

Volunteers paint a mural on the side of an old mill in Lawrence.



COURTESY OF FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF BOSTON

Seeks to Change LAWRENCE'S PATH— and That of Its Residents

By *JESSICA ANDORS*

In January of 2014, [Lawrence](#) was selected for the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's Working Cities Challenge program, designed to stimulate and reward cross-sector collaboration toward economic progress in the Gateway Cities of Massachusetts. The timing is fortunate, because Lawrence has almost perfect conditions—an alignment of stars if you will—to make some giant steps forward in a variety of areas. In part, the Working Cities award was a recognition of the ripeness of the time in the city as well as the quality and capacity of its ideas and partners.

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Postindustrial Gateway Cities around the state are familiar with both the litany of tangible difficulties on the ground—high unemployment, a relatively weak job base, high poverty and low educational attainment, aging infrastructure and housing stock—and the less tangible but equally hindering reputational difficulties—the stories repeated about our cities—that hinder investment and revitalization from within and without. Lawrence is perhaps a more extreme case of both of these challenges, but like all cities it also has unique strengths, which include its young, growing, striving Latino immigrant population (75 percent of the city), and the window of opportunity.

One of Lawrence’s aligning stars was the 2012 state receivership of its failing public schools, which has provided the city with a historic opportunity to boldly and permanently transform the educational landscape and culture in the city. In the past two years, the Lawrence Public Schools have made tremendous strides in student achievement and graduation rates. What may be less obvious is that the system has also genuinely opened itself to collaboration and partnership with both highly effective local nonprofits and its immigrant parent body.

Another aligning star was the November 2013 election of a young, college-educated, Army veteran and passionate native son as mayor, who has set about professionalizing city government, with twin strategic priorities of public safety and economic development guiding his efforts. Mayor Daniel Rivera is bolstered in this work by a young and growing Latino middle and professional class, often the children of first-generation immigrants who went away to college and have made the conscious decision to come back and live, work and reinvest in their city.

Other stars include the city’s nonprofit community, which has long been one of its strongest assets, providing not only needed social services but also improving local health policy and practice, engaging and educating youth, driving real estate investment—including creative reuse of old mills and major housing and green space development—and encouraging

local entrepreneurship. The nonprofit community has also been instrumental in building habits of civic engagement and participation—from the neighborhood to the voting booth—among immigrant families. New leadership at the community college level has brought a renewed focus on Lawrence’s “presence” and Latino student retention, while also driving a new public-private collaborative effort, the Lawrence Partnership, that has engaged major employers, business owners, and financial institutions in shaping local economic development initiatives.

Transformational Goals

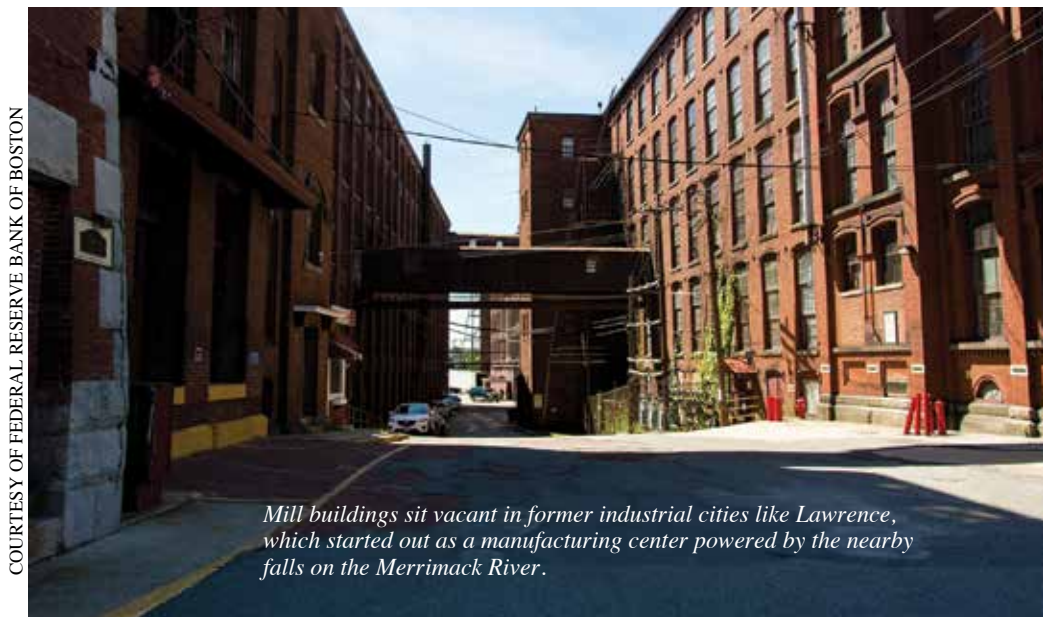
As we in Lawrence were navigating this emerging landscape through 2013—driven first by nonprofits and the community college, but soon involving key city officials, school personnel and employers brought in through personal outreach and networking—it became clear that the connection between educational and economic success was critical, and that the school system was the city’s greatest and most timely leverage point. Between Lawrence students and their families, the school system impacts nearly half the city’s population. We knew that there was a lot of research in the field about the connection between family economic stability and student economic success, and we began to ask ourselves: Is there a practical, sustainable way that the schools can become a hub not just for student success, but for the advancement of

entire families? Could the nonprofit and business communities complement and strengthen the overall Lawrence Public Schools turnaround effort by addressing the economic and employment situation of these families? Thus was born the Lawrence Working Families Initiative.

The partners in the Lawrence Working Families Initiative comprise a cross-sectional range of local and regional nonprofits (including the local community college and health center, both anchor institutions and major employers in the city), other regional employers, the Workforce Investment Board/ValleyWorks Career Center, the city of Lawrence, the Mayor’s Health Task Force, and the Lawrence Public Schools. This group set its sights on the following goals:

- An increase in household income for Lawrence Public Schools families
- Better employment outcomes for public school parents and graduates (higher employment rates, higher-wage jobs)
- Improved school outcomes (graduation rates, test scores, college continuance)
- An increase in parents actively engaged in school leadership
- An increase in employer commitment to the city in terms of business location and local hiring

The Working Families Initiative partners are seeking to fundamentally change the way the school system interfaces with



Mill buildings sit vacant in former industrial cities like Lawrence, which started out as a manufacturing center powered by the nearby falls on the Merrimack River.

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the larger community, making the schools a cornerstone of a community-wide effort to support family economic success, to authentically engage parent leadership, and to improve student achievement and educational outcomes. In doing so, the initiative also seeks to change the way local nonprofits work together and the way the local workforce development system engages and supports Lawrence families and leverages the strengths of both employer and nonprofit partners. We also seek to centrally engage and locate employers in the schools themselves, through workshop and volunteer participation, internship development for students and parents, and the creation of direct connections between prepared/trained/educated parents and human resources staff at participating employers.

timeframes. All these tasks and more probably take two to three times as long in a collaborative effort as they would in a single-organization effort.

Another critical challenge involves maintaining a balance between the consuming nature of rolling out specific programmatic elements—in essence, creating a “there” for the initiative and a concrete place for partners to engage—and the need to focus on systems change and practice shift. For example, the collaborative has raised resources and is currently working with two of the nonprofit partners, Compass for Kids and The Community Group, to recruit specialized program cohorts of public school parents: one for job training and placement in the hospitality sector, and the other for training as certified home daycare providers (a means of self-employment and, in Lawrence, a viable path to economic self-sufficiency). There is parallel work to be done, however. This includes creating a practice over time of this sort of program development within the LPS Family Resource Center so that it is seen as a core function, and integrating the local Workforce Investment Board and Career Center into the planning and execution of these activities such that they see public school parents as a core feeder population for their wider efforts with local employers.

Yet another emerging challenge is balancing the supply and demand sides of the equation. This involves working closely with partners to cultivate quality job opportunities with local employers while preparing parents to fill them, with an eye to creating *pipelines* to employers. The initiative is now in an intensive outreach phase to individual schools to build up the “caseload” for its “family coach,” a key staff member of the initiative who works with individual parents on their employment and income goals. Meanwhile, the initiative is also intensively cultivating employers (and working with its Workforce Investment Board and Career Center partners) to understand their needs and processes and to create specific pathways and opportunities for public school parents. To build and coalesce demand, and increase supply, the initiative needs successful placements that can create

more opportunities with more employers and help spread the word among parents.

Different employment sectors also present different challenges for engagement. The Working Families Initiative’s financial institution partners are very willing to help, and they have an existing engagement infrastructure to operate from because of regulatory requirements, but their employment opportunities are fewer than in other fields. In the health care sector, the test is finding the right leverage point—often the specific person or people within—who can move these large institutions to pay attention and engage. The manufacturing sector—still a major employer in the region—is where the city and Workforce Investment Board partnership matters most. The initiative’s challenge is to stay connected with the focus and vision of the mayor’s office on economic development and job growth, to be a vital part of their outreach efforts in this sector, and to make sure that our parents have the soft skills preparation these employers continually cite as critical.

Efforts Pay Off

Thus far, it appears that the time and effort are worth it. The excitement generated by such a large and visible partnership is necessary to create the level of momentum needed to actually shift practice and culture. The initiative has some early examples of what’s working, which provides optimism for the coming year.

Here are some of the early results:

- In order to build the base for deeper parent involvement in the schools, lead partner Lawrence Community Works has been rolling out “Community Education Circles” as a new strategy for parent engagement in four elementary schools in the system. The circles have seen substantial turnout and glowing evaluations from parents and teachers, as well as a direct impact on student performance. The work will involve expanding the circles, embedding them in the schools, and using them as a platform for connecting parents to economic opportunity.
- The initial funding through the Federal Reserve Bank has leveraged support from the Kellogg Foundation and the



According to the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, the unemployment rate in Lawrence is more than double the statewide rate.

Emerging Challenges

One year into this effort, the initiative’s experience demonstrates the promise and challenges of the collaborative approach. Foremost among these challenges is simply managing collaboratively—that is, screening, hiring and jointly supervising key personnel to provide the “glue” and the “grease” for functional, well-tended, transparent partner relationships; developing data-sharing protocols and joint evaluation tools; cultivating the habit of information-sharing; maintaining focus on shared goals; building out specific program elements; navigating and shifting bureaucratic practice with large institutional partners; and handling different partner/sector expectations about

Miller Foundation to support parent engagement and parent internships, and a recent award from CommCorp to Working Families Initiative partner Compass for Kids to support workforce training for the hospitality sector.

- The Lawrence Public Schools are opening a Family Resource Center, with space for partners and a growing calendar of events and workshops aimed not simply at remediating problems (the traditional focus of “student support services”) but growing and building on family assets.
- The initiative has begun a parent training program for self-employment as home daycare providers.
- Employer panel discussions with parents are in development and will take place in a series at the Family Resource Center this spring, with human resources staff from financial institutions, health care providers, and manufacturing employers.
- Working Families Initiative staff are working closely with the mayor’s office and business development director on joint employer visits to determine needs, cultivate relationships, and share information on the initiative. The message to employers is not “help us,” but, “What can we do to help you?”
- A “family coach”—one of two core Working Families Initiative staff hired, along with the project director—has been slowly growing his client base of parents during the fall and is now successfully making job placements.
- Three new employers—Lawrence General Hospital, T.J. Maxx and PolarTec—have come on board to join the original twelve.
- Initiative staff are designing and implementing a rigorous evaluation of the Community Education Circles and the Family Resource Center, with substantial direction and support from the Boston Fed and its research economists. This support will be critical to demonstrating “proof of concept” and ensuring the sustainability of the initiative’s efforts beyond the initial grant period.

Surprises, Adjustments and Lessons

Once you have (collectively!) envisioned beautiful end goals—full employment, high academic achievement, and a rush of employers to the city—it is always surprising how long things take and how deeply ingrained habits are. It takes continuous effort and courage to move from theory to practice, and to overcome the inertia of how things have been done before. As the poet Marge Piercy says in her community development anthem, “Report of the Fourteenth Subcommittee on Convening a Discussion Group”: “This is how things begin to tilt into change / how coalitions are knit from strands of hair / of barbed wire, twine, knitting wool and gut / how people ease into action arguing each inch / but the tedium of it is watching granite erode.” It’s important to keep chipping away at the granite, because sometimes a huge chunk of the wall comes down at the tap of a chisel, and some things seem to fall into place once you have worked hard on others. In the case of the Lawrence Working Families Initiative, the relationship with the Lawrence Public Schools has been particularly productive, even though few would have predicted as much based on past experience with the school system.

The initiative’s work over the past year has of course been a tremendous learning process. One of the biggest lessons is the importance of being institutionally connected through more than one person. There needs to be a web of relationships, so that if one key person moves on, the initiative is not left with a hole in the middle of its partnership. It’s important to have “buy-in” not only from leadership—a given as necessary—but also from front-line staff and implementers. The Lawrence Working Families Initiative is approaching this challenge through joint training and networking events, but this is a continuous and iterative process of necessity.

A related lesson is that there is no blanket approach to partners of any sector. Every new partner has to be approached and cultivated individually. Everyone has different intersection points between self-interest and the collective interest, and recruiting each partner is a “mini-campaign” that involves strategizing, cultivation and relationship maintenance



Challenges Encountered

- Managing collaboratively
- Balancing the need to roll out programs with the need to achieve systemic change
- Balancing supply and demand
- Understanding the unique qualities of different employment sectors

on an individual basis. At the same time, it’s important to provide team-building opportunities so the collaborative is a true web of strong multi-partner relationships, with no one partner—even the lead—acting as too much of a hub or funnel.

Money is completely necessary but in no way sufficient. It’s the people and the partnerships that will make the initiative succeed.

Finally, Abraham Lincoln is credited with the line, “The best way to predict your future is to create it.” As a change agent, he is a pretty stellar role model.

Conclusion

If *Anna Karenina* had been written by an urban planner, the first line might have been, “Happy cities are all alike; every unhappy postindustrial Gateway City is unhappy in its own way.” Many cities share the same problems, but how they play out in particular geographic, cultural and historical contexts, and what solutions will work, are different for each place. Local context and culture are key ingredients. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Lawrence’s experiences, however, can hopefully inform an ongoing conversation about how to address these compelling issues. Lawrence, which is dealing with 150 years of wealth extraction, human and financial capital outflow, industrial and environmental contamination, and massive economic change, could eventually become part of a larger movement of places that are working with patience, tenacity and creativity to change their historic pattern. From Piercy again, in “The Low Road”: “It starts when you say *We* / and know who you mean, and each / day you mean one more.” ❀