

REIMAGINE AMERICA'S SCHOOLS CASE STUDY

# OKLAHOMA CITY: MAPS FOR KIDS



## Introduction

There are no real established road maps on how change occurs in public education. One strategy for bringing change to our public schools is by studying examples of successful change strategies employed by other cities, school districts, and statewide organizations. This case study is an example of how change can occur that comes from within the community, but initiated outside the school district itself or more formulaic institutional strategies. In Oklahoma City, a transformative and innovative collaboration in the late 1990s led a civic reform movement to change both the core pedagogy and institutional funding formula, leading to a multimillion-dollar fund to renovate or build new for every school within the greater Oklahoma City public school district. It was an initiative that would change the trajectory of the Oklahoma City schools and overcome decades of decline.

Like so many urban school districts, Oklahoma City schools had been hard hit by the desegregation of public schools in the 1970s and had seen their student population decline from 70,000 to 38,000. Over the years, the lack of funding and community support had taken its toll on both the school system and its facilities. The district was facing financial and educational collapse and needed a dramatic and innovative strategy to turn things around.

The stage was set for this transformative strategy by a group of four community leaders who, through a series of informal and private organizing sessions, put together a framework for this city-wide plan. Initial members included Bill Bleakley, newspaper publisher and attorney, Patrick McGuigan, editorial page editor for the daily newspaper, Bruce Day, attorney and well-known civic leader, and Ron Bogle, university executive and elected member & former President of the Oklahoma City Board of Education. The concept they developed was built on a much larger and wildly popular multi-billion dollar initiative by civic leaders to revive the city's inner core called [Metropolitan Area Projects](#) (MAPS). MAPS was funded by a voter supported one-cent temporary sales tax.

After developing a proposed strategy, the group of four began quietly building a larger diverse and inclusive community planning committee. Key in their early recruits was Kirk Humphreys, Oklahoma City mayor at the time and former board president of a neighboring school district. Humphreys would play a key role in creating the necessary formal collaboration between the city and school district. One by one, additional members of the committee were recruited, until, when the movement went public, it had the endorsement of a strong and diversified leadership team that touched every area of the city.

The public effort to rebuild the school system's facilities was launched in 1999 and over the course of a year, the Project Kids Community Inclusion Initiative organized nearly 60 community meetings that involved more than 3,000 residents, not simply to build support, but to seek ownership in a new and energized vision for the future of their schools.

After these extensive community forums, the Project Kids Committee developed a document called "Project Kids: Rebuilding Oklahoma City Schools," which included a list of recommendations and a framework for engaging the voters who would have to approve the bond issue.

In November 2001, the voters of Oklahoma City approved a historic combined bond and tax referendum in the amount of \$700 million for school construction. A key aspect for gaining community support was a plan to overhaul the curriculum for 21st-century learning. Historic for Oklahoma City, but also nationally as one of the first cities to undertake a system-wide infrastructure modernization initiative. And, like the MAPS initiative, this one was paid for in large part by a voter supported one-cent sales tax. The modernization plan would include more than 100 comprehensive school construction projects to be completed over ten years.

## Changing the rules for financing public school construction

Prior to the Maps for KIDS initiative, the rules for funding school construction in Oklahoma were very restrictive. In addition to requiring a 60% super majority for passage, the bonding capacity for the school district was based on the value of real estate in the city and capped at around \$110M dollars. Pretty meager for a district with over 90 school facilities. In fact, a 1996 study by the district found that it would take 14 years to address all the deferred maintenance costs required to bring district buildings up to basic safety, comfort, and security needs. Not a situation that would support a transformative vision for the district.

In order to address the much larger vision of creating 21st-century centers for learning, the rules governing funding had to be changed. Over many months and with much work with leaders in city and state government, several changes were made. First, the city had to agree to share its taxing authority with the schools, setting up the ability to include a temporary one-cent sales tax to be earmarked for school construction; second, the state legislature had to pass an amendment allowing the school district to propose multiple years of bond issues in a single vote, thus allowing the district to essentially exceed the \$110M maximum. Finally, the city and district had to agree to the creation of a new governance structure.

## Creating a new governance structure

A significant element in achieving success was a decision to create an innovative governance structure through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the city and school district to create the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area Public Schools Trust (OCMAPS). The Trust became the governing body responsible for management and control systems, budgets, cash flow, oversight of design and construction contracts, and comprehensive reporting. The city had gained substantial credibility through the successful managements of the Metropolitan Area Projects work, so by shared authority between the city and the school district, this structure provided confidence to voters that the MAPS for KIDS projects would be professionally managed.

## Lessons for urban school districts

Oklahoma City's success is an important example of transforming an urban school system through a visionary, bottom-up, inclusive strategy. A strategy that was especially purposeful in including the under-represented and under-heard parents, students, and teachers that populate every community. By building community-wide consensus as the central strategy, rather than relying on the more common top-down strategy built on political persuasion, Oklahoma City was able to leap-frog over decades of continued incremental progress and create a new reality that positioned the district to achieve greater success.

## MAPS for KIDS: A few lessons learned

1. Great challenges require courage, vision, and imaginative thinking, as well as a willingness to take on the existing systems.
2. Recognition that if the organizational structures and procedures in place do not provide a pathway to success, then you have to change the organizational structures and procedures.
3. Simply trying harder within the existing bureaucratic framework will never work.
4. Consensus building as a strategy for community success is superior to a more common persuasion campaign. It takes longer, it is much harder, and it requires shared authority and decision-making. It requires the authentic engagement of high passion/low power people within the community.
5. In Oklahoma City, the community planning committee represented the diversity of the city, politically, economically, and racially. These differences could have drowned them in their disagreements, so rules of engagement were developed and all agreed to remain focused on the single issue of MAPS for KIDS. Or, as Mayor Humphreys said, “We all agreed to leave our guns at the door.”
6. The role and use of philanthropic/private dollars vs public dollars are important to understand. In Oklahoma City, about \$1M in philanthropic/private dollars was used to leverage about \$700M in public dollars. And philanthropic/private dollars were used in ways that public dollars could not be used, including the costs of staffing support, consultants to help with the community engagement meetings, publications, advertising, etc. All essential for the success of the initiative.
7. Excitement within the community is contagious. People want to become involved if they feel they are heard.

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