant from Teacher Town, USA.

*People didn't understand the cultural narratives of each school. You brought in people from a different district, from a different city... There's a whole different kind of way of learning that needs to take place, of leading that needs to take place, of teaching that needs to take place. You have to understand that the neighborhoods all have their own specific cultural narrative.*

Tomeka Hart, who was raised in Memphis, served on the Memphis school board, and has ties to the ASD, referred to the intensely “tribal culture of Memphis neighborhoods” and the importance of understanding the communities for effective school reform: “The people in the iZone have been here, they know this community. They don't have to learn the community. They didn't have to do a whole lot of professional development on cultures.”

The difficulty of establishing trust and strong working relationships was expressed not just by local community members, but also by some teachers and leaders working in ASD schools. A staff member of one ASD operator made this observation:

*I think we face resistance [from] just not looking like [people from] the community. Very few people who work for us live in Frasier. So we're not seen around town. We're not seen in the community... I still think there's just suspicion, and you know this city is very focused on people who grew up here.*

An ASD staff member acknowledged the perception “that the ASD is not sensitive to the needs of particularly poor black communities.” Others noted that the ASD left itself vulnerable to such claims by not ensuring that their strategy was fully understood. State representative Raumes Akbari explained this dynamic:

*So they need to spend some time working in that community, get some boots on the ground, grassroots, and explain this is what we're doing, ... When you have people losing their jobs and you have a school changing so dramatically and so quickly, parents don't understand the history behind it, then there's going to be a negative reaction.*

ASD staff admitted that their initial commitment to community engagement was sidetracked by the all-encompassing effort to improve student outcomes. As a new agency charged with overseeing extraordinarily challenging work in a highly complex environment, the ASD found it difficult to stay focused on community engagement, as Barbic acknowledged: “We haven't done a great job about collectively explaining all this stuff. We've just been so busy trying to do it. I think now we need to start picking up our head a little bit and just explain to folks what all this stuff means.”

While the ASD leaders strategically used community members to represent them in face-to-face encounters with local residents, this did not lead to sufficiently deep and trusting relationships, according to LaShundra Richmond, who leads an organization that worked with the ASD to generate community buy-in:

*To get buy-in from the community, they took some of the school leaders that were in that particular community in those schools and leveraged them as part of ASD's ground staff. These were black faces, black voices, and black leaders, which was a very strategic move. But ...there wasn't any true partnership. The conversations and relationships didn't continue. They lost the momentum and the trust that they had built.*

For some in the community, the issue was not a lack of engagement or communication but a lack of empowerment. Frequently, we heard that the ASD was imposed on or “done to” the community rather than with it. The leaders of one community organization noted that despite their organization’s support for the ASD, they perceived the ASD as a paternalistic imposition. “This is something that we felt like you did to us,” said one such leader. “So now we don’t necessarily want to

provided merely the illusion of community power. In reality, they claimed, decision-making authority remained squarely with the ASD. For these respondents, the distinction is clear: engagement is not empowerment. One former ASD staff member conceded that the strategy risked engendering more cynicism than buy-in. “Some folks think that the AAC matching process is not authentic. The ACC makes a recommendation, but the ASD makes the final decision.”

*The perception of strong results would not have entirely defused the controversy, but it would have legitimated the ASD’s claim as a driver of school improvement. But bold promises of lofty results quickly confronted the challenges of improving teaching and learning in schools beset by a history of poor performance within communities mired in inter-generational poverty.*

One way the ASD could have reduced community rancor was to meet its ambitious—and public—performance objectives. The perception of strong results would not have entirely defused the controversy, but it would have legitimated the ASD’s claim as a driver of school improvement. But bold promises of lofty results quickly confronted the challenges of improving teaching and learning in schools beset by a history of poor performance within communities mired in inter-generational poverty. In a highly publicized report,

be fully invested in the conversation until we can trust you. You come in and just say, ‘I know what’s best for you,’ and don’t even ask me to weigh in.”

An ASD staff member with close ties to the community acknowledged that “there is a sense that the ASD is imposing itself. I think part of it is the fact that you have TFA [Teach for America] types that are coming in and doing two years and leaving, and they contribute to the instability of the community. I think that this issue around race is something that we can’t deny.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, other respondents felt that the AAC, which was designed as a platform for community input,

Zimmer and his colleagues (2015) determined that ASD schools’ average performance, over a three year period, was no better than other priority schools and worse than iZone schools. The report did note some improvement in math scores, but also found that the ASD has had no statistically meaningful impact on reading scores.

ASD officials, while not refuting the validity of the Vanderbilt study, point to evidence of steady improvement. For example, they note that ASD schools, on average, outperformed the SCS iZone in math and science in the 2014-15 school year. ASD

<sup>10</sup> In the 2015-16 school year, there were just over 70 TFA corps members in ASD schools, but there were also 208 TFA members in Shelby County schools (33 in the iZone, 87 in non-ASD charter schools, and 88 in Shelby County traditional schools).

leaders also tout that their second and third year schools averaged level 5 (the highest level) on the state’s system of “value-added” measures, which is designed to capture growth in student achievement rather than to determine whether a student met a fixed proficiency benchmark on the state assessment. ASD leaders also note that ASD high schools demonstrated growth in every tested subject.

It is possible that these isolated data points may signal a gradual, upward trend in the performance of ASD students on state achievement measures. For seasoned observers of school reform, the lack of instant success is hardly surprising. Even the most established and proven programs can take several years to generate measurable gains in a new school. The fact that ASD schools include high concentrations of students with serious academic, social, and psychological needs virtually ensures that improvement will take time.

In the short run, however, these arguments seem to have done little to offset the perception that the ASD’s first three years have been marked by varying results and marginal gains. Indeed, for those already suspicious of the ASD, the slow start was easily interpreted as either a broken promise or evidence that improving the lives of disadvantaged students was never the actual intention. One SCS board member

reflected “I mean the biggest thing is, if you’re not doing any better with the schools, why should we continue to give you our schools?... You can’t fix us.” A former ASD staff member involved in community engagement efforts acknowledged how the discrepancy between early promises and actual results eroded support.

*I think that with the ASD the perception in the community may be that we’ve overpromised what we can do in terms of the impact on student outcomes. I think there is this narrative now that the ASD said it was going to come in and transform these schools—that’s really not happening.*

Dramatic promises of transformation followed by disappointment and cynicism is a familiar pattern in education. But the fact the ASD’s initial goal proved to be unrealistic does not necessarily mean that providers failed; it could simply show that overcoming a daunting array of social, psychological, and instructional obstacles requires an educational infrastructure that takes longer than two to three years to build. If educational improvement is in fact the goal, perhaps all that is needed is a little patience. Why, then, did these community members gravitate toward negative interpretations of the ASD, refusing to embrace the notion that the ASD was an earnest and legitimate attempt to transform a system that had produced inadequate results for decades?

## VI. PARENTS, STAKEHOLDERS, AND “THE COMMUNITY”

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Any effort to make sense of the divergent interpretations of the ASD quickly leads to an equally divergent set of explanations. Some local observers see hostility toward the ASD as a reluctance to embrace change, a poor understanding of school

quality, or a reflexive defense of the neighborhood school. There may be some truth to these explanations. For example, when SCS district leaders determined that they needed to close a handful of under-enrolled schools, they also encountered fierce resistance.

As one former state official said, “People don’t like having schools closed or taken away even when they’re low performing.” Others, while not denying the importance of race in shaping perceptions, note that it can provide a convenient way to avoid grappling with hard questions about local schools. One high-ranking district official made this point: “For people who want to continue to promote an ‘us versus them’ mentality it doesn’t take a lot of thought to say ‘it must be because of race.’ I think people buy into that too easily.”

Likewise, ASD leaders point out that amid all the noise generated by a handful of critics, the voices of parents—and thus the needs of students—are easily lost. Many parents, they claim, are either supportive of the ASD or at a minimum interested in its effort to improve the schools. Indeed, analysts have long argued that parents are at a disadvantage compared to more organized interest groups with the wherewithal and resources to press their agenda. Our research has uncovered anecdotes about parents being thrust anti-ASD signs to hold at community meetings, parents that are hesitant to express support for the ASD in an environment where ASD critics were particularly vocal, and other examples in which parents were misinformed about ASD schools. To ASD leaders, these incidents stand in stark contrast to their guiding ideology that “it’s all about the kids.”

Indeed, if the controversy about the ASD were truly all about the kids, increasing parent satisfaction would be the key to building a strong coalition of supporters. The CMOs in our sample have devoted considerable resources to creating a hospitable environment for parents. Outreach measures have ranged from family

picnics, to back-to-school nights, to home visitations, and may in part contribute to the high rate of parent satisfaction reported on ASD surveys. To the extent that these efforts build trust and are reinforced by positive classroom experiences for students, good will among parents should accumulate.

Yet while parents are a critical stakeholder group, they are not the only one. Shelby County teachers and principals, district officials, business leaders and community activists all have vested interests in the school system that include but extend beyond student learning. Urban education systems play a critical role in sustaining the African American middle class, and in Memphis the district is the second largest employer. Likewise, education has long been central to the civil rights movement and to the development of African American political clout (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 2001).

Concerns about jobs, civil rights, and political empowerment do not preclude attention to student learning, but the experience of cities like Washington, Baltimore, and Newark suggests that perceived threats to jobs and power will be contested, and that student achievement will never be the only issue at play (Stone, et. al, 2001; Russakoff, 2015). For former Tennessee superintendent and strong ASD supporter, Kevin Huffman, community pushback is a permanent feature of the enterprise.

*I think it’s probably folly to think that somehow if we just get greater results, this will go away. That’s not true. I think people in the political world think if you just have enough community meetings it will go away. That’s not true either.*

Civil rights activist and education reformer Howard Fuller makes a similar point in a stark way: “All the investments [in school reform] that you all are making are going to go down the drain because the push back on your strategy is coming. You all made certain decisions and said, “We’ll deal with them later. Well now is later.”<sup>11</sup>

Huffman may be correct that a degree of resistance and pushback is inevitable. But as Fuller’s comment implies, the ASD’s capacity to endure over time will be

greatly strengthened by a broad coalition of supporters that incorporates constituencies beyond parents and legitimizes concerns that resonate deeply among many Memphians—concerns which cannot be reduced to being “all about the kids.” There is little doubt that many schools in Memphis are in dire need of improvement; but there is also little doubt that a long history of racial discrimination, violence, and a “by any means necessary” effort to keep the suburban and city schools separate has provided Memphians with ample reasons to question the intentions of outsiders promising improvement.

## VII. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2.0

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One lesson from the ASD’s first three years is that “the local” still matters even for a powerful, state-run district. This point has not been lost on ASD leaders. In a significant shift in policy, the ASD replaced the aforementioned Achievement Advisory Council with Neighborhood Advisory Councils (NACs) that wield greater discretion in matching schools and providers. Two aspects of the new policy stand out.

The first is the NACs’ authority to reject the transfer of a school into the ASD and keep it as part of the Shelby County district. Converting schools has been one of the ASD’s primary (and controversial) points of power, and delegating some of this control to a neighborhood committee, albeit one selected by the ASD, is not a trivial change. In granting this degree of decision-making capacity to the NACs, ASD leaders hoped that the councils would absorb

some of the public criticism that has been targeted at the ASD, and in doing so defuse the perception of a hostile takeover of neighborhood schools.

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*While disheartening to ASD leaders, the unpredictability, politicking, and divisiveness that characterized the NACs are of little surprise. The dynamics of democratic localism apply to an ad hoc council formed by a state-run district just as they do to a traditional school district.*

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The second noteworthy component regards the prominent role of parents in the NAC. The ASD has mandated that parents comprise at least 50% of each council. The strategy is clear: the concerns of parents will carry more weight than those of other groups. Rich Haglund, the ASD’s general council, explained

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<sup>11</sup> Howard Fuller, comments made at The Urban Education Future? Lessons from New Orleans 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina conference in New Orleans, 6/9/15. A video of the session can be found at <http://educationresearchchalliancenola.org/sessions/2015/6/19/race-in-schools>

the underlying ideology: “There is this tension and this fine line between having a high-quality school operation that is designed for good outcomes and still having community involvement in it...At the very end, though, are the parents and the families that you can delegate decision making to.” This perspective does not lack sympathizers. Many critics of the traditional system advocate for changes in governance that privilege parent priorities over the concerns of other constituencies. Of course, this strategy is central to the larger charter school movement which seeks to weaken the ties between schools and interest group politics, thereby strengthening the hand of parents.

In January, 2016, the first round of NAC deliberations culminated with a series of recommendations about the specific schools to be absorbed into the ASD and the providers with which they would be paired. The process

is new and likely to further evolve, but the initial experience points to the unpredictability and turbulence that comes with granting a lay council authority over high-stakes decisions.

For example, despite a concerted effort to privilege the voice of parents, ASD leaders felt that in some cases, the NACs provided a platform for strident anti-ASD critics to express their views. Other ASD leaders expressed concern that council members more sympathetic to the ASD were reluctant to speak

out. Moreover, difficulty in recruiting parents to serve on the NACs forced ASD leaders to reduce the size of the councils in order to preserve the 50% parent ratio. The smaller councils struggled to cope with complex and lengthy operator applications that in some cases reached 200 pages and contained a wide array of data.

Viewed from the perspective of the ASD, the NACs proved unwieldy and unpredictable. One of the most experienced ASD operators, Aspire Public Schools, was denied a new school despite extensive community engagement efforts and rising scores in its

existing ASD schools.

Moreover, accusations questioning the integrity and legitimacy of the process, depicted in the local press, seemed to generate additional controversy and resentment. In short, the plan for the NACs to defuse community backlash has yet to materialize.

*Unlike most charter schools, the ASD is not a voluntary option that exists alongside traditional schools, and unlike the New Orleans Recovery School District it has not replaced the existing district. Rather, the ASD must coexist in a complex, interdependent relationship with a local system whose ties to the community entail a complex mix of historical, social, and economic factors.*

While disheartening to ASD leaders, the unpredictability, politicking, and divisiveness that characterized the NACs are of little surprise. The dynamics of democratic localism apply to an ad hoc council formed by a state-run district just as they do to a traditional school district. Indeed, initial experience with NACs simply underscores the complexity of the ASD’s political environment. Unlike most charter schools, it is not a voluntary option that exists alongside traditional schools, and unlike the New

Orleans Recovery School District it has not replaced the existing district. Rather, the ASD must coexist in a complex, interdependent relationship with a local system whose ties to the community entail a complex mix of historical, social, and economic factors. It is not

difficult to understand the ASD's desire to establish a decision-making structure that privileges parents and that focuses on a circumscribed set of educational issues. Less clear is whether other interests can be kept at bay.

## VIII. CONCLUSION: THE DILEMMA OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

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In its founding and its belief system, the ASD seeks to redefine the meaning of local control in education. Not only is it fiercely averse to a district-like bureaucracy, but it is also wary of the representative institutions that have mired districts in chaotic and maladaptive policies. The reluctance to create permanent councils with decision-making powers, despite the commitment to community engagement, illustrates this concern. The AAC's encroachment into controversial issues beyond its mandate and the difficulty encountered in the first year of the NACs suggest that the ASD's fears were not entirely unjustified.

Moreover, the ASD's unambiguous line of authority and clear mission have enabled it to focus on a remarkably coherent set of goals. Our data depict an organization singularly unified in its pursuit of an ambitious student learning agenda, committed to organizational learning, and capable of making strategic adaptations. In comparison to the broader education system that has been vulnerable to competing agendas, shifting priorities, and the vagaries of local control, this combination of resolve and capability is remarkable.

But coherence and focus have come at a steep price. Avoidance of local political institutions has left the

ASD vulnerable to the perception that it is committing an aggressive takeover of neighborhood schools. The attempt to give voice to parents has inadvertently (and ironically) contributed to the perception of a hostile takeover benefitting private interests. The ASD's conception of hyperlocalism may eventually lead to schools that are more responsive to the needs of students, but this seems unlikely to satisfy public demands for greater power to determine the policy agenda or to stave off the impulse to defend the local district's political turf.

In addition, the ASD's approach has meant that its public support is based almost entirely on obtaining strong student outcomes. Local districts are also under pressure to improve, but their legitimacy is grounded in far more than test scores. As the ASD has learned, justifying a controversial intervention in local schools on the basis of rapidly achieved and extraordinarily ambitious outcomes is a double-edged sword. ASD leaders see the strategy as privileging student needs, but in adopting this approach they placed their legitimacy in the hands of providers whose efforts, at least in the short-term, have confronted daunting challenges.

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