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Q&A

In Its First Year, Achieve Hartford Makes An Impact

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Q&A talks educational reform with Jim Starr, executive director of Achieve Hartford.

Q: What is Achieve Hartford? What are its goals with respect to Hartford schools? Why are businesses involved?

A: Achieve Hartford was launched largely through the business and civic community as an independent, nonprofit organization to monitor, support and be a catalyst for education reform and to foster greater community involvement in the Hartford Public School District. Some of our key initiatives include:

- System-wide school reform support and advocacy;
- Independent assessment and reporting of district and school performance;
- Parental tools for more effective parent engagement and advocacy; and,
- Community education and access to tools regarding school choice.

The business community is committed to the Hartford School system's success as Hartford's economic health is dependent on a school district that produces students who will perform and compete in our future workforce and contribute back to the community.

Q: Who are the leading corporate funders of your group? Does financial support also include personnel support in terms of board and committee membership?

A: Key funders include The Travelers Foundation, Aetna, The Prudential Foundation, The Hartford, The Phoenix Companies, Bank of America, ING and the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. There are a large number of individual contributors as well. Our board membership drives our mission and what we do and includes key leaders from many of these organizations. We also have board and committee representation from other key educational, civic, and business community leaders.

Q: Why does it take outsiders to improve the public schools? Why can't the concerns be addressed internally?

A: To be sure, a commitment to improve schools and drive reform efforts must start internally. However, research indicates that if reform is to be effective and lasting, it must be "owned" by the community and driven by the many external parties who are stakeholders in its success. Achieve Hartford was established to help be that community ownership driver as well as be an independent voice to

ensure the educational goals for the school system are met.

Q: Achieve Hartford is focused on long-term and sustainable reforms, according to its website, but what have been your short-term successes? How would you grade Achieve Hartford in its first year?

A: While it may be premature to give us a final grade for this year, we think we have earned fairly high marks so far. We sponsored and promoted Smartchoices, an interactive web tool that provides key data about Hartford school performance. This is a significant resource to parents as they navigate the choice process in Hartford. We have also hosted a community forum with a national speaker focused on Hartford's portfolio of schools approach. Our literacy-based resource program has provided more than \$22,000 to 12 schools, directly impacting more than 500 fourth and fifth graders. Our community awareness and advocacy activities have included multiple public statements and speaking opportunities, the development of a content rich website, conducting and publishing research, and providing multiple media touch points for perspectives and commentary on the reform efforts. Also, we publish weekly our Education Matters bulletin discussing issues facing the district and including perspective on those issues.

Q: One of your goals is to be a "critical friend" to the school system. Has Achieve Hartford found itself in that role? If so, what have your criticisms been?

A: Overall, we are supportive of the reform efforts underway in Hartford — because they are working. In 2009, Hartford students showed a 20 percent increase in performance over 2007. Hartford's rate of academic improvement for grades 3-8 outpaced all peer districts in the state, with an increase of 3.7 percent over 2008. The state's average increase was 2.5 percent. Also, graduation rates have improved 13 points to 42 percent.

However, we have a long way to go and as Achieve Hartford grows and the reform continues to take hold, we will highlight the challenges. As an example, Hartford's reform is complex and the amount and rate of change necessary often exceeds the capacity for ideal communication. The district hopes to improve on that over time. Also, as policies are adopted to implement change, we have provided input and perspectives for improvements and best practices. Our goal is to ensure that 10 years from now the achievement gap is closed and that an operational commitment to reform has been maintained. ■