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OPINION CONTRIBUTOR

## ON THE ROAD TO SCHOOL SUCCESS

By MICHAEL HANCOCK, KEVIN JOHNSON, ANGEL TAVERAS and JULIÁN CASTRO | 10/15/13  
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Lagging far behind their international peers. Shamefully low reading and math competency. A staggering achievement gap. We've heard the alarming statistics about the trajectory of American students. After 10 years, No Child Left Behind has failed to put American children back on a competitive academic track.

But we are beginning to see real results in America's cities, the epicenters of innovation, including the four we lead: Denver; Providence, R.I.; San Antonio; and Sacramento, Calif.

Long before we entered the political arena, each of us lived in the city we now lead. We attended public schools and sat at those desks — and through that connection, we know that public education can work.

One lesson is that education doesn't need to be a partisan battleground. Far from Washington, smart education policy is uniting even the most strident opponents.

Take the Common Core standards, which were first promoted by the National Governors Association and has now been adopted by 45 states. Common Core improves on NCLB by putting more influence into the hands of those on the ground, breathing new life into an old Tip O'Neill axiom: Not only is all politics local, but effective education policy is even more local.

It is at the local level, in individual school districts and municipalities across the country, where real positive change is happening in education policy, practice and programs. Working with our partners in state government, we are improving graduation and reducing dropout rates, retaining more teachers, reducing remediation, improving reading comprehension and math skills, decreasing teen pregnancy rates and much, much more. The results are beginning to speak for themselves.

Recognizing that the average student to counselor ratio is 420 to 1 in Texas public schools, San Antonio created cafécollege in 2010, which has provided college advising and test preparation to more than 30,000 area students. In August, the City of San Antonio also opened the doors of Pre-K 4 SA, a voter-approved pre-kindergarten initiative that is providing teacher training and high-quality, full-day Pre-K to more than 22,000 4-year-olds over the next eight years.

Facing the inherent difficulty of addressing the challenges of the city's five school districts, Sacramento saw a need to attract proven education practices to the city. The mayor's office helped convene and recruit prominent national organizations, and within just one year, City Year, Teach for America, StudentsFirst and College Track launched sites in the city. Each organization has had an immediate impact on schools and on student learning, and the influx of talented individuals invested in student success has created a promising environment for collaboration and innovation.

Providence is focused on the strategies necessary to dramatically raise the percentage of students reading on grade level by the end of third grade. Working with a coalition of community partners, the city is placing hundreds of high-impact volunteers in classrooms, boosting kindergarten readiness, expanding meaningful summer learning opportunities and working to address chronic absenteeism. Providence's comprehensive plan to invest in young people and improve third-grade reading proficiency has earned national recognition, including designation by the National Civic League as a 2012 All-America City for Grade-Level Reading and the \$5 million grand prize in Bloomberg Philanthropies' inaugural Mayors Challenge.

In Denver, understanding that schools in the far northeast area of the city were in desperate need of improvement, officials and community leaders focused on turning around a network of struggling schools and opening high-quality new ones. High-intensity tutoring helped students catch up; a redesigned transportation system increased access to the schools themselves. In the three years, there has been a dramatic increase in enrollment in far northeast Denver, and there are now several more high-performing schools to serve the community.

We are hardly alone in developing and implementing these kind of successful, locally based programs and innovations. Many other mayors adhere to the same formula. That's the philosophy behind the Obama administration's I3, or Investing in Innovation program, which provides competitive grants to fund programs that have been proven to work.

Of course, just as no two students are the same, no two school systems are, either. Each school system must tailor its efforts to its unique circumstances. But we must all keep innovating and sharing our experiences if we're going to build the 21st-century education system our kids deserve.

*Mayors Michael Hancock of Denver; Kevin Johnson of Sacramento, Calif.; Angel Taveras of Providence, R.I.; and Julián Castro of San Antonio launched the Mayors for Educational Excellence Tour this week in Denver.*

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