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The School Improvement Industry

A Case Study of Framingham

Abigail Jurist Levy, M.M.H.S.

This study looked at school improvement in the Framingham public schools from three perspectives. We were interested in finding out if the administration and school committee, local businesses with an interest in education, and agencies that provide training and technical assistance to schools have similar ideas regarding how the Framingham schools should improve. We conducted interviews with administrators and members of the school committee, local businesses and businesses involved in school/business partnerships, and six agencies that provide training and technical support to schools in the Greater Boston area. We found that although all groups shared many interests, the businesses and school improvement agencies relied on the school system to provide direction for their efforts. Simultaneously, the school committee and administration were unable to create a shared vision owing to the political nature of their relationship.

For several years I have been interested in how the vast number of organizations and individuals involved with public education interact with one another and contribute to the improvement of schools. Three fellow students at the Heller graduate school, Brandeis University, and I had an opportunity to examine the “school improvement industry” at work in the town of Framingham, Massachusetts. In the summer of 1992 we met with some of the local players, learned how they functioned and what effect they might have on local education.

We talked with school committee members and administrators, local businesses involved with education, and agencies providing training and technical assistance to schools. Our goal was to learn if there was common ground among these disparate but potentially powerful stakeholders in the way they defined the strengths, challenges, and vision of the Framingham public schools. Such common ground might well serve as a driving force for achieving fundamental change through local support and involvement. Conversely, the lack of same could easily inhibit such change.

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- We asked school administrators and school committee members how they would like to see their schools improve. This involved interviewing six members of the school committee and five administrators.
- We asked businesses with an interest in the community what kinds of school improvement efforts they would like to support. To accomplish this we researched thirty-one Framingham businesses and six in a partnership with a Framingham school.
- We asked agencies that provide training and technical assistance to schools in the Greater Boston area what kinds of projects they would like to get involved with by interviewing representatives of six such agencies.

We did not choose Framingham because we felt its school system was in greater or lesser need of improvement than any other system in the commonwealth. Rather, we were interested in the town because of its large size, changing demographics, and because its school system had recently undergone several important changes, most notably the revision of the entire K-12 curriculum and the merger of the two high schools and the two middle schools. To gain additional background on the town, we compiled census and other demographic data, conducted a computer search of the *Boston Globe* and *Middlesex News*, and interviewed four involved members of the community.

It is important to note that we did not interview parents or teachers, two groups with critical roles to play in any school improvement effort. The time we had available to conduct our research was limited to the summer months, making these groups inaccessible. At this time, it is unclear to us how much of an impact they have on shaping the vision of the Framingham public schools. It would add to the richness of this project if they could be included in the future.

The Town of Framingham

With a population of 65,000, Framingham is the largest town in the nation. As a result of its size, power is dispersed broadly over a large number of elected officeholders. Recent debates have focused on whether Framingham should remain a town or adopt the more formal power structure of a city government.

School personnel and newspaper articles described a growing trend in the diversity of its residents.¹ Framingham has now become, in the words of one administrator, "a microcosm of the world" in which forty-seven languages are spoken, children come from million-dollar estates and homeless shelters, and Hispanic, black, Brazilian, Russian, and Indian communities, among others, are established and growing. Administrators discussed the challenges of meeting the needs of such a variety of children and families.

The division between these diverse groups is represented by the separation between the north and south sides of town. The south side is heterogeneous, with a high percentage of families in both low- and high-income groups, many minority racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups, and many families headed by single parents. The north side has a relatively homogeneous composition of white middle- and upper-middle-class families. The north/south division has been a significant concern to educators in recent years for several reasons, among them the merging of the North and

South high schools; the merging of the North and South middle schools; and the clustering of minority students in only a few schools; for example, one elementary school on the south side is composed of approximately 50 percent minority children.

The 1990 census provided a somewhat more limited, though consistent picture of diversity. According to 1990 census figures, 10 percent of the Framingham population is composed of people of color, an increase from 5.4 percent in 1980. The percentage of foreign-born residents has also increased, from 8.4 percent in 1980 to 11.7 percent in 1990. In contrast, the percentage of people living in poverty has decreased slightly, from 6.7 percent in 1980 to 6.1 percent in 1990.

The number of families with children living in poverty, however, has increased dramatically, from 3.7 percent in 1980 to 8 percent in 1990. Over the course of the three years 1989–1992, the number of children who applied for the subsidized lunch program and were eligible has increased from 14.3 percent in September 1989 to 23.2 percent in June 1992. It is important to note that the number of eligible students may be even higher, because not all eligible children apply.

Findings: The Framingham Public Schools

We wanted to learn how the key players in Framingham's school system would like to see their schools improve. We spoke with six of the seven school committee members, three of the eleven principals, and two central administrators. When we asked for this information, we received a range of answers, such as changing the school calendar and schedule, increasing funding, and focusing more on the needs of children. However, four areas were of interest to both groups:

1. *Adjust to an increasingly diverse community.* Various aspects of this issue concerned people differently. For example, some were interested in ways to increase parent involvement, others were concerned with integrating the students more evenly throughout the system, and still others mentioned increasing the staffs' and administrators' awareness of their own biases and assumptions regarding minority groups.

2. *Increase the depth and variety of the school system's business partnerships.* Cultivating school/business partnerships is a fairly new project for the school system, but one that has received financial support and is part of a five-year plan. Of concern in this area is the need to bring the world of work, technology, and ideas into the classroom more effectively. Some respondents said it was an opportunity to broaden the base of support for education.

3. *An overall interest in increasing the involvement of parents.* While it was clear that both administrators and school committee members felt that parents should play a more visible role in the schooling of their children, it was not clear what form that role should take. One administrator discussed the difficulty teachers will have in working with parents, saying, "They've been used to being protected from infringement from parents and students for twenty-five years."

4. *Institute the process of school-based management.* This was discussed by all respondents, but with a wide range of opinions regarding the effect it will have on the quality of education. Everyone stated the importance of giving principals more control over what happens in their buildings. Some respondents felt that teachers may be reluctant to accept the additional work and responsibility of participating in the management of their school. Others mentioned the value of parental involvement and of

“letting the professionals do their job.” One respondent rather wearily said, “We want to do it to ourselves before the state does it to us.”

In our discussions with administrators and school committee members, perhaps the most compelling observation was the quality of interaction between the two groups and among the committee members themselves. The composition of the school committee had recently changed dramatically and that change was felt throughout the system. Members of the committee spent a great deal of time and effort jockeying for political position, while, in turn, administrators felt compelled to protect themselves and their staff from the actions of the committee.

Some members of both groups discussed the “political” nature of public education, particularly with regard to making changes in either policy or practice. It was observed by members of both groups that a member of the school committee who wanted to keep his or her seat found it more important to respond to the needs of the voters than to the needs of the school system. When only 20 percent of the residents have school-age children, perceptions of educational need and vision can differ greatly between voters and educators. The majority of respondents indicated some measure of frustration with these counterproductive roles and relationships.

Findings: School Improvement Agencies

We wanted to learn what aspects of school improvement were of interest to agencies providing training and technical support to schools. The national and local attention on education reform has invited many new entrants to the school reform business. We tried to select a variety of agencies, looking for those that had experience in the areas of interest identified in our school interviews and would be likely to respond to a request for proposal (RFP) from the Framingham public schools.² We interviewed representatives from six organizations in the Greater Boston area. The agencies ranged in experience from less than one year to more than twenty-five years and varied in size.

When asked what areas the agencies covered, representatives mentioned six: partnerships, volunteers, school-based management, mentoring, parent training, and trainer training. Their interests clustered mainly in the areas of school-based management and partnerships, subjects that were mentioned in the Framingham interviews and frequently in school reform literature. Figure 1 illustrates their responses.

Figure 1

Comparison of Services Offered

	partnerships with				volunteer programs	SBM	mentoring	parent training	training trainers
	B	P	C	U					
Agency 1									
Agency 2									
Agency 3									
Agency 4									
Agency 5									
Agency 6									

B = business; P = parents; C = community organizations; U = universities;
SBM = school-based management

Agencies described themselves as facilitators and supporters of schools. Their function was to assist schools in finding solutions to problems that were appropriate for the school personnel, the students, and the community. Occasionally they were needed to help define a problem more clearly, but they did not bring ready-made answers with them.

When discussing their long-range goals, all organizations planned to expand geographically beyond the school systems they then served (market development). Agencies 1 and 3 also planned to increase the use of their services by the schools or systems with which they were then working (market penetration). Agencies 1, 2, 4, and 6 planned to develop new services and products (product development) to meet the needs of their current and future clients. This information is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Three- to Five-Year Plan for Growth

3 - 5 Year Plan for Growth			
	Market Penetration	Market Development	Product Development
Agency 1			
Agency 2			
Agency 3			
Agency 4			
Agency 5			
Agency 6			

Our discussions with the six agencies created a picture of an extremely complex and competitive market in which all were trying to expand their share. Although some of the agencies may have received a portion of their funding directly from the school systems they served, most received the majority of their support from a variety of foundations and government agencies. Therefore, they often had to meet the needs and objectives of two quite different groups with different, sometimes conflicting goals. If they are to remain attractive to their funders, they must provide the services and programs their funders want to support, which may not necessarily be the ones school systems want — for example, the area of school-based management.

The competition these agencies face for funding is extremely energetic. While everyone spoke about the need to collaborate with other agencies and avoid duplication of services, the underlying message was one of turf issues and control.

All organizations spoke of their commitment to achieving long-term systemic change rather than a “quick fix.” This is also an issue that comes up frequently in school reform literature. As everyone we spoke with mentioned, however, long-term systemic change takes a long time to achieve. Several agencies discussed the conflict

between long-term programs and short-term funding. How much can they actually accomplish in the short time they've been given?

Findings: Businesses

Our aim was to learn whether there was an interest on the part of local businesses in supporting the Framingham public schools in their school improvement efforts. We approached this question in two ways: cold-calling local businesses and interviewing people representing Framingham business partners.³

Our understanding of school/business partnerships was enriched by some of our earlier conversations with agency representatives, as several of them had done significant work in this area. We also spoke with people who initiated the effort to establish formal partnerships and have a role in their ongoing coordination.

Cold Calls

This portion involved identifying and contacting sixty-eight Framingham businesses with annual earnings of more than \$10 million.⁴ Our goal was to learn how education in general and, if possible, school improvement in Framingham fit into their funding priorities. Gathering these data presented us with significant challenges. Some businesses had a formal process for making contributions, others had an extremely informal process. The information available was occasionally incomplete, depending on the authority, time, and interest of the individual taking the call. For example, in one case, cold calls revealed little regarding a company's commitment to education even though that company was, in fact, involved in a school partnership. Thirty-seven business calls could not be completed, most often because of the difficulty in reaching the person responsible for making decisions about contributions.

This problem signaled an important issue that came up later in our work with businesses: the differences between school and business cultures and their profound influence on partnerships. For example, before a Framingham school could explore the possibility of a formal business partnership, the administration and school committee needed to be involved in the planning stages and approve the final process. In contrast, we found that business involvement was most often driven by an individual with a strong personal commitment to education who placed less emphasis on policy, board input, and approval.⁵ As a result, our cold calls produced sketchy results, often because of the informal giving process.

The cold calls revealed that of the thirty-one businesses contacted, six had already made contributions to school improvement efforts, fifteen said they would consider a contribution in the future, and ten said they would not consider such a contribution.

When asked if there were aspects of education that were of particular interest, many could not say. The two most common answers were very general in nature, namely, elementary and secondary and minority education.

Business Partner Interviews

As follow-up to our original research, I interviewed six of the eleven businesses partnered with one of the eleven Framingham schools.⁶ I wanted to learn what motivated these businesses to seek a relationship with a Framingham school, how they would

like their partnership to take shape in the future, and what factors contributed to making a partnership work.

In addition to these goals I had two underlying questions: To what extent does the national focus on education and business affect business involvement at the local level? and How do the differences between the cultures of schools and corporations affect their working relationships? It is worth noting that none of these partnerships are based on providing financial support to schools. Rather, they are exchanges of expertise, ideas, and resources.

Our investigation of business partners revealed the following: on the whole, business involvement was driven by the commitment and vision of individuals rather than by explicit corporate policies.⁷ Business partners were recruited by word of mouth, based on the personal contacts of two energetic businesspeople who organized the effort of formal partnerships in Framingham. Of the eleven businesses formally partnered with a Framingham public school, only two are located in the town.

When asked what motivated their company's decision to become involved, partners felt there were two equally important reasons: the desire to be a good neighbor and a recognition of the role businesses could play in children's education. Several discussed their awareness of national efforts in this area.

It was somewhat difficult for business partners to articulate how they thought the program might take shape in the future because the partnerships were very young and the partners felt inexperienced in the school environment. They mentioned most often the need to make sure that whatever they did was relevant to the students' curriculum, the most appropriate areas being math and science. Two people discussed how the interactions between teachers, businesspeople, and students could change their perceptions of one another and of one another's worlds. They had already seen this happen to some extent and wanted to encourage it. Related to that was the common hope that by exposing them to the world of work, children would see the relevance of their education and be excited by its possibilities.

Everyone agreed that a working partnership required considerable time, energy, and commitment on both sides, along with the approval of top management. The majority of people also mentioned some discomfort with the fact that they were carrying the company ball alone. They all hoped that their companies' commitment would grow, that the partnership would become a part of the business and school culture and no longer depend on the efforts of one person to keep it going. They recognized that this may take several years to achieve, which some found discouraging.

The difference between business and school cultures seemed to have a profound effect on how partnerships developed. Two concrete examples mentioned most often were scheduling and teachers' isolation. Businesspeople frequently said it was difficult to meet with teachers and to arrange field trips, for example, because of the necessity of maintaining the school schedule. Teachers were often hard to talk to because they had little access to phones, not to mention other ways of communicating. Businesspeople became more understanding of the difficult job of teaching, but they were frustrated by what they saw as the system's built-in obstacles to providing new educational opportunities for children.

There were other, more subtle differences that continue to influence the process. For example, the business partners do not have a complex hierarchy to which they have to report or justify their activities. This is not the case with schools, which must report their activities regularly to the central administration and school committee.

Businesspeople often discussed the important role that hierarchy played in schools and how it influenced communication and program development. They questioned whether schools may be inhibited by experimenting with new programs for fear of failure. It was also mentioned that teachers have seen many programs come and go. Before investing too much of their time and energy in the partnerships, they need to feel confident that the program will have staying power.

Businesses were described as being result-oriented. Thus, schools needed to find concrete ways for businesses to become involved so that their efforts and the results could be clearly defined.

Does the School Improvement Industry Help to Improve Framingham's Schools?

Each component of the industry we looked at, schools, businesses, and supporting agencies, has the potential for generating tremendous energy. If that energy is to be used to improve schools, we must first understand what "improve" means. Who defines "improve"? Who decides what an "improving" school should look like?

The Framingham school system has two pairs of eyes: those of the administration and of the school committee. We have seen, however, that their visions necessarily differ as a direct result of the responsibilities they have to their constituents. Administrators protect the interests of children, while the school committee is responsible to the voters. Because only 20 percent of the community has children, the interests of voters and educators are less often complementary and more often contradictory.

That contradiction was made clear from the wide range of answers the two groups gave in response to our question regarding their vision for the Framingham schools. Four areas were of common concern, but does that necessarily make them the areas on which it is most important to focus? Choosing them by default is not necessarily good educational practice; it is compromise and good politics.

The majority of administrators and school committee members were frustrated by the political atmosphere they described in our conversations. The time and attention that should have been spent on educational issues were instead spent on political maneuvering. As a result, there was a vacuum where their collective vision of an improving school system should have been.

Could that vacuum be filled by the businesses or agencies we studied? They have a great deal to offer and many have already made significant contributions. They could inform Framingham's vision profoundly, but they couldn't fill the vacuum. Our conversations with them made that abundantly clear.

Business partners were aware of the national focus on business involvement with education, but their hopes were very focused. They simply had some skills and resources they wanted to make available to students who had little opportunity to be exposed to industry. Achieving that much was challenging; they discussed no larger plan, no bigger picture. Indeed, as visitors, they felt they had no right. Cold calls to local businesses revealed a willingness to contribute to education, but they were unable or unwilling to be specific regarding areas of particular interest or need.

The agencies offering training and technical assistance have exceptional skills and experience in working with schools. They understand how schools work and they are able to help them arrive at ways to work better. The constraints they face, however,

are profound. As they guide their efforts, they are obligated to consider their funders' interests, funding cycles, and the level and quality of the competition.

Both groups looked to the school system to define Framingham's vision of good education, and only the educators and the community, as a group, have the right, the obligation, and the skill to define and articulate that vision. If the political process inhibits establishing such a common definition, perhaps the process needs to be reexamined. If the process of governing school systems inhibits the growth of good schools, perhaps the process should be changed.

We began this study because we wanted to find out if there was common ground between the Framingham schools, business, and agencies. Could that commonality drive fundamental change through local support and involvement?

Although the businesses and supporting agencies we met have much to contribute, their contributions were accepted by default in a political process. Consider how the schools could take flight if the process were, instead, an educational one. ♣

I would like to thank my colleagues Ellen Brodsky, Anne Keliher, and Laurie Sherman for their initial work on this project.

Notes

1. Adam Gaffin, "A Tale of Two Framinghams: Both Sides of the Track," *Middlesex News*, September 6, 1992, 1-A; Connie Paige, "A Tale of Two Framinghams: Picture of Division or a Portrait of Diversity?" *Middlesex News*, September 13, 1992, 1-A; Adam Gaffin, "Census Data Didn't Tell the Whole Story," *Middlesex News*, September 13, 1992, 2-A; and Ellen Ishkanian, "A Tale of Two Framinghams: A Town Strives to Handle Its Diversity," *Middlesex News*, September 20, 1992, 1-A.
2. Two organizations were exceptions. One served only schools within a particular geographic area but anticipated expanding soon. The other had considerable experience in business partnerships, an area of interest to the Framingham schools.
3. In addition to the formal partnerships discussed in this study, informal relationships exist between individual Framingham schools and businesses. We did not include them in our research.
4. Dun's Regional Business Directory, Volume 1 (New York: Dun and Bradstreet Corporation, 1992); *Massachusetts Directory of Manufacturers*, 1992-93 Edition (Hohokus, N.J.: Commerce Register, 1991); and Framingham Chamber of Commerce.
5. One exception was a nonprofit organization whose policy includes a history of commitment to community service.
6. At the time this work was done, of the five remaining businesses, one contact person had been laid off and not replaced and another was unable to become involved until the late winter because of workload.
7. See note 5.

“Vouchers are an idea whose time may have come. They are on the table for serious discussion . . . In fact, the whole notion of vouchers has gained respectability [because] certain sectors of the left have joined the right on this issue. They have a lot of appeal to the right because of the market appeal. They appeal to the left because of the equity issue.”

“I don’t have a problem with neighborhood schools. I would drop the racial controls. I don’t think they are getting us anywhere. There is really no downside to real intradistrict choice; interdistrict choice is more complicated.”

— Abbie Thernstrom