



# Leading the Parade:

Transforming Urban Public Education  
in Ohio to become a High Demand and  
High Performing System in 2020

*Executive Summary*



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# Leading the Parade: Transforming Urban Public Education in Ohio to become a High Demand and High Performing System in 2020

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### **About McREL**

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) is a nonprofit education and research organization based in Denver, Colorado. For more than 40 years, McREL has been dedicated to helping educators use research to improve student achievement. As a national leader in research, school improvement, standards-based education, balanced leadership, professional development, and scenario planning, our highly respected education researchers and experts have provided services to educators in all 50 states and 18 foreign countries. Our Web site ([www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org)) offers hundreds of reports, tools, guides, and services designed to improve school and student performance. To learn more about McREL, contact us at 303.337.0990 or [info@mcrel.org](mailto:info@mcrel.org).

## Executive Summary

Since 2001, superintendents and teacher union presidents from the eight largest urban school districts in Ohio—Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown—have worked together in a strategic alliance known as the “Ohio 8 Coalition.” Their mission is to work with policymakers to improve academic performance and close the achievement gap for urban children throughout Ohio. Toward that end, the Ohio 8 is focused on four strategic priorities: 1) improvement and innovation, 2) policy, 3) leadership, and 4) capacity building.

In the fall of 2007, the Ohio 8 Leadership Council began examining future trends in order to reinforce its long-term vision and strategic plan. With support from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Ohio 8 members participated in a comprehensive scenario-planning process facilitated by Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL), an organization with expertise in future-focused strategic planning. The process enabled the Council to explore trends depicted in KnowledgeWork’s *Map of Future Forces Affecting Education*, design future scenarios for the year 2020, and analyze the implications for urban education in Ohio beginning in 2008. Based on their deliberations, the Ohio 8 developed a set of robust recommendations and subsequent actions designed to position themselves successfully for the future.

### Scenario Planning and the Ohio 8 Coalition

Scenario planning is the process of creating stories about possible futures in order to anticipate and prepare for changes beyond one’s control. Scenarios do not predict the future, but they do provide a way to identify and manage uncertainties. Scenario planning challenges the current mode of thinking, prompting new insights that drive transformation in organizations and institutions. The process incorporates the following eight steps: 1) select the issue of focus and timeframe, 2) explore the external world, 3) clarify uncertainties, 4) develop the scenario framework, 5) write the scenarios, 6) identify implications and options, 7) take action, and 8) monitor trends.

Scenario Planning for the Ohio 8 Coalition took place over a four-month period, March through June 2008, and involved 45 participants, including the members of the Ohio 8 Leadership Council, a Working Group appointed by each of the eight districts, Ohio 8 staff, and representatives from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation.

The process began with the formulation of a key strategic question, known as the focal issue. This question, *How can urban public education in Ohio transform to become a high-demand, high-performing system in 2020?* guided all subsequent work on the project.

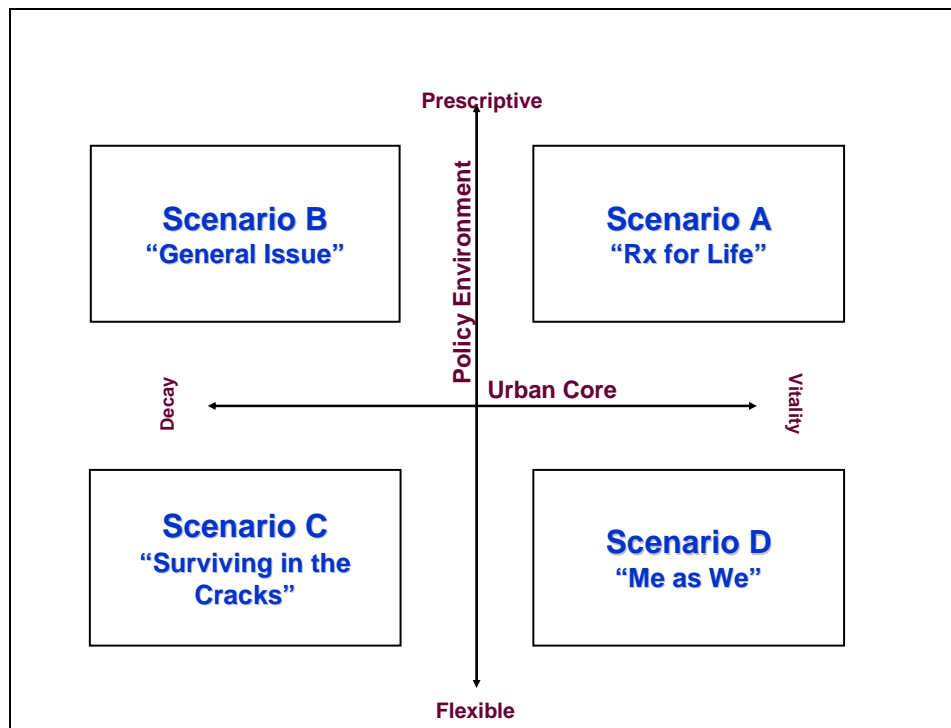
Next, the group explored trends identified on the *Map of Future Forces Affecting Education* in various “impact areas” including family and community, markets, institutions, educators and learning, and tools and practices. Participants agreed on the two uncertainties most critical and relevant to the focal issue:

- The *urban core* and whether it will continue to decay or develop vitality

- The *policy environment* and whether it will become more prescriptive or more flexible

These critical uncertainties, when crossed on the two axes of a Cartesian plane, form the Ohio 8’s Scenario Framework.

***The Ohio 8 Scenario Framework***



Working Group teams then articulated the key elements of each scenario: a general description; deep causes of events unfolding between 2008 and 2020; a timeline and potential news headlines over the 12 years; evidence and present-day signs foreshadowing each scenario; and a plausible and engaging plot, characters, and format.

McREL consultants then wrote four scenarios for a metaphorical “Center City, Ohio,” in the year 2020, based on the creative input of each team. Team members reviewed the drafts and provided feedback to McREL. In June, 2008, the revised scenarios were shared in a joint meeting with the Leadership Council and Working Group members. Participants identified the implications for urban public education in Ohio, strategic options if the Ohio 8 found themselves living within each scenario in 2020, and action steps the Ohio 8 can take today to position its members most effectively for each potential future.

An abstract of each scenario follows (see Appendices A and B for the complete text of all scenarios and the entire set of options and action steps).

## **The World in 2020: Four Possible Scenarios**

### **Scenario A: R<sub>x</sub> for Life**

This is “a Hub world” where economic conditions, coupled with activist government and a strong sense of civic engagement, have produced an accessible, full-service delivery system for the residents of Center City and other urban communities across Ohio. In this scenario, prescriptive policies provide a uniform platform for addressing education, community, and healthcare needs in an efficient, effective manner. All governmental levels play a role in solving problems, and the public will to address numerous domestic challenges is strong. A new federal education law—All Children Exceeding Standards (ACES)—is prescriptive and far-reaching, focused on the mastery of standards.

In order to provide leadership in an “R<sub>x</sub> for Life” future, the analysis of this scenario suggests that the Ohio 8 should begin today, working with state policymakers and other local leaders, to remove barriers to coordinating education and social services. In addition, the Ohio 8 might advocate on behalf of policies and revenue streams that will accelerate service coordination, identify existing programs that will hasten alignment, select a willing urban community to serve as a pilot or demonstration site, and catalyze a statewide communications strategy to build public support for and participation in such efforts.

### **Scenario B: General Issue**

Limited public education resources, exacerbated by the ravages of urban decay, foreshadow a bleak existence for the residents of Center City in this scenario, where the schools by 2020 have become the last bastion of safety. Ohio’s inability to resolve state education funding in a way that benefits urban districts combines with dire economic straits, environmental disasters, and a prolonged war in the Middle East. By 2011, the reauthorized federal No Child Left Behind Act offers states a comprehensive system of national standards, curricula, assessment provisions, and data tracking with a heavy focus on STEM, as an alternative to the current system of 50 state standards and accountability programs. As downward economic trends in the urban core continue, those residents who are able, flee the cities. Urban schools become the site of last resort, serving only the poor and most vulnerable students. The federal government steps in, creating the General Issue (GI) Teacher program, which deploys soldiers once they return from the wars in the Middle East. The GI Teachers have a dual role—to teach mathematics and science while maintaining order in the schools and surrounding cities.

In order to reinforce the leadership position of its members in a “General Issue” future, an analysis of the scenario results in the recommendation that the Ohio 8 begin today to design a dual strategy, one that positions local school buildings as safe environments while creating broad-based public support for service learning.

### **Scenario C: Surviving in the Cracks**

In this scenario, the bulk of the urban core has decayed and the majority of Center City dwellers languish in poverty with no jobs, absentee landlords, empty lots, crumbling schools, and few

opportunities. Absent is the compelling national and state leadership or unity of purpose needed to bring about large-scale solutions for school funding, early childhood education, or workforce development. Having tried and failed to improve urban education with prescriptive, high-stakes accountability measures, policymakers turn to alternative solutions once considered anathema within the public arena. In 2010, NCLB is reauthorized to support student vouchers in the urban areas, thereby expanding competition. Cities splinter into distinct neighborhoods characterized by a sense of isolation which separates neighborhoods ideologically, politically, and socio-economically. A fortunate few neighborhoods turn inward, becoming more self-reliant and entrepreneurial in the process, thus surviving in the cracks.

In many respects, a “Surviving in the Cracks” future represents the most challenging scenario for the Ohio 8 because it intersects urban decay with increasing competition for delivering education services. To simply ignore this scenario would likely accelerate the demise of public education as we know it today. Therefore, this scenario analysis encourages the Ohio 8 to seek out state support for broad collaborative approaches to improving education, particularly those which embrace the use of technology and individual learning plans for all students.

### **Scenario D: Me as We**

In this scenario, widespread availability of free WiFi (through a wireless cloud in cities) and other innovative technologies, reinforced by federal and state policies encouraging grassroots solutions, fuel local ingenuity and productivity. Center City leaders, embracing a philosophy of enlightened self-interest, adopt an entrepreneurial, collaborative approach to local problem solving. They align public policies and private sector resources, making it possible for leaders from K–12 education, higher education, social services, the arts, and economic/workforce development to join with business leaders in addressing quality of life issues. Development impact fees, coupled with a new Ohio school finance law, provide local communities with a more stable revenue source. At the same time, skyrocketing fuel costs prompt state and local leaders to develop more efficient public transportation and offer economic incentives to live and work in the core city. Education focuses on lifelong learning delivered 24/7 and through multiple venues. The traditional high school diploma has been replaced by a competency-based credentialing system.

In order to reinforce the leadership position of its members in a “Me as We” future, the analysis of this scenario suggests that the Ohio 8 begin today to advocate for the joining of two critical ideas into the same education policy discussions: universal access to the Internet and the use of individual learning plans for all students.

### **Recommendations**

The following five recommendations form the basis of a dynamic planning process for transforming urban education in Ohio into a high-demand and high-performing system in 2020. The recommendations reflect discussions from the Ohio 8 Coalition meeting in June 2008. The first two recommendations focus on successful implementation, whereas the last three address

specific program priorities reflected in the scenarios (see the full report for details of each recommendation).

- 1. Use the future scenarios and work products contained in this report to help the Ohio 8 Coalition achieve its vision, mission, and strategic priorities.**
  - Align scenario planning recommendations with the Ohio 8’s existing strategic priorities.
  - Identify potential opportunities and barriers in the existing governance and funding system.
  - Translate the strategic options which appear in all four scenarios (robust options) into a concrete action plan that guides program implementation and operations.
  
- 2. Develop the organizational capacity to lead the parade.**
  - Engage the communication staff of each district, as well as external community experts, in designing an outreach strategy aimed at three key audiences: each district’s local community, state education leaders, and the general public.
  - Establish ongoing mechanisms to monitor and communicate trends and analyze the implications for urban education in Ohio.
  - Create formal structures among the Ohio 8, and other urban communities, to continually share progress, promising practices, and long-term results.
  
- 3. Prioritize service learning within urban school districts and communities.**
  - Convene a service learning “design team” and task force to explore how to integrate service learning innovatively throughout urban school districts.
  - Develop a plan to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders and build greater buy-in for service learning.
  - Convene a statewide summit or “institute” on service learning for educators, community leaders, and members of the public.
  - Provide professional development to teachers, principals, and others on how to successfully implement service learning.
  - Identify state and local resources to support service learning.
  - Provide incentives for districts to develop comprehensive service learning programs.
  - Implement structures to sustain and improve the implementation of service learning programs.
  
- 4. Develop the “Hub” concept as a full-service design for schools.**
  - Convene a task force or committee to explore the possibilities for creating a “Hub” pilot initiative.
  - Partner with key organizations such as the Aspen Institute, Knowledge Alliance, and others to support the design process and elevate the conversation.
  - Build political support for launching a pilot initiative.
  - Implement, support, and evaluate the demonstration “Hub” project.
  
- 5. Take the lead to help prepare Ohio urban education for 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning.**

- Reach common agreement on what students should know and be able to do to master 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and competencies.
- Create and refine a system of competency-based assessments to monitor and report individual student progress.
- Develop support systems for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, including universal access to WiFi.
- Create a commission to launch a 21<sup>st</sup> century skills effort.

## **Conclusion**

By creating and reflecting on four likely scenarios in response to its focal issue, the Ohio 8 has begun to *lead the parade*, positioning itself for ongoing success on behalf of the children they serve now and in the future.