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## **The Boston University-Chelsea Partnership or the Role of Networking for School System Reform**

**Daniele Vidoni, Angelo Paletta, Cara Stillings**

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**THE BOSTON UNIVERSITY-CHELSEA  
PARTNERSHIP  
*or*  
THE ROLE OF NETWORKING FOR  
SCHOOL SYSTEM REFORM<sup>•</sup>**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The longstanding partnership between Boston University and the Chelsea Public School District of Chelsea, Massachusetts is unique for many reasons. Perhaps the most recognizable feature of this Partnership, however, is that it is the only example of an American university engaging in the day-to-day management of a public school system.

The BU/Chelsea partnership has been, from its very beginning, a mutually beneficial relationship between a well-established private university and a troubled local school district. By the mid 1980s, the city of Chelsea had been plagued by corruption and mismanagement for so long that the district was suffering more than almost any other in the state. Of the mere 48% of students who did graduate from Chelsea High School, only one fifth expressed a desire to attend a four-year college. Schools in the district were in dire disrepair, and the community-at-large faced the various hardships suffered by many largely immigrant populations—it was not well-equipped to deal with the urgent problems facing its public schools. Boston University, on the other hand, had previously voiced its intention to make better use of its ample resources in the fields of education and management by providing assistance to a needy local school district. Thus Chelsea was perfectly poised to approach the university and request its help. In 1988 then-Mayor of Chelsea John Brennan approached then-president of Boston University John Silber, requesting the university's aid. In 1989, after completion of an exhaustive study and with the blessing of the Commonwealth, the university agreed to engage the partnership without any financial incentive; the visibility that the partnership would bring and the opportunity to give to the greater Boston community would be its reward.

At its inception, the stated goal of the partnership was to “provide the highest quality of education and educational opportunity for the children of Chelsea and to make Chelsea's public schools a national model of urban education” (Agreement, p. 3). Additionally, the partnership would revolve around seventeen specific goals, each of which remains a guiding force in education in Chelsea today. The first eight goals<sup>2</sup> warrant mention in the

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<sup>1</sup> A special thanks to the Superintendent of the Chelsea School District and all the other managers who kindly supported our research, for dedicating their time to us and sharing their experience with us.

<sup>2</sup> Goals 9-17, are:

1. Develop a community school program through which before-school, after-school, and summer programs are offered to students in the school system and through which adult education classes for inhabitants of the city are offered;
2. Identify and encourage the utilization of community resources;
3. Establish programs that link the home to the school system;



context of this work, as they point to the university's major concerns with the quality of schooling in Chelsea in 1989:

1. Revitalize the curriculum of the city's school system;
2. Establish programs for the professional development of school personnel and for the expansion of learning opportunities for parents;
3. Improve the test scores of students in the school system;
4. Decrease the dropout rate for students in the school system;
5. Increase the average daily student attendance rate for the school system;
6. Increase the number of high school graduates from the school system;
7. Increase the number of high school graduates from the school system that go on to attend four-year colleges;
8. Increase the number of job placements for graduates of the school system.

The initial partnership agreement was for a ten-year period (1988-1998), though the agreement was extended for five years in 1998 and for another five years in 2003. Per the agreement, the Chelsea School Committee ceded its general authority to a management team of Boston University personnel. This team would appoint and oversee the school superintendent and take any action necessary to fulfil the partnership goals, so long as such actions complied with state and local law. Despite this seemingly great degree of autonomy, the agreement did require that the management team continuously report to the school committee, and the school committee retained the authority to veto decisions with which it did not agree. However, in nearly twenty years of partnership, disagreements between the district and management have not resulted in significant alterations to policies proposed and implemented by the university. While it would be misleading to assert that the partnership, even after nearly twenty years, has achieved all of its goals, the strong trust that the district continues to place

- 
4. Decrease teacher absenteeism in the school system;
  5. Improve the financial management of the school system and expand the range of operating funds available to the school system;
  6. Increase salaries and benefits for all staff, and raise the average teacher salary to make it competitive with the statewide average;
  7. Construct effective recruiting, hiring, and retention procedures for all staff members;
  8. Establish student assessment designs and procedures that are of assistance in monitoring programs and that act as incentives for staff members in each school;
  9. Seek to expand and modernize physical facilities in the school system.

in the university is just one example of the many ways in which the partnership has been a success. Other examples are the great gains that the district has made in offering a higher quality of education to all students and the impressive increase in achievement, most notably at the elementary level, that Chelsea's students have achieved over the years.

Of course, the enduring and systematic bolstering of a complex structure such as a school system would not have been possible had the partners been limited to the Chelsea School Committee and Boston University. Indeed, a social problem, such as the quality of the local schooling system, cannot be tackled only by pushing for the adoption of certain pre-determined solutions; instead, major stakeholders must create a harmonious environment in which citizens can decide together how to act, and in which civil society and the markets, along with the public administration, feel part of the creation of public value by directly partaking in the co-production process.

The BU/Chelsea partnership will come to an official end in 2008. The original intent of the partnership has always been to provide Chelsea with the strong foundation to run its schools autonomously. In an effort to build this foundation, the university has, over the years, made a point of sharing its managerial and educational expertise. The future development and the effective and efficient management of the Chelsea School District will not depend solely upon whether the university has shared its expertise effectively, however. If that were the case, at the termination of the project, even the intangible assets, e.g. knowledge, upon which the success of the District was based, will be lost. Instead, Chelsea's opportunity to continue to achieve excellent performance results depends on how well Boston University, the "flagship business" of the Partnership, has been able to share, with the other members of the Network, the responsibility of managing the system. Moreover, continuing the good work begun almost twenty years ago depends on the intellectual capital the District has managed to "accumulate", and on the ability to produce new capital, through the promotion of knowledge-management processes.

This paper endeavours to determine how the Partnership changed the involvement of staff members, students, their families and the community as a whole, thereby promoting the creation of a network of primarily private and non-profit institutions (already in existence or created at the time) to improve the schooling system.

## Social Context of Chelsea School District

In the 1950s and following the construction of the Tobin Memorial Bridge,<sup>3</sup> the city of Chelsea found itself in a state of emergency fuelled by corrupt politicians, the rapid deterioration of the quality of public services, and an increase in social problems related to the diffusion of poverty (Delattre 1994). These alarming signs of a social malady worsened in the mid 1970s because of instabilities resulting from waves of immigrants that dramatically shifted the ethnic make-up of the city. Traditionally a gateway city that had, for much of the twentieth-century, become home to Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants, by the 1970s the Hispanic population of Chelsea had increased rapidly—persons of Hispanic descent would make up 40% of the total population of Chelsea by 1998. Add to that the Asian and African ethnic groups that account for 10% of the total population, and the result is that in 2007 the 5,500 students of the Chelsea school district speak 39 languages and 85% of them belong to ethnic minority groups.

The picture of Chelsea public schools at the creation of the partnership is perhaps best painted by then-President of Boston University, John Silber: “The story of the schools of Chelsea is the story of America’s urban schools. By the first half of the twentieth century they have become the gateway into American society for immigrants and their sons and daughters. But now, as we are all sadly aware, many of our public schools are in disarray and no longer offer a passageway to success. Nowhere has this breakdown of public education been more evident than in Chelsea”.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, toward the end of the 1980s, per-pupil funding in Chelsea, largely derived from local property taxes, was much lower than the average in the State of Massachusetts. In 1988-89, only a quarter of all high school students in Chelsea took the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT), and only a fifth of all High School graduates planned to attend a four-year college course. To exacerbate the problems already faced by the district, 25% of all teenage girls were pregnant or already mothers, which undoubtedly contributed to a high drop out rate of around 52%.

Given the many circumstances outside of Chelsea schools that dramatically affected the daily business of schooling, the BU-Chelsea Partnership, through its seventeen goals, emphasized the social, cultural,

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<sup>3</sup> The Tobin Memorial Bridge, built in 1950 to provide better access for suburban residents who work in the city of Boston, cuts the centre of Chelsea in two and has become the symbol of its many problems. Smog and exhaust fumes from the thousands of cars that cross the bridge daily pollute Chelsea’s air. Moreover, today the bridge is a visible dividing line between the rich and poor of Chelsea and between its Hispanic and white residents.

<sup>4</sup> Silber, J., “The Partnership: The Vision”, *Journal of Education*, 176 (1), p.3, 1994.

and economic growth of the city its primary objective. To meet this objective, BU firmly believed that it must start by making significant investments in the young students of the district.

## **School District's Development Strategy**

To understand the strategy adopted by Boston University for the development of the Chelsea School District, one needs to keep in mind the central role of the School of Education Outreach Program, as outlined in its mission statement:

*At the School of Education, we believe that the teaching profession brings with it great responsibility not only to impart knowledge, but to shape character. Our faculty and students live this belief every day through our curriculum and our outreach efforts across the community and the nation.*

The effort of the University for the turnaround of Chelsea is rooted in this perspective, which explains why university resources were used and, above all, professors and students from the School of Education have put incredible effort into reforming the school district and trying to make it autonomous again.

Whilst preparing the partnership agreement, Boston University's School of Management was assigned the task of carrying out a study on the status of the district, the conclusions of which comprise Boston University's Report on the Chelsea Public Schools "A Model for Excellence in Urban Education". The report includes certain unique suggestions to be implemented by a renewed governance system in the School District.

The Partnership has tackled the education crisis in Chelsea by adopting a comprehensive strategy: "Readying all children to learn, preparing teachers to teach, restructuring outdated curriculum and involving as much of the community as possible in the education system."<sup>5</sup> This strategy, together with an Action Plan contained in the initial report, is articulated through the aforementioned 17 strategic goals that, all together, continue to represent the primary objectives of the Partnership.

The development vision of the Partnership is explained by means of a map of strategies (Fig. 1), in which the objectives are divided into six distinct but closely related performance areas. These areas are:

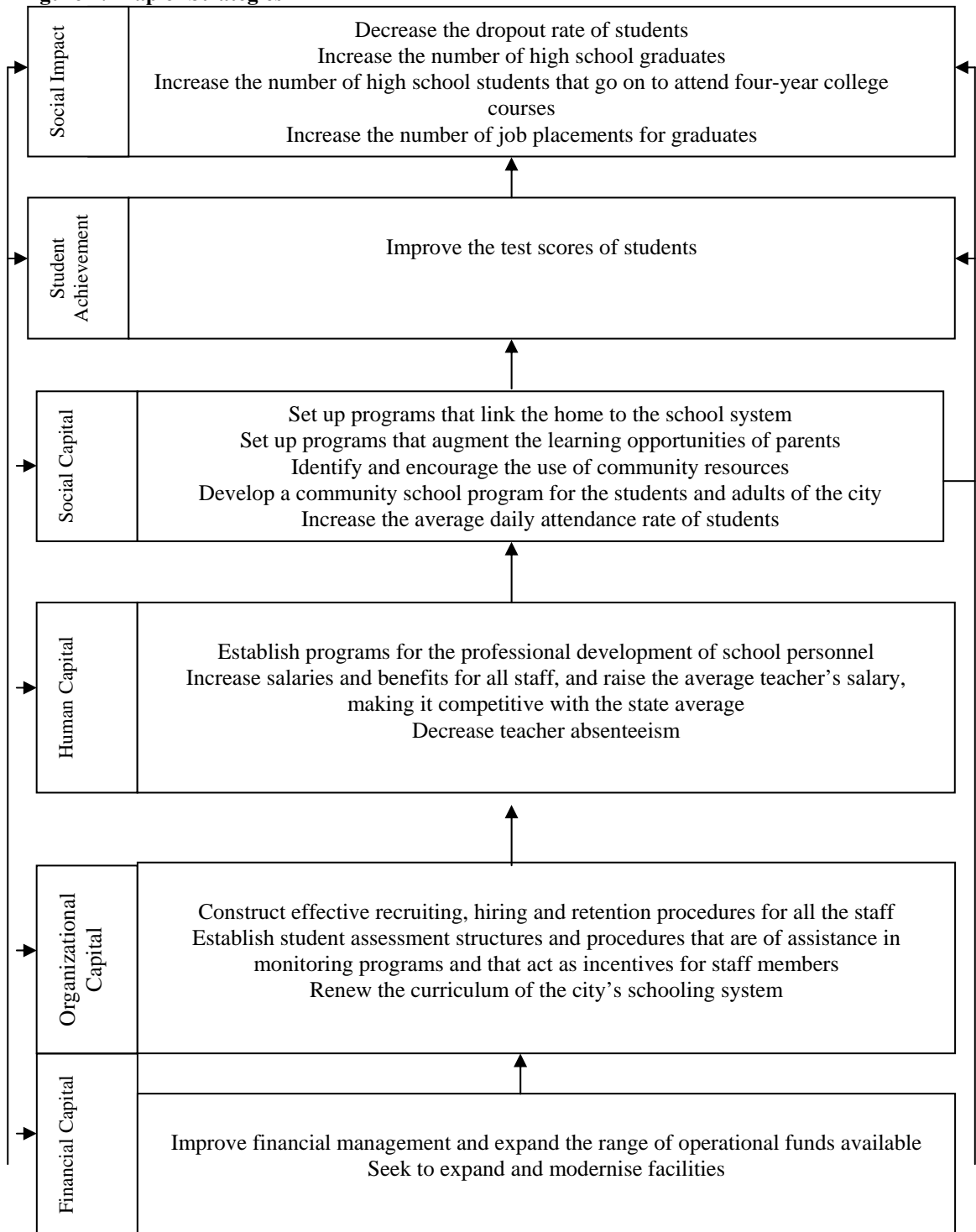
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<sup>5</sup> Cited on <http://www.bu.edu/chelsea/chelseaagmt.pdf>

1. Social Impact;
2. Student Achievement;
3. Development of Social Capital (participation and satisfaction of students, families, and the community at large);
4. Development of Human Capital (knowledge, skills and abilities of staff members);
5. Development of Organizational Capital (effective syllabus, effectiveness of internal processes, of education and administration, leadership and managerial innovation);
6. Development of Financial Capital for the sustainability of the development vision.

The development vision of the school district is based on the principle that improved school performance depends, primarily, on students' willingness to learn, which, in turn, depends on many diverse factors. However, the following factors play a decisive role: family involvement, knowledge and skills instilled in students at an early age, the socio-economic situation of the student (especially with regard to services such as school meals, transport and health care, and the multitude of learning opportunities a thriving and stimulating environment can provide (Glenn 1991).

**Figure 1: Map of Strategies**



## The Structure of the Network

The development strategy of the school district could not have been achieved without the involvement of all stakeholders, as stated in the Partnership Agreement. Indeed, it was essential for all parties to recognize “that both the success of the project and their ability to achieve the objectives of the agreement depend on factors external to and beyond the capacity of the University and the School Committee and require the support, cooperation, and active involvement of the parents, people, public employees, and elected administrators of the City, public and private agencies and branches of government beyond Chelsea, including the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Federal Government, as well as business and industry.”<sup>6</sup>

The Partnership launched a new governance model for the school district, which—in related literature—is referred to as “Network Management”. In this model, interaction with the socio-political environment of the District plays an important role; management problems tend to be external, related to complex networks of organizational relations. (Mayntz 1993; Provan and Milward 1995; Berry et al. 2004).

A network is characterized by a number of chosen members, who, for various reasons, (institutional obligations, inter-dependence resulting from the complexity of the activities carried out, physical proximity, technical inter-dependence), become interdependent, i.e. no unit is subordinate to another within a hierarchy (Agranoff and McGuire 2003).

A network is relatively stable, meaning that its internal relations develop on a continual and long-standing basis. It differs from a hierarchical structure, because the central entity is not a single, dominant actor that unilaterally imposes its own rules (Crozier 1988; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan 1997; O’Toole 1997).

This does not mean that the members of a network have to have the same interests or objectives, or agree on everything. However, the effectiveness of a network does depend on its ability to divide work amongst members, and on the understanding of those factors affecting final results.

The presence, within a network, of a third party makes the tools used within the hierarchy to coordinate and supervise ineffective; it cannot merely define objectives and negotiate targeted results with an organizational unit or an agency while respecting the budget made available. The internal planning of a network relies more on reciprocal comparison and persuasion, rather than on strict governance. Due to the uncertainty and complexity of the policies to be managed, the planning

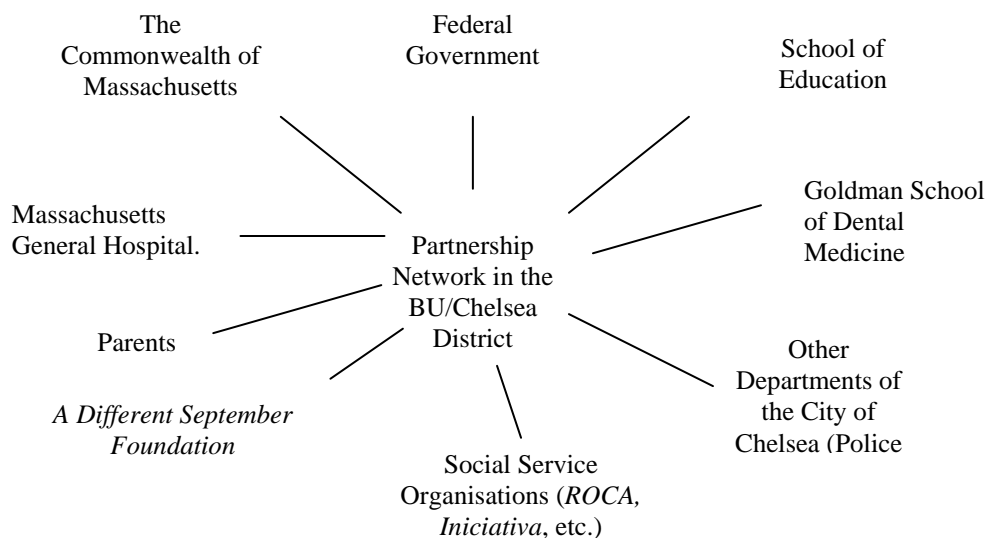
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<sup>6</sup> Cited on <http://www.bu.edu/chelsea/chelseaagmt.pdf>

phase mostly involves the management of the plan of action for the interaction process, rather than the defining of specific objectives. The members jointly define the direction to take by agreeing upon the mission, the values, and the strategies that will shape the future of the system. In other words, it is not only about reaching the final aim, but *how* it is reached.

The following figure shows the Network of the Boston University/Chelsea Partnership.

**Figure 2: Main Members of the Network**



The figure shows the members involved in the Partnership, all of which have contributed to reaching the aims of the Partnership in diverse ways, including:

- financing programs, projects and events;
- providing school services jointly;
- offering additional services, as opposed to the basic activities that fall under school service;
- participating in the decision-making processes of the School District.

For the Management Team of the Partnership, the creation of public value has resulted in the development of two types of management (Moore 1995, Paletta 1999):



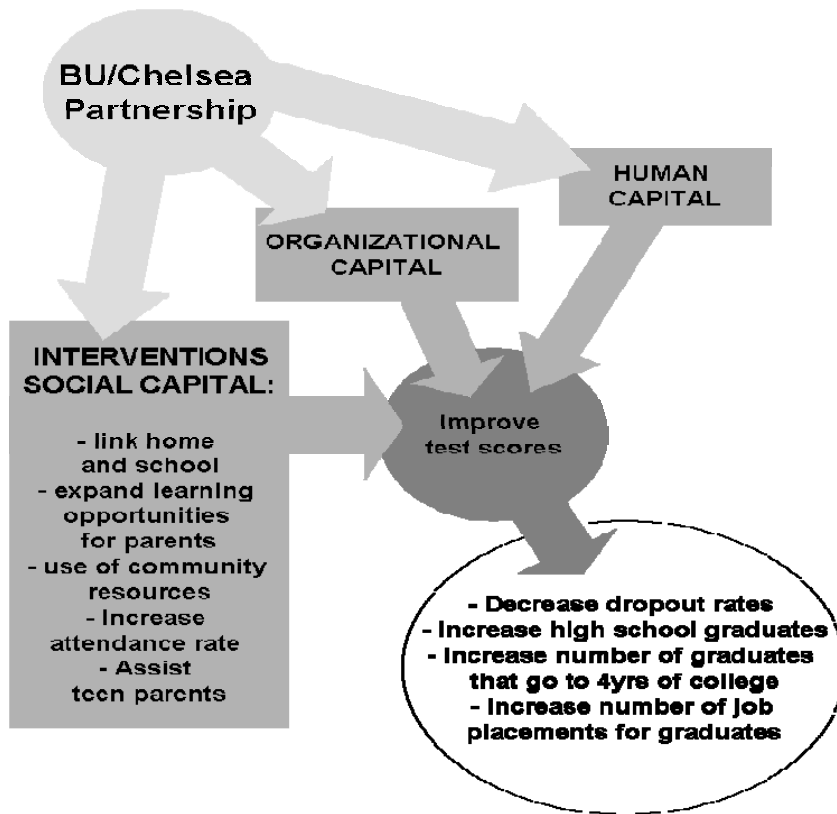
- *Political Management*, with reference to searching for and obtaining external support and resources, stimulating co-production, becoming an active part of the community's inter-institutional network, managing relations with stakeholders and other social partners;
- *Operational Management*, focussing on internal aspects, such as organization, the creation of guidelines and incentives, the monitoring of the Superintendent and school managers, so as to achieve institutional aims.

### **Social Significance of Interaction between Network Members**

Both types of management are essential: without them, the strategies of the Network could not be achieved. Political management proved to have a central role in the success of the Partnership because it improved the social capital of the Chelsea Community, thereby ensuring that the performance objectives set for students would be achieved and that they would have a positive social impact (See Fig. 3). In this sense, political management was complemented by sound operational management, which improved the environments in which all stakeholders affiliated directly with the schools work, and which allowed those stakeholders to create and abide by a system of guidelines and incentives that, as will be briefly discussed below, both anticipated and corresponded with changing educational expectations on the state level. In brief, the management of the Network has made government action possible, action that goes beyond the abilities of the single organizations involved. The Partnership allowed for the union of resources and capabilities, that, had they been left unsupervised, would not have led to the desired results (Metcalf 1989; Reborá and Meneguzzo 1990).

As shown in Fig. 3, the aim of the public Network is to tackle a complex and multi-faceted social problem that comprises poverty, the unemployment of students' families, drug abuse and poor health care, dropping-out of school, the integration of foreigners, and the protection of teenage parents. As long as they exist, these problems will continue to harm the community, despite the many efforts made to counter them (Keast et al. 2004). Table 1 lists some of the more significant programs that have bolstered the management of the Network.

Figure 3: The Actions of the Partnership in terms of Political Management



**Table 1: Programs for Chelsea Public School Students and Families**

<b>Project</b>	<b>Project Description</b>
<i>Chelsea Community Schools</i>	<i>Chelsea Community Schools</i> has operated in Chelsea since 1996. Though separate from the public schools, this organization offers recreation and continuing education opportunities to those living in Chelsea, e.g. sport, piano lessons, cooking classes, English language lessons, tutoring for adults. <i>Chelsea Community Schools</i> receives public funds and private donations. An independent board, comprising a school superintendent, the representatives of various community organizations and independent citizens, coordinates the services offered by <i>Chelsea Community Schools</i> .
The <i>Intergenerational Literacy Project (ILP)</i>	The <i>Intergenerational Literacy Project (ILP)</i> incites families to encourage students to do their homework systematically, and according to the programs set at school. Professors at Boston University, along with the teachers of the Chelsea District, offer English language Courses to immigrant families, many of whom do not read or write in their native language. The program seeks to assist families in working with their children, both to achieve the objectives of the schools and to reinforce a positive attitude towards education.
<i>Early Childhood Education</i>	The Early Learning Center is open to children between the ages of three and four. The importance of these programs is widely documented in various reading material. <sup>7</sup> Even the <i>Early Childhood Education Program</i> , despite it being relatively small, plays a crucial role in fulfilling the Partnership's objectives. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, besides the general benefits of the program, the support given to immigrant families, for the most part working parents whose mother tongue is not English, and their openness to learn of a new culture, thereby helping to accelerate social integration and make it more effective need to be highlighted.

<sup>7</sup> "High-quality early childhood development programs contribute directly to higher employment and earnings, better health, less crime and poverty, greater government revenues, and higher levels of verbal, math and intellectual achievement for participating students."

Lynch, R. G., *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal, and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development*, Economic Policy Institute, Washington, 2004.

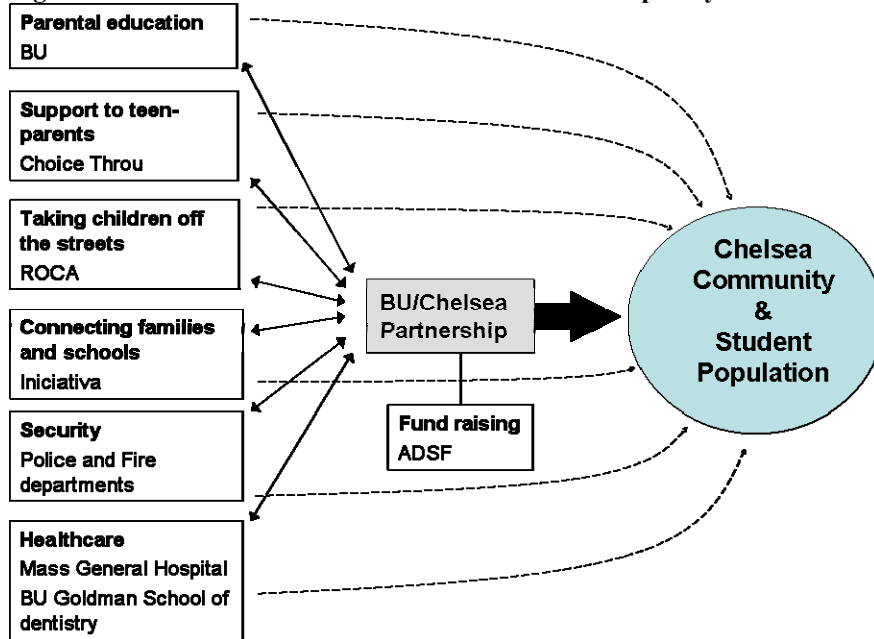
<sup>8</sup> According to D. Sears, Chairman of the Management Team: "At present, we know of no other program providing comprehensive coverage coupled with a strong emphasis on genuine academic preparation."

Sears, D.A., "The Partnership: The Present", *Journal of Education*, 176 (1), 1994.

## Non-Profit Organizations operating in the Network

The Network promoted by the Partnership includes cooperation between the District and Social Organizations operating in the area (Fig. 4). Table 2 provides a description of these organizations.

Figure 4: The Structure of Network Relations as developed by the Partnership



**Table 2: Non-Profit Organizations in Chelsea**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Organizational Description</b>
<i>Choice Thru Education Inc.</i>	<i>Choice Thru Education Inc.</i> was created in 1988 to offer pregnant teens and young parents an alternative to dropping out of school. The company’s program has been developed closely with the School District and offers the same high standard of education as Chelsea High School so the graduates are of the same level, but also allows young mothers to take their babies with them to classes, until they are old enough to be left in the care of the baby-nursing service.
<i>ROCA</i>	a non-profit organization created in 1988, <i>ROCA</i> does works to help street children and tackle the problem of street gangs. The School District and <i>ROCA</i> have created a work program aimed at assisting students who have been suspended from school for long periods of time. The District makes local school space available and finances the support-system of the <i>ROCA</i> staff.
<i>Iniciativa</i>	an alliance of non-profit organizations and individuals working with the Hispanic families of the area. One of the programs launched by <i>Iniciativa</i> goes by the name “Town Meetings” and sees parents – especially those of Hispanic origin – meeting the Administrators of the District and the staff members of the various non-profit organizations working with the Partnership so as to discuss the strategies that will help reach shared objectives.
<i>A Different September Foundation</i>	A special mention must go to this foundation for its special role. The Chelsea/Boston Partnership was a 10-year contract signed between the Municipality of Chelsea and Boston, during which time the city agreed to finance the schools of the District as it had done in 1988-1989. The city went bankrupt, however, two years later, and the drastic reduction of the already scarce resources could have brought about the end of this ambitious project. The University decided to maintain its commitment all the same and in 1991, created a private organization, <i>A Different September Foundation</i> , to gather funds for the schools. The operational costs of the Foundation are covered by Boston University. As a result, all donations (which amount to more than \$12.4 million to date) are destined to programs serving Chelsea’s schools.

## **Operational Management for Student Results**

Although it has always been clear that a multi-faceted approach that included strategic political management of the Network would be necessary for the turnaround of the district as a whole, the foundational objective on which all others rest—the improvement of student results—could not occur without strategic operational management, specifically as it applies to schools and school personnel. Over the eighteen years of the Partnership, student results in Chelsea, especially at the elementary level, have improved dramatically.

This is not to say, however, that teachers, administrators, and other players in the partnership are satisfied with achievement at present. While most stakeholders would like to see greater gains in student achievement overall, raising test scores and graduation rates at the high school level in Chelsea has proved quite difficult. The difficulty of impacting student achievement at the high school level in Chelsea stems, in part, from the high mobility rates that exist in the community. At any given time, 32% of students in Chelsea Public Schools are either entering or exiting the district (Chelsea Public Schools, internal data). This means that many students are coming into Chelsea with low levels of education, if they have been to school at all. Moreover, many students who receive a sound foundational education in Chelsea leave the district as their families become upwardly mobile. With regard to the tracking of student test results and graduation rates, Chelsea is often serving and reporting on students who have been in the district for short periods of time—schools have limited time to make a large impact. While the negative effects of high student mobility may be easier to compensate for at the elementary level, it is often difficult to retain and to greatly impact the achievement of a tenth grade student who enters the system with a third grade education.

The impact that has been made can be seen in the improvement in student test scores at the elementary level and, to some extent, graduation rates, over time. Tables 3-6 show that between 1998 and 2005, a great number of Chelsea elementary school students have risen from the bottom-most MCAS ranking, which warns that students are failing at a given subject, to the “proficient” category. This movement has occurred cumulatively over time, despite slight variations within the trend from year-to-year. Table 7 shows a corresponding increase in the graduation rate.

**Table 3: Percentage of Chelsea Students by MCAS Proficiency Category  
Grade 4 English Language Arts, 1998-2006**

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Advanced</b>	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	5	3
<b>Proficient</b>	2	3	4	21	28	32	32	31	35
<b>Needs Improvement</b>	59	63	63	55	57	46	51	52	46
<b>Warning</b>	39	33	33	23	14	20	15	12	16

**Table 4: Percentage of Chelsea Students by MCAS Proficiency Category. Grade 4 Mathematics, 1998-2006**

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Advanced</b>	4	5	3	4	5	6	8	12	12
<b>Proficient</b>	12	13	13	15	21	26	33	26	24
<b>Needs improvement</b>	42	51	50	56	50	49	48	51	48
<b>Warning</b>	42	31	34	25	23	20	10	15	16

**Table 5: Percentage of Chelsea Students by MCAS Proficiency Category. Grade 3 Reading, 2001-2006**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Proficient</b>	31	36	41	50	34	28
<b>Needs Improvement</b>	57	50	48	41	51	50
<b>Warning</b>	13	14	11	9	15	15

**Table 6: MCAS English Language Arts, Math, and Reading Results. Grade Level Trends, 1998/2001-2006**

		Percent Warning/Failing		Percent Advanced and Proficient	
<b>Grade 4 ELA</b>	1998	39	<b>-23</b>	2	<b>+36</b>
	<b>2006</b>	16		38	
<b>Grade 4 Math</b>	1998	42	<b>-26</b>	16	<b>+20</b>
	<b>2006</b>	16		36	
<b>Grade 3 Reading</b>	2001	13	<b>+2</b>	31	<b>-3<sup>9</sup></b>
	<b>2006</b>	15		34	

<sup>9</sup> The recent downward trend in grade 3 reading test scores is notable but should not completely obscure an overall upward trend between 2001 and 2004.

**Table 7: Chelsea High School Dropout Rates, 1998-2006.**

	97-98	98-99	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06
<b>Dropout Rate</b>	16.30 %	13.70 %	9.90%	10.10 %	7.40%	8.20%	8.10%	9.60%	10.88 %*

\* An estimated dropout rate is computed at the end of June. Students who return in the fall or whose registration to other districts is confirmed in September are no longer counted as drop-outs. The tentative June estimate, therefore, is inevitably higher than the actual rate, which will be computed on October 1<sup>st</sup>.

While not one or even several things can be pinpointed as responsible for the improvements in student results that have occurred since 1989, interview data with teachers and administrators that have been with the Chelsea Public Schools since the inception of the Partnership indicate possible contributors. Teachers and administrators in Chelsea report that the following four things, in their view, have enabled improvements:

1. a shift in the general organizational philosophy and mission of the district,
2. the implementation of a participatory but guided decision-making process,
3. vast improvements in teacher training and teacher support,
4. the effective mobilization of financial resources for capital and environmental improvements.

Overwhelmingly, teachers and administrators who participated in research interviews reported an overwhelmingly negative attitude toward student achievement at the advent of the partnership. The idea that only “so much” could be accomplished with “these kids” was reportedly pervasive; further, teachers working in the system felt neglected by both the state and the local district. One former teacher and current administrator repeatedly indicated that prior to the Partnership, the district have never performed a “root-cause” analysis to explore how things such as hunger and poverty were affecting student performance. Over time, the Management Team pointedly put in place administrators devoted to inculcating the idea that “every child can learn” into schools district-wide. With attention from BU professors who trained teachers in strategies to ensure that every child would learn—a kind of professional development attention that many teachers in the district had never before had access to—the slow but sure adoption of the core principals of the Partnership became evident to many, and a concomitant shift in the culture of the district as an organization occurred.



It is possible that an operational strategy that allowed for a participatory decision-making process facilitated this eventual adoption of a different way of thinking about education in Chelsea. After a few initial stumbles whereby BU was negatively perceived as “white knight on a horse” coming in to save a poor, struggling community, key players in the partnership made a conscious effort to include all stakeholders in decision-making processes, especially those related to implementation of curricula and standards, in an effort to improve student achievement. Some interviewees describe the decision-making process born during the Partnership as both “bottom-up” and “top down,” pointing out that a major curricular overhaul at the K-8 level was, in fact, teacher initiated and then administratively approved. From an operational management standpoint, this kind of decision-making process and the feeling of responsibility with which it imbues stakeholders who are “on the ground” provided an incentive for change conducive with “institutional aims.”

Of course, it is likely that none of these key changes in attitude and behaviour would have been possible without the effective mobilization of resources to improve the environments in which teachers and administrators worked. One interviewee described that, prior to the Partnership, the school buildings in Chelsea were in such disrepair that walls literally crumbled and roofs leaked. Chelsea residents reported that, as they appeared in 1989, the buildings in which students learned were not structures of which the community could be proud. A dramatic overhaul of all the school buildings in Chelsea, facilitated by the Management Team’s effective management of state and local resources, has given Chelsea several new buildings of which to be proud, including an elementary school complex that rivals that of any suburban district, something which teachers and Chelsea residents alike are apt to point out. Indeed, teachers that have been in the district for the duration of the Partnership report that the resources now available to them and the environments in which they now teach make an enormous difference in how they perceive their job and the realistic nature of the goal to educate every child. When stakeholders feel valued, they are more likely to value the organization of which they are a part; it would indeed be unwise to underestimate the very positive influence of rebuilding in Chelsea.

While each of these themes is important contributor in its own right to the effective operational management of the network, it would be remiss to neglect the very important role that state and federal reforms have played in enabling Chelsea to make progress towards fulfilling

many of the Partnership's original goals. In 1993, the Massachusetts Legislature passed an Education Reform Act (ERA) that would dramatically affect communities like Chelsea. Calling for a two-pronged approach of increased state funding for communities and the establishment of state curriculum standards and mandatory state tests to measure student progress, the ERA provided Chelsea with both incentive to improve and guidelines for what should be taught and how improvement should be measured. As one former teacher explains, the importance of the "time and space" of the partnership, especially with regard to the ERA in Massachusetts and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) on the federal level, cannot be discounted.

As Chelsea teachers came together under the Partnership and then under ERA to create classroom and school-wide standards aligned with state requirements, they also came together as a cohesive group, informed about what was going on school-wide and not just within individual classrooms. Moreover, prior to the ERA the district had begun to require that student progress be measured using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). For the first time forced to pay close attention to the results of both the ITBS and the state mandated MCAS, teachers became focused not only on classroom inputs, but outputs as well. In some sense, the requirements of the state encouraged a compliance with much of what was already happening in the context of the Partnership—the district's actions coupled with those of the state, catalyzed changes that would eventually have a positive impact on student achievement.

## **Sustainability**

As encouraging as the positive results that have been achieved under the Partnership may be, they in no way speak to the sustainability of the system once the Partnership comes to an end.

The data show that the primary stakeholders in Chelsea are the Hispanic Minority Group (Fig. 7). This is significant because even the initial Partnership Agreement signed in 1989 stipulated that both the success of the project and the possibility of restoring the School District's autonomy depended on the active involvement and support of all stakeholders.<sup>10</sup>

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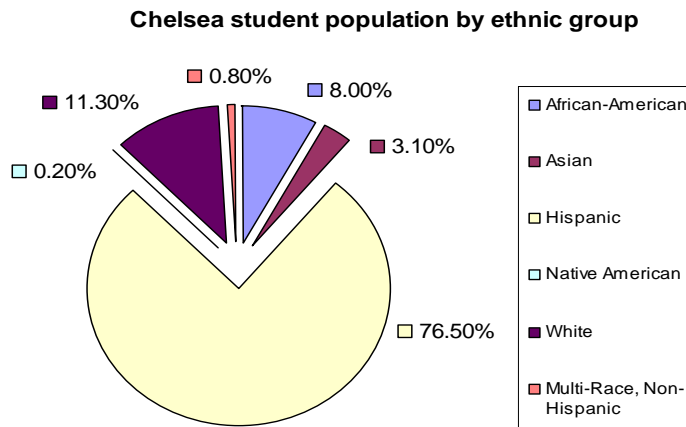
<sup>10</sup> "The parties recognize that both the success of the project and their ability to achieve the objectives of this agreement ... require the support, cooperation, and active involvement of the people of the City of Chelsea, the public employees and officials of the City ... and the support of public and private agencies and branches of government beyond Chelsea".  
<http://www.bu.edu/chelsea/chelseaagmt.pdf>

According to the theory of property rights, stakeholders are “those whose relations to the enterprise cannot be completely contracted for, but upon whose cooperation and creativity it depends for its survival and prosperity” (Slinger and Deakin 1999). In view of this, the fact that the major stakeholders, in this case the Hispanic people, are not represented at the institutional level poses a serious question as to the possibility of the Network prospering in the future.

**Table 8: The Hispanic or Latino Population of Chelsea and the State of Massachusetts<sup>11</sup>**

	Chelsea	Massachusetts
<b>Total Population</b>	35,080	6,349,097
<b>Hispanic or Latino Population</b>	16,984	428,729
<b>% Hispanic or Latino</b>	48%	7%
<b>% Under 18</b>	27%	23%
<b>% Born Overseas</b>	36.1%	12.2%
<b>Per Capita Income</b>	\$14,628	\$25,952
<b>% ≥25 without High School Diploma or GED (General Education Development)</b>	40%	15%
<b>% Poor</b>	23.3%	9.3%
<b>Unemployment Rates (2004/05)</b>	6.4%	4.5%

**Figure 5: Ethnic Groups present in the High Schools of the Chelsea School District**



Until now, the maintenance and development of the community network has been led and coordinated by Boston University, a type of “Network Administrative Organization” (Provan and Milward 2001). As

<sup>11</sup> Data taken from the website of the U.S. Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html>

such, Boston University has had a multitude of varying tasks to carry out, keeping in mind the life-span of the Network. In the very beginning, the University had to attract and maintain numerous members, but above all, it needed to guarantee that certain institutional interests and occasionally conflicting pedagogical principals would not undermine the project. Indeed, as shown by the words of E. J. Delattre, the history of the Partnership was marked by diverging opinions on issues such as “bilingual education, budget priorities, the distribution of condoms at schools, the construction of new school buildings, staff appointment, and the prerogatives and influence of the various parent committees and stakeholders. Certain issues met with strong opposition and citizens often disapproved of Boston University’s decisions” (Delattre 1994). Despite these obstacles, in an attempt to ensure the continued progress of the Network, Boston University persevered in its role as a leader, by managing the interests of all and all collaborative work. This plan of action is in line with the economic theory developed in other fields, including intermodal transport (Paletta 2005) and mental health care (Provan and Milward 1995), where the role of the primary actor, who gathers funds, monitors and allocates resources so as to incite cooperation between members, is crucial if the network is to be effective. Boston University took on two roles: that of agent and principal. It is an agent for the community, because it ensures that the services Chelsea requires are guaranteed by the Network; it is the principal of the members of the Network, as it is in charge of financing, coordinating and monitoring.

In the future, the Network will be compelled to work without Boston University’s contribution. To avoid the risk of the Network collapsing, all stakeholders need to be fully committed to the Network. The stronger the ties between internal members, the less the risk of the Network collapsing. Until now, tension levels have been high, as shown by the actions of the activists for Hispanic Rights. On 15th April 2003, for example, the lack of Hispanic representatives in the School Committee was reported. It seems that there were no people of Hispanic origin serving on the Committee, because racially polarized voting patterns were prevailing:

“In contests for the Chelsea School Committee, Hispanic persons consistently vote cohesively and white persons vote sufficiently as a bloc to usually defeat the Hispanic voters’ preferred candidates. Although Hispanic persons compose 44% of the voting age population of the city, there are no Hispanic persons among the current seven School Committee members, and only one Hispanic

person has ever been elected to the Chelsea School Committee in the city's history".<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately, the matter was solved in that same year by means of a "Memorandum of Understanding Between the City of Chelsea, Massachusetts and the United States", which stated:

"To prevent any potential Hispanic vote dilution in the City of Chelsea, the United States and the City have agreed to implement the districting plan [...] which provides for a nine-member School Committee, with one member to be elected at-large and eight members from single-member districts, three of which are comprised of an Hispanic majority in total population and voting age population."

(Cited on

[http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/litigation/chelsea\\_mou.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/litigation/chelsea_mou.htm))

In this way, given that there was a Hispanic majority in three Districts, the Latino population would most certainly be represented in the School Committee. A press campaign<sup>13</sup> ensued, aiming to attract the votes of the Latinos. The result was that Lucia H. Colon, a member of the Hispanic population, now serves on the Committee as Vice President. It is interesting to note that there are three Districts with a Hispanic majority; hence, it would be feasible to expect the Committee to comprise at least three members of Hispanic origin; however, the fact that the composition of the Committee has remained almost the same, means that the work done in the past has proved beneficial and that it has laid the foundations for the future.

## **Lessons learned**

The Boston University/Chelsea Partnership has many of the characteristics, detailed in theory, of a network: different players, stable relations between members, and the use of non-hierarchical coordination mechanisms. In addition, thanks to the efforts of the past few years, the Partnership has succeeded in calming the waters between the White and Hispanic population, the principal stakeholder of the District. This was necessary if the mission and development vision of the Partnership were to be shared by all participants.

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/litigation/chelsea\\_ltr.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/litigation/chelsea_ltr.htm)

<sup>13</sup> See "Latinos Urged to Vote", *The Boston Globe*, 17 October, 2004.

All of these factors had a significant effect on “external factors”, such as the social improvement and economic renewal of Chelsea.

The Management Team shared, with the single organizations involved, the responsibility of overseeing the Network, and monitored the environment in which these organizations worked. It favoured communication, trust, mutual respect and cultural values. The use of authority would not have guaranteed the same positive results, as these are the direct product of the value attributed to the resources of the area and of the effectiveness of inter-institutional coordination.

. As shown by this case study, the central role of networking cannot be attributed solely to the fact that it provides services directly. Networking for the turn-around of a school district, as part of a local network enhancing public value, also has an active role in the purely political decision-making process, identifying needs and shaping the system able to satisfy these needs.

In a *network society*, the voice of the citizen needs to be heard at the outset of the public value creation process and not merely when protests or complaints are made. This means ensuring that, via the right social channels, citizens have access to those institutional conditions that will allow them to be a part of the intervention programming process and of the ensuing strategy adoption phase.

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**Abstract**

The longstanding partnership between Boston University and the Chelsea Public School District of Chelsea, Massachusetts is unique for many reasons. Perhaps the most recognizable feature of this Partnership, however, is that it is the only example of an American university engaging in the day-to-day management of a public school system.

The BU/Chelsea partnership will come to an official end in 2008. The original intent of the partnership has always been to provide Chelsea with the strong foundation to run its schools autonomously. In an effort to build this foundation, the university has, over the years, made a point of sharing its managerial and educational expertise. The future development and the effective and efficient management of the Chelsea School District will not depend solely upon whether the university has shared its expertise effectively, however. If that were the case, at the termination of the project, even the intangible assets, e.g. knowledge, upon which the success of the District was based, will be lost. Instead, Chelsea's opportunity to continue to achieve excellent performance results depends on how well Boston University, the "flagship business" of the Partnership, has been able to share, with the other members of the Network, the responsibility of managing the system. Moreover, continuing the good work begun almost twenty years ago depends on the intellectual capital the District has managed to "accumulate", and on the ability to produce new capital, through the promotion of knowledge-management processes.

This report endeavors to determine how the Partnership changed the involvement of staff members, students, their families and the community as a whole, thereby promoting the creation of a network of primarily private and non-profit institutions (already in existence or created at the time) to improve the schooling system.

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