

Opportunity for All

A Framework for Quality and Equality in Education

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HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-68253-363-5

Library Edition ISBN 978-1-68253-364-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: O'Day, Jennifer A., 1944– author. | Smith, Marshall S., author.

Title: Opportunity for all : a framework for quality and equality in
education / Jennifer A. O'Day, Marshall S. Smith.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : Harvard Education Press, [2019]
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019011189 | ISBN 9781682533635 (pbk.) | ISBN
9781682533642 (library binding)

Subjects: LCSH: Educational change—United States. | Educational
equalization—United States. | School improvement programs—
United States. | School management and organization—United States. |
Community and school—United States.

Classification: LCC LB2822.82 .O3255 2019 | DDC 379.2/6—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019011189>

Published by Harvard Education Press,
an imprint of the Harvard Education Publishing Group

Harvard Education Press
8 Story Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Cover Design: Endpaper Studio
The typefaces used in this book are Adobe Garamond Pro for text and
Myriad Pro for display.

CHAPTER 1

Hope, Strategy, and Change

“MAKING HOPE HAPPEN”

The sun was shining and the mood upbeat as over a thousand people funneled through the doors of Orange Pavilion in San Bernardino, California, on November 10, 2016. There were high schoolers garbed in brightly colored T-shirts depicting their chosen “pathway,” teachers chatting up parents, and administrators talking with community leaders. School board members, employers, and representatives from area colleges and universities held enthusiastic exchanges. Even the Mexican consul was there. By the time things settled down, every seat in the arena had been filled.

The occasion was the fifth annual Community Gathering for Excellence, in which San Bernardino leaders and residents come together to hear about the progress of their schools and to recommit themselves to a collective vision for the region. That vision, under the banner “Making Hope Happen,” is centered on every child graduating from high school with the knowledge and tools to succeed in life and in work.¹ Toward this goal, the community heard some good news on that November day: graduation rates for the district had risen again, surpassing those for both the state and the nation, with rates for Latino and African American students at or very near the districtwide average.² Moreover, the College Board had recently recognized the district with a Gaston Caperton Opportunity Award, given annually to 130 local systems across the nation that have shown exceptional progress in preparing traditionally underrepresented students for college. San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBCUSD), which had nearly tripled its readiness rate, was one of only two large urban districts to be so honored. Nor had the progress stopped at academics. Through instituting restorative practices and social

and emotional skill development, SBCUSD had also reduced suspensions by 72 percent and cut student citations in half since the previous year.

These results, and the outpouring of support and optimism from the community, would have been remarkable in almost any district in the nation. But they were even more so in this place and at this time. Once a thriving working- and middle-class community, San Bernardino had been hit hard by an economic downturn that began well before the Great Recession of 2008. In the mid-1990s, rail shops, the local steel plant, and then Norton Air Base had all closed, the latter taking with it over 12,500 jobs. Downtown businesses followed suit, and when the housing crisis hit in 2008, foreclosure rates in San Bernardino were 3.5 times the national average. By 2010, San Bernardino had become the second-poorest of the hundred largest cities in the US, next to Detroit, and thereafter both the city and the region continued to be among the slowest in the nation to recover.³ Indeed, in 2015, the *Los Angeles Times* had labeled San Bernardino a “broken city,” with 41 percent of the city’s residents and 44 percent of its children living below the poverty line and over 15 percent facing deep poverty (household incomes of less than half the poverty level). In 2016, the year of the community gathering, only 46 percent of the city’s working-age residents were employed and 54 percent required some form of public assistance.⁴

One would hardly expect these economic conditions to generate high levels of hope and engagement. The timing of the community gathering made such a response even less likely. Just eleven months earlier, the entire community had been rocked by a terrorist shooting and attempted bombing that killed fourteen people and seriously injured another twenty-two attending a work-related Christmas party. The city was also five years into bankruptcy, which had further cut services despite a clearly increasing need. Finally, November 16, 2016, was just two days after the end of the most vitriolic and divisive presidential campaign in memory. Yet even while the new federal administration was talking of immigration bans and border walls, condemning public schools for leaving “our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge,” and placing its hopes in free market forces, San Bernardino leaders and community members had banded together in a collective effort to strengthen the public schools and the city and region of which they are an integral part.

What has contributed to this faith in their schools and hope for the future? In his opening remarks, Superintendent Dale Marsden suggested that

“the journey starts and ends with leadership.” Reaching out to the assembled community, he urged: “Leadership matters at every level. From the boardroom to the classroom to our city council to our local, state and national governments, even to the seat you’re in today. Your leadership matters, your engagement matters. We want you to leave today with this city in your heart. We want to enroll you as a part of the actual, physical solution to what our city needs.”⁵ Certainly, Marsden’s leadership—in both words and actions—has made a difference in San Bernardino City schools.

But for hope to flourish, people also need to see concrete possibilities for change. For this, Marsden and the district have turned to neighboring school systems that despite their own challenges have made a significant impact on improving student outcomes and reducing opportunity gaps for traditionally underserved students. One such district is Long Beach, California, which has been on this journey for over two decades. In fact, Carl Cohn, who initiated systemic improvement in Long Beach, spoke at San Bernardino’s second community gathering in 2013, comparing SBCUSD to where Long Beach had been fifteen years earlier and encouraging the district to keep moving toward its vision. San Bernardino leaders also looked to Garden Grove, California, whose continuous improvement culture and comprehensive approach to supporting its teachers has produced remarkable gains over the past eighteen years. A little farther north was Sanger Unified School District, a high-poverty district in California’s Central Valley, which went from one of the worst-performing districts in the state to a national model of turnaround, whose 71 percent Latino and 22 percent English language learner (ELL) student body had surpassed state averages in achievement and attainment for all students. Inspiration has also come from other systems, both across the US and internationally.

Such examples ignited a spark of hope by demonstrating the possibility for change; in the past seven years, San Bernardino’s own progress has kindled that spark into a flame, one that the district’s growing group of partners continue to fan as they join the improvement effort.

This brings us back to the theme of hope and our opening example of San Bernardino City Schools. Recall that San Bernardino lies in the heart of the economically depressed Inland Empire in Southern California and has had to contend with historically poor management at both the district and municipal levels, low levels of achievement and attainment, and among the highest poverty rates of the nation’s big cities. In the past four years, the city has been rocked by violence in the form of a terrorist attack that left fourteen people dead and a school shooting that killed three, including an eight-year-old student. Yet the community has come together in a collective impact initiative focused not just on improving the school system and student outcomes but also on rebuilding the economic viability of the city and region as a whole. This is a goal that all the actors in the area can get behind. At the time of the Fifth Community Gathering for Excellence described in chapter 1, the district and its partners were already celebrating some remarkable progress, including big reductions in disciplinary referrals and a graduation rate that had surpassed that of the state, with much-reduced gaps among student groups.

In the two years since then, the graduation rate has continued to rise to over 89 percent, well above that of the state and even above the district’s own targets.¹³ In addition, A–G course-taking (needed for admission to the state universities) has seen “exponential growth” as the district has focused on improving grading practices and instruction to increase rigor and advance implementation of the state’s standards. Superintendent Dale Marsden notes that at the current rate, the district will be able to close achievement and attainment gaps—but much too slowly. So attention to capacity building in low-performing schools is being stepped up and refocused. Meanwhile, the collective impact initiative is ready to be handed off to a third party (the Making Hope Happen Foundation) to coordinate, and partnerships with local employers and the county have expanded the multiple pathways in high schools and are moving toward a goal of two thousand (mostly paid) internships for high school seniors in 2019–2020. Eventually, this should include all seniors in the district and hopefully the county as well.

There is still a great deal of work to be done, not only within the school system but throughout the city and the region. The vision for San Bernardino is long-term and based on deepening partnerships across employers, city, county, district, and community forces. There are no superheroes here; every-

one has a stake and a role in the effort's success. Indeed, hope is not just a concept in San Bernardino; it is a call to action. We invite our readers to similarly answer this call in their own communities, schools, and school systems. While the journey may be long, the examples in this book demonstrate that steady work by all stakeholders can overcome many obstacles.¹⁴