Looking beyond Harlem: International insights for area-based initiatives

Area-based initiatives in France and the
United Kingdom offer lessons for other countries.

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Partnerships connecting schools, families, and community-based organizations are a characteristic of successful schools cited in *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010), and the middle level scholarship widely supports the notion that "beyond school matters" are associated with adolescents' social and academic experiences (e.g., Clark & Clark, 2003, 2005; Epstein, 1996; Rothenberg, 1996; Sanders, 1999; Werderich, 2008). Moreover, collaboration with external partners can enhance a middle level school's capacity to effectively educate young adolescents who have traditionally been marginalized, including English language learners (Walqui & van Lier, 2010) and students with disabilities (Kennedy & Fisher, 2001). Much of this literature addresses discrete student subgroups and focuses on student, classroom, and school levels. However, in recent years, increased attention has been paid to macro-structural developments, most notably the move toward "area-based initiative" (ABI) policies modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ).

HCZ has garnered much attention for its provision of comprehensive social, educational, and health services to families in a 97-block area of New York City. HCZ offers a wide range of resources to more than 8,000 children and 5,000 adults, including Head Start, early-childhood learning programs, parenting programs, after-school and summer tutoring for middle grades students, and health care. HCZ appears to have led to numerous positive outcomes for the local community and has, in fact, been lauded by President Obama and the U.S. Department of Education as a model to be replicated in other high-needs areas throughout the country. Accordingly, since 2009, the U.S. Department of Education has promulgated its Promise Neighborhood program, which awards funds and guidance on a competitive basis for planning and implementing HCZ-like initiatives. The enthusiasm for and promise of such ABIs, however, are accompanied by a number of concerns as to whether the HCZ idea is actually replicable or if it can be a widely effective and efficient initiative on a larger scale. In considering such matters, we suggest that, although the middle level and wider P–12 policy fields can glean many valuable lessons from HCZ, instructive insights should also be gained from other countries' experiences with ABIs.

Replicating HCZ

The ecological philosophy underlying HCZ and other ABIs has been supported in recent years by research suggesting that multiple environments associated with children's development—including families, community-based organizations, and neighborhoods (the relationships within and among them)—need to be engaged to reap significant and sustainable social and educational benefits (Berliner, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Rothstein, 2004). HCZ's attention to such matters has been associated with the academic successes of its Promise Academy II Middle School as well as the other

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Shared Vision, Organizational Structures, Community & Business

five HCZ schools (all labeled Promise Academies), which have been highlighted in the academic literature (Dobbie & Fryer, 2009) and in the popular media (e.g., *Time Magazine, 60 Minutes,* and the film documentary *Waiting for Superman*). In fact, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks (2009) referred to HCZ's efforts as "the Harlem miracle," noting that HCZ had "eliminated the black-white achievement gap" (p. A31). HCZ has been widely regarded as a gold-standard ABI, and much consideration has been given to developing more programs like it elsewhere. However, there are a number of questions regarding HCZ's wide-scale replicability.

One of the most common questions is whether comprehensive community planning models such as HCZ are economically feasible. HCZ has assets of nearly $200 million and an annual operating budget of close to $84 million—two-thirds of which is from private donations. Some of its most influential governing board members are Wall Street billionaires whose contributions have supported HCZ's provision of after-school programming, student trips, parent programming, and a range of other resources and opportunities (Otterman, 2010). Private donations have also allowed HCZ's Promise Academy Schools to maintain small class sizes at both pre-K–6 and middle school levels. Such financial assets, however, are not likely to be available in other communities throughout the United States, leaving many to question whether such a model is actually sustainable.

Another common replication concern relates to the charter school structure of HCZ's Promise Academies. Charter schools—which have been broadly critiqued by a range of education scholars as being difficult to evaluate and not sufficiently inclusive of all students (Miron & Nelson, 2001)—grant leaders almost full autonomy in crafting policy and managing personnel. HCZ, for example, has complete discretion in establishing teacher schedules and expectations. In fact, when many of the teachers failed to live up to HCZ expectations in the program's first academic year, HCZ fired nearly half of them (Curto, Fryer, & Howard, 2011). Additionally, charter schools in the HCZ and elsewhere are commonly criticized for being exclusionary, in that they do not serve *all* students. They often have insufficient enrollment space, lack comprehensive instructional resources to meet all students' learning needs, and actively "weed out" students who do not live up to academic or behavioral expectations. Accordingly, given that fewer than 10%

Area-based initiatives in the United States have been credited with eliminating black-white achievement gaps. photo by Alan Geho

of the schools included in the initially funded Promise Neighborhood zones (those that were awarded planning grants in 2010) were charters—most were traditional public schools—it is unlikely that HCZ's charter school-oriented academic norms are broadly transferable across developing Promise Neighborhood contexts.

A third aspect of HCZ that is often described as nearly impossible to replicate is its leadership. Geoffrey Canada, HCZ's founder and chief executive officer, has drawn from his well-documented intelligence, charisma, social capital, and life experiences in Harlem in shaping and directing nearly every fundamental aspect of the program (Tough, 2008). He is a remarkable leader whose identity has become fundamentally intertwined with HCZ. While Promise Neighborhoods are called to develop leadership structures rooted in mutuality and extensive collaboration among diverse constituents, HCZ has always been largely driven by Canada's vision and resourcefulness. What are the implications of there being few if any "other Canadas" to work similarly in developing ABIs? Can collaborative leadership arrangements function as efficiently?

ABIs in Europe

Given the aforementioned limitations to using HCZ as a template for replication, a look beyond Harlem is

Figure 1 Selected ABIs in Europe since 1980

Country	ABI
Belgium	Educational Priority Policy
Denmark	Kvarter-løft (Neighborhood Lift)
United Kingdom	Education Action Zones
France	Zones d'Education Prioritaire (Priority Education Zones)
Ireland	Area-Based Partnerships
Netherlands	Grote Steden Beleid (Major Cities Policy)
Spain	Plans Educatius d'Entorn (Environmental Education Plans)

warranted. We might learn lessons from Europe, where various state-driven ABIs have been implemented with varying success over the last 20 years (see Figure 1). Two of the most visible and ambitious of these efforts have been France's "Zones d'Education Prioritaire" (ZEP) and the United Kingdom's "Education Action Zones" (EAZ).

Zones d'Education Prioritaire (ZEP)

ZEP, which was initiated in 1991 and revised in 1998, was the first state-driven ABI to be implemented at scale. It adhered to an ecological perspective of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) and an inter-organizational orientation for educative action. ZEP recognized the importance of the local intersection of in-school and out-of-school factors (Storey, 2007). Its ten specific priorities, which bear similarities with the family and community-focused elements of the Association for Middle Level Education's (formerly National Middle School Association) position statement, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2010), were to

- Strengthen school links with parents.

- Give parents confidence in the school.

- Ensure parents have a role in civic education.

- Recognize the important role of parents as representatives.

- Involve parents in the development of projects, in the activities of the school, and in the progress of their children.

- Open the school to the locality to create the conditions for an effective partnership.

- Mobilize local council services around a project for education.

- Develop "local education contracts," bringing together out-of-school activities organized by local councils and community organizations.

- Improve support for teachers and create conditions for more effective leadership.

- Include regular meetings of network councils comprising schools and their partners (Hatcher & Leblond, 2001).

ZEP was a particularly noteworthy indicator of the larger movement toward ABIs across Europe, given that France's highly-centralized education system had never allowed for much local, context-responsive practice. Hatcher and Leblond (2001) explained:

> It is important to understand just how radical this change in policy is. It represents a fundamental break with the republican tradition of the previous hundred years of French education. In this tradition, the functions of the school, to create the future citizens of the republic and to provide equality of opportunity for merit, were to be accomplished through uniform universal provision ensured by tight centralized state control over the schools. There was no place for a recognition of localism or particularism. (p. 5)

ZEPs were implemented in 865 sites in France, far exceeding the number of comparable programs in the United States—where 21 Promise Neighborhood

proposals were awarded planning grants in 2010, and a mere five received implementation funds in 2011. Although its effectiveness in improving social and educational conditions in disadvantaged communities has been described as "limited" (Benebou, Kramarz, & Farty, 2009), the ZEP policy has been sustained for two decades and is still in effect.

Education Action Zones (EAZ)

In the United Kingdom, EAZ policy was implemented at 73 sites between 1998 and 2000. Zones tended to include 12 to 20 schools at the primary and secondary levels and, like ZEP and Promise Neighborhoods, were situated in neighborhoods that were experiencing significant social, educational, and economic challenges (Smith, 1999). EAZs attempted to coordinate action among families, schools, and community agencies to address these challenges—a method that some have referred to as forging "joined-up solutions to joined-up problems" (Power, Whitty, Gewirtz, Halpin, & Dickson, 2004). The competitive process through which EAZs were funded was quite similar to the current Promise Neighborhood funding process, in which teams of local stakeholders submit applications delineating the particular needs in their areas and positing a series of action strategies to address them. Although EAZ applicants were encouraged to present ideas that represented innovative—or even radical—alternatives to traditional practice, the "targets" or objectives to which they aspired appeared to be markedly similar to those of many mainstream education agendas. For example, the major targets for an EAZ in Birmingham, England, were to:

- Improve pupil attainment by 20% over the three-year period.
- Decrease exclusion rates by 20% over the three-year period.
- Improve attendance so that all schools reach a minimum of 90%.
- Increase the hours schools are open for learning by 50% over the three-year period.
- Double the number of learning opportunities available in the zone over the three-year period.
- Reduce the number of school leaders leaving without training or employment by 25%.
- Increase the number of adults entering into accredited courses by 15%.
- Double the number of volunteers in local education, health, and community organizations (Hatcher & Leblond, 2001).

Not surprisingly, there was significant difference in the extents to which EAZs—and the schools within them—reached goals such as these. Power and associates (2004) explained, "While some zones appear to be making strong relative progress, others are not. This high level of variability raises questions about whether it is possible to identify any 'zone effect'" (p. 459). Such sentiment—that the zones were not demonstrating consistent effects across the United Kingdom—led to EAZ being cycled out of the national agenda by 2003.

Lessons learned from ZEP and EAZ

Notwithstanding the fundamental differences among the education and public service systems in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, those charged with planning, implementing, and evaluating policy relating to Promise Neighborhoods (or other ABIs) can learn from ZEP and EAZ. Specifically, the ZEP and EAZ cases can provide insights for both the middle level and wider pre-K–12 literature on how ABI leadership and implementation intersects with macro-political environments, how roles and relationships unfold among multilevel stakeholders in these settings, and how notions of effectiveness are constructed and measured.

How does leadership practice unfold?

The macro-political environments in which ZEP and EAZ were implemented had profound influences on the ways the policies were guided through planning and implementation. The highly centralized nature of the French system, for instance, challenged ZEP's capacities to develop with significant "bottom-up" leadership. Although ZEP was largely anticipated to be a decentralizing force, its dispersal of power "never fully occurred, in that state representatives still had an active hand in most local decisions" (Hatcher & Leblond, 2001, p. 5). In fact, although some local school leaders had at least some voice in the development of various programs, parents, teachers, and most community-based stakeholders were not represented on formal committees and were granted virtually no leadership or management opportunities.

In the United Kingdom's considerably more decentralized system, ABI policy was viewed much

differently—as an attempt by the government of the New Labour Party to further their influence. The 149 local education authorities throughout the country found opportunities to govern schools being usurped by EAZ. The centralizing effects of the policy led to conflict between local constituents, who, for years, had near complete responsibility for their schools, and the increasingly present government-affiliated managers (Power, et al., 2004). EAZs were more explicit than ZEPs in stipulating representative front-line governance in the form of action forums—statutory bodies that were to be composed of wide-ranging stakeholders including parents and community-based leaders. However, Hatcher and Leblond (2001) noted:

> In practice, much of the actual policymaking process of EAZs takes place not in the forum itself but in the much smaller and more frequent meetings of the executive group—whose composition is more exclusive than the forum. There may well be no representatives on it of parents, of the local community, or of classroom teachers. (p. 9)

Accordingly, while the broader ABI idea is typically characterized as being "grassroots" in nature—that is, ABIs are to facilitate context-specific issue identification and responsive local action—the ZEP and EAZ cases suggest that such characterizations are not always accurate in practice. Are there lessons here for Promise Neighborhoods? Although the United States has more than 16,000 school districts and a tradition of highly decentralized education—and, as such, will likely engender ABI contexts with less federal-local tension than France and the United Kingdom—ground-level issues of leadership and oversight that challenged ZEP and EAZ will require consideration in Promise Neighborhoods. Federal influence on Promise Neighborhood implementation will only be seen to the extent that local programs design their initiatives around broad U.S. Department of Education stipulations, such as the requirement that at least one-third of local Promise Neighborhood governing boards be composed of a combination of "zone" residents, outside-of-zone residents with low incomes, and local public officials. Promise Neighborhoods are not likely, then, to face similar "state dominance" challenges as ZEPs and EAZs. Nor are they going to follow the HCZ leadership model in which a charismatic leader (i.e., Geoffrey Canada) and a close cadre of colleagues are in control. Rather, Promise Neighborhoods appear to be set up to facilitate

more authentically grassroots, collaborative leadership. Key questions to be resolved in each setting are: How will inter-organizational communication and power dynamics unfold in these collaborative contexts? Who will take the lead? Will school-based interests and issues dominate action agendas, as they tended to in EAZs? How will parent- and community-based stakeholder perspectives be legitimized so that they can work with schools in ways suggested by *This We Believe*? As encouraging as some may find Promise Neighborhood stipulations aimed at "bottom-up" leadership, translating such policy into practice is a complex endeavor.

How are teachers integrated?

On a related note, the ways teachers' roles took shape in ZEPs and EAZs can be instructive for Promise Neighborhoods. Unlike Promise Academy teachers in Harlem, who are clearly aware of and aligned with HCZ's broader work, both ZEP and EAZ teachers were considerably less integrated into their zones. HCZ's charter school was created expressly for the program's reform agenda, and its teachers are viewed as *part of the solution* to the neighborhood's problems. Schools and teachers in ZEPs and EAZs were, however, implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—framed as *part of the problem*. Their perceived ineffectiveness was, in fact, one of the key reasons the zones were created. Some media members and public officials implied that ABIs were adopted because traditional modes of schooling and

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teaching were not getting the job done (Hatcher & Leblond, 2001). Not surprisingly, then, teacher buy-in fluctuated considerably among ZEPs and EAZs, for, unlike the "newness" of the HCZ school and teachers, these programs were to operate in conjunction with existing schools and teachers. New charter schools full of eager, cutting-edge teachers were not an option in the European cases. Teachers who had operated in certain

ways for many years were challenged to adapt their practice—particularly toward more active engagement of multiple family, community, and government stakeholders. Many teachers were reticent to embrace such changes, given their broader public depiction as deficits to the system and due to the fact that they were granted little voice in their local zones' development, as previously discussed.

This "teacher integration" challenge is fundamental to wider ABI planning and implementation. More than 90% of schools in proposed Promise Neighborhoods, for instance, are traditional public schools in which existing cores of teachers and other educators will need to re-consider their work as it unfolds in new, comprehensive, school-community collaborative contexts. Given the preponderance of research indicating that teachers have more direct impact on student learning than any other educators—especially at the middle level (Darling-Hammond, 2010), the comprehensive integration of teachers into zone planning and implementation is of fundamental importance. The best of inter-organizational schemes will likely be jeopardized without widespread teacher buy-in, as was the case in many ZEPs and EAZs. How are teachers integrated into ABIs? While teachers' professionalism, autonomy, and professional practice should be respected, they must move purposefully toward emergent community-connected practices that corral fresh insights and resources.

What are the impacts of boundaries?

Taking ABI policy to scale unearths a range of "boundary issues." In France and the United Kingdom, for example, the many distinct zones—literally hundreds of them implemented across relatively small areas—confused families and community-based stakeholders who were attempting to navigate them (Halpin, Dickson, Power, Whitty, & Gewirtz, 2004; Power, Rees, & Taylor, 2005). They were unsure of how, where, and to what extent the initiatives overlapped boundaries. While such concerns are not likely imminent in the United States, where the relatively small number of Promise Neighborhoods (likely no more than 20 before 2012) are to be dispersed across significantly larger areas, two other boundary issues that emerged in EAZs are of legitimate concern. First, in most instances, EAZ boundaries did not mirror or entirely encompass the boundaries of the local education authorities (LEAs) within which they were

implemented. This exacerbated confusion, leading many to question, for instance, not only where and how EAZ boundaries intersected but also how EAZ and LEA boundaries mattered. Whereas, within-LEA practice (pre-EAZ) tended to be somewhat standardized (in terms of the services that were provided to students, the ways instruction unfolded, etc.), the introduction of EAZs meant that both educator practices and student/family opportunities were diversified in these small areas. The core work of teachers in EAZ areas of an LEA, for instance, looked significantly different than that of teachers in non-EAZ areas of the same LEA. LEA leaders were essentially charged with guiding—and attempting to maintain some congruence among—two distinct areas within their previously standardized districts. HCZ, a private corporation, does not face similar dilemmas, but most Promise Neighborhoods will.

Another concern is the way in which ABIs are framed as facilitators of "territorial justice" (Power, et al., 2005; p. 103) that distribute resources in direct proportion to the needs of people living in a particular area. In fact, ABIs disproportionately allocate resources to geographically bounded areas, so those who live and attend school just beyond these areas remain on the outside looking in. Spatially-bounded programs, some argue, can foster winner/loser dichotomies that have very real effects on students' and families' opportunities. Both EAZ and ZEP policy attempted to encourage resource and information sharing between those on both sides of program boundaries, but most accounts indicated that such practice was irregular at best. Are there mechanisms through which zone benefits can be accrued outside the zones? Can ABIs actually stimulate territorial justice? Questions such as these are likely to be magnified in considerations of ABIs as large-scale policy solutions.

How does parent engagement take shape?

Although parental engagement is central in most ABIs, some suggest that this engagement often takes on deficit orientations. Power and associates (2004), for instance, claimed that the competitive EAZ funding process forced communities to highlight parents' shortcomings (because those neighborhoods deemed worse-off were often awarded funds) and that, once implemented, EAZs shaped parents into passive recipients of services rather than critical advocates for their children. Even though

the Promise Neighborhood application process has more of an asset orientation, the critique from Power and associates still merits consideration in the U.S. context. Programs like HCZ's "Baby College," which is designed to support new parents' efforts to create healthy living and learning environments for their children, appears to be promising in many regards. However, it is less clear if and how such programs might lead to more "middle class-type" parental engagement marked by non-hierarchical communication between parents and teachers, parental fluency in navigating complex school and social service systems, and, more generally, a sense of empowerment and active agency in larger education discussions (Cucchiara, 2008). Can scaffolded models be developed in which parents transition from basic involvement in their own children's experiences to active leadership and advocacy in their wider school communities? Neither ZEP nor EAZ were able to facilitate such transitions.

Area-based initiatives have been implemented in countries throughout Europe since the 1980s.

How is effectiveness conceptualized?

A final lesson from France's ZEP and the United Kingdom's EAZ relates to the evaluation of ABIs. How do we know whether there are certain "zone effects" that merit continued intensive resource deployment in such areas? To date, ZEP, EAZ, and even HCZ have largely attached such questions to students' progress on standardized tests (Power, et al., 2004; Tough, 2008). Simply put, if students' test scores go up, the zones are deemed effective, but if their scores remain stagnant, the zones are deemed ineffective. Such were the primary bases for judgments that ABI policy was "much ado about nothing" (Benebou et al., 2009), largely ineffective (Halpin et al., 2004; Power et al., 2004, 2005), and not a particularly efficient model (Curto et al., 2011). While reliance on such high-stakes test indicators is quite typical in the current era of accountability and testing, it seems especially insufficient in ABI contexts. Most ABIs are designed to incorporate creative, or even radical, methods to confront long-entrenched conditions of social exclusion (Etienne, 2008; Parkinson, 1998). Yet, when determining whether these programs are working, researchers are primarily looking at narrow, short-term outcome data.

Such foci have profound formative impacts. They shape the ways that "in-zone" time and resources are deployed, encouraging heightened emphases on test preparation. For example, Tough (2008) provided an in-depth description of HCZ's hyper-vigilance with standardized test preparation for "border kids" whose test results were just shy of "adequate." He noted that millions of dollars in Wall Street support hinged upon their improvement. The investors wanted a clear-cut indicator that their investments in HCZ were well-spent and, in turn, Geoffrey Canada went to extensive measures—including firing a principal—to ensure that these students' test scores improved. While Canada's HCZ vision certainly encompasses more than improved student test scores, the extent to which he is forced to "play the game" to sustain his program is alarming. A comprehensive model for analyzing ABIs should be tied to diverse, multilevel, longitudinal data, including measures of graduation and attendance rates, parent engagement, community stakeholder participation, school culture, community health, and so on. However, the current demand for instant results has precluded the in-depth, time-intensive inquiry that renders these data. Amid Power and associates' (2004, 2005) descriptions of short-term EAZ failures to increase student test scores, for instance, some encouraging parent-related findings are granted little attention. The authors wrote:

> There were ... some significant shifts in parents' attitudes toward their school, which could be interpreted as indicating increases in linking capital.

Parents reported more involvement with their children's school. They also indicated higher levels of trust—with over two-thirds claiming that the reputation and standard of their children's school had increased since the zone started. There were also high levels of reciprocity with, on average, half volunteering for school activities. (pp. 463–464)

By many accounts, these are vital findings indicating that a long-term change process was underway in many EAZs. However, because the findings were not accompanied by consistent increases in student test scores, they were essentially deemed insufficient indicators of the program's effectiveness and, ultimately, its continuance. In concert with the indicators of excellence in middle level schools (NMSA, 2010), we suggest that comprehensive community reform agendas should lend credence to such findings. In short, our conceptualizations of ABI effectiveness should be broad, nuanced, and—counter-intuitive to the immediacy of needs facing our communities—rooted in longer-term understandings.

Conclusion

We have suggested that, as the U.S. Department of Education moves toward ABI policy implementation, useful insights might be gained by looking beyond Harlem to other government-initiated ABIs in Europe. While ZEP and EAZ unfolded in contexts that were extremely different from the United States, they offer transferable lessons in areas of leadership, teacher integration, neighborhood boundaries, parent engagement, and evaluation. The utility of these international comparisons to inform U.S. education policy and practice is supported by Darling-Hammond's (2010) claim:

While no system from afar can be transported wholesale into another context, there is much to learn from the experiences of those who have addressed problems we encounter. A sage person once noted that, although it is useful to learn from one's own mistakes and experiences, it is even wiser to learn from those of others. (p. 164)

Indeed, the examples from France and the United Kingdom provide ground-level lessons for specific Promise Neighborhood sites and raise foundational questions about the efficacy of ABIs as federal policy. Ultimately, we conclude that, while the ecological design of ABIs offers great promise to both middle level school and wider school-community education reform agendas across the United States, we should not necessarily anticipate an array of new HCZs.

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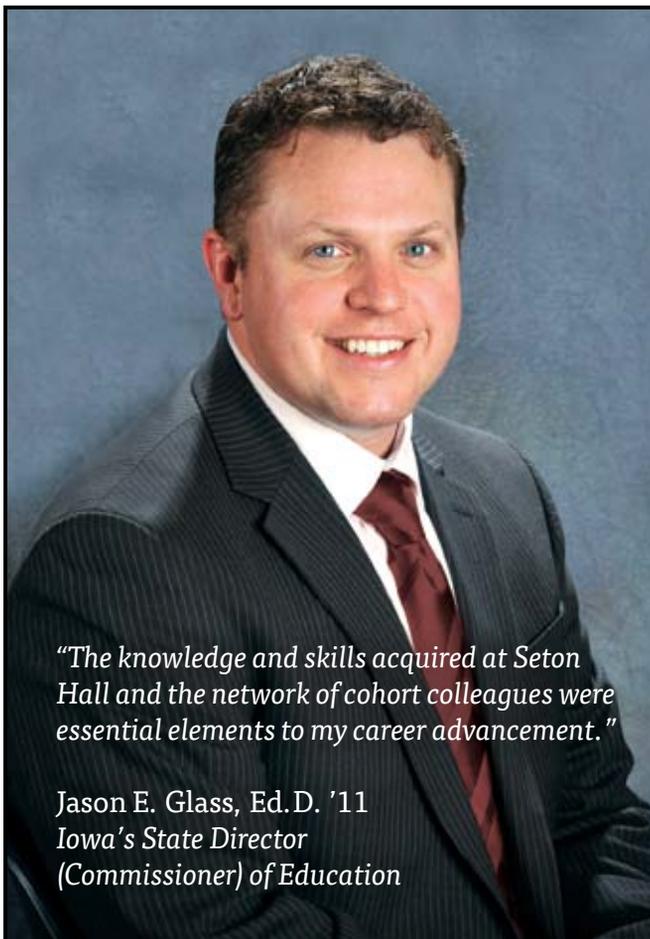
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