

A Bold Partnership

Working with a Gates Foundation grant, Florida's Hillsborough County school district is making a huge investment in effective teaching. And it has the right leaders to do it

“**O**ur ultimate goal is to dramatically increase student achievement, raise graduation rates, and ensure college and career readiness. The way to do that is to ensure that our teachers are adept and inspired, and have the support they need.”

This is how MaryEllen Elia, superintendent of Florida's Hillsborough County Public Schools, introduced the district's bold, long-term partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to the community at large. In an op-ed column published in the *Tampa Tribune*, she outlined how the Gates Foundation has committed \$100 million over seven years to help the district dramatically strengthen teacher effectiveness.

We aren't talking about an old-time strategic plan with thousands of words, pounds of paper, and another one of those lists of unrealistic, unfunded goals. On the contrary, this wide-ranging plan is part of a national effort involving two other school districts—Memphis, Tenn., and Pittsburgh—and a coalition of charter schools.

It's an exciting and ambitious project that also has involved the board from the get-go.

Governing strategically

Elia reached out to the board after she was contacted by a Gates Foundation

executive in February 2009, and kept it actively involved throughout the extraordinarily thorough, highly intensive, and competitive application process. The political reasons for doing so are obvious, but this is a practical expression of her governance philosophy.

“Governing is, to my mind, a true team ‘sport,’ involving a fully informed and engaged board of education working in close partnership with a CEO—the superintendent—who really does believe in an influential board that makes the truly high-stakes decisions that have a tremendous impact on district affairs,” she said in a recent interview at her office.

I've written about Elia's approach in a past column that discussed how she views her job as a member of the district's “strategic governing team.” She reiterated that approach in the interview.

“My job, as CEO, is to make sure that there's a process in place for my board to fashion high-level policies and make truly strategic decisions, to ensure that the board has the information it needs for policymaking, and to follow through on these decisions with a well-managed implementation effort,” she said. “And wearing my ‘chief innovation officer’ hat, I'm especially accountable for helping the

board to concentrate on decisions that result in significant change, not just tinkering around with business-as-usual. This is what our Gates-supported effort is all about.”

The cornerstone

Elia and her board didn't suddenly discover the need for innovation when they first heard from the Gates Foundation. That was laid out early in Elia's tenure as superintendent. Over several intensive retreats and work sessions, she and the board reached a rock-solid consensus on a fundamental strategic assumption and on the need for significant innovation to translate that assumption into practice.

“My board—unanimously—and I reached agreement that the effectiveness of our teachers must be a preeminent concern of ours as the district's strategic governing team, for the very simple and compelling reason that it's the most important determinant of student achievement,” Elia told me. “We agreed that what happens in the classroom outweighs everything else and that there's no close second, including technological shortcuts.

“Education, we believe, has always been essentially a people business, still is, and always will be,” she said. “Of course, assumptions don't automatically lead to concrete action, so we committed ourselves to undertaking large-scale innovation addressing teacher effectiveness.”

The Gates Foundation program does just that, by focusing on five core “strategic initiatives” that include:

■ **Measuring teacher effectiveness:** A fundamental redesign of the district's teacher evaluation system

and its linkage to professional development.

■ **Performance-based career ladder:** A clear definition of the performance level required for tenure as well as the levels required for advanced teaching roles.

■ **Next-generation pay-for-performance:** A teacher compensation system that awards large salary increases based on sustained performance and progress up the career ladder, rather than years of experience or credentials.

■ **Programs and incentives for high-needs students:** Policies and incentives that address schools with a critical mass of high-needs students, as well as the 60 percent of high-needs students located in the district's highest-performing schools.

■ **Apprentice teacher acceleration program:** A comprehensive, high-quality induction program that addresses the high attrition rate among new teachers and accelerates their performance growth.

Detailed board involvement

So, what happened between Elia and

the board that helped make this process so successful?

At the very beginning, Elia thoroughly briefed the board on the time-consuming process that would be involved in applying for a Gates Foundation grant. She secured the board's explicit, unanimous go-ahead for the district to participate in what turned out to be a four-month effort that took an estimated 25 percent to 30 percent of her time.

The board selected one of its members, Carol Kurdell, to serve on the five-person team to oversee and manage the grant preparation process. This included participating in three intensive on-site meetings (called "convenings") with Gates executives and other applicants in Atlanta, Chicago, and Seattle.

The board representative teamed up with Elia to make sure that other members were fully apprised of progress as the proposal moved forward, and they made sure that the board gave its formal stamp of approval to the final proposal that was presented to the Gates Foundation last September. Finally, the board rep-

resentative will continue to participate on the five-person team, which has now become the implementation steering committee for the effort.

An innovation effort of this magnitude, which involves the expenditure of millions of dollars and thousands of administrative and faculty hours over a seven-year period, is sure to encounter some glitches during the implementation process. It would be totally unrealistic to expect smooth sailing for the whole journey.

But involving the board throughout the application process and building continued board involvement into the implementation effort now under way will help to ensure that the district ultimately realizes a powerful return on its—and the Gates Foundation's—investment, in terms of the only bottom line that really matters: student achievement. ■

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