

Evaluation Brief

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Improving Student Performance: The Role of District-Level Staff

The Evaluation Section, Division of Accountability Services has been analyzing 1998 and 1999 End-of-Grade Test data in order to identify high poverty and/or high minority schools making noticeable achievement gains. High poverty/high minority schools were identified where minority students are performing at a high level, have made large gains over several years, or where the black-white achievement gap had been reduced. While a number of individual schools were identified in these analyses, of particular interest were districts where clusters of schools fell into one or more of these categories. This finding piqued our interest in what was happening at the district level, leading to the identification of high achievement gain or high black-white gap reduction *districts* with large percentages of poor and minority students. Subsequent analyses examined districts where *both* white and black students have made the highest gains in the state, regardless of percent of poor and minority students in the district. Phone interviews and/or visits were made to several of these districts and schools. Recent studies of high poverty schools and districts in the state of Texas confirm our findings of the district influence on school performance (Ragland, et. al., 1999). Similarly, research on what it takes to implement and sustain comprehensive school reform reinforces the role of the district and external expertise.

The potential roles and strategies for direction and support of schools from the district level highlighted in this *Brief* are drawn from interviews and/or visits to North Carolina districts or schools and are confirmed by other research. At the same time, work with low performing schools by the State's Assistance Teams and the School Improvement Division has shown that these same practices typically are *not* in place for low performing schools and their districts. The selected examples noted on the inset page are by no means all-inclusive, and are typical of many other districts in North Carolina making good progress

Overarching District Leadership

A Compelling Need to Change. The organizational development literature emphasizes the important role of leadership in presenting compelling reasons why change is needed. The ABCs Accountability Model as such constructs a statewide compelling need to change. However, the manner in which this need is communicated and supported at the local level is up to district and school leadership. District leadership can positively frame and maintain a focus on the need for school reform, provide the data necessary to highlight areas in need of attention,

and provide the training and resources necessary to understand and implement the strategies for change.

A Common, Sustained Vision. A coherent vision of school improvement is maintained for the entire district over time. Guiding principles, such as Total Quality or a compelling belief in the ability of all students to achieve at high levels are clearly held by the central office staff, starting with the superintendent. Even when leaders change, the vision and commitment remain steady. The vision does not preclude individual school efforts, but unites all schools and staff in a common direction.

Visible Leaders. Part of leadership is to be visible. Central office staff in these districts, including superintendents, are in the schools each week. They learn about the issues schools face, work with them on various programs, observe, and provide feedback.

High Expectations. It is axiomatic to say that high expectations are important to student learning across all subgroups. Yet, this belief must be lived and implemented from the central office to the classroom. In the districts and schools we visited, the expectation that all students can learn to high levels plays out in content standards and instructional strategies, as well as through equity of opportunity for all students. Equity means high quality instruction for all students, as well as quick and effective intervention or acceleration when needed.

Ownership and Community. While it is likely more difficult for districts that are both geographically large and have a very diverse student enrollment to engender a sense of community, the districts we visited typically see their students as “our” students. They are determined to demonstrate that all students can learn to high levels. There is a sense of personal accountability for their students and a belief that *everyone* has a part to play. No one is “off the hook.” Thus, while a sense of community and expectations of high performance are ultimately conveyed by the teacher and the school, the district supports those expectations by creating a sense of community for the schools and being part of the team. This sense of partnership often includes parents, students, and community/business groups.

Specific Practices Observed

Within the broader context of district leadership and vision, several practices and emphases were found for districts where clusters of schools are doing very well. It should be noted that these factors are related and often overlap.

Focused and Strategic Planning. Districts can provide the context for focused planning, starting with diagnosis of needs and strengths. Using strategies such as curriculum audits, Total Quality planning or vision-driven strategic planning, districts can begin to eliminate fragmented approaches to school improvement and begin the process of aligning teaching and learning. District goals and plans provide a framework for school improvement plans, which in turn are carried to the department and the classroom level. Plans are “living documents” as opposed to static ones that sit on a shelf, and are continuously refined.

Aligned and Pervasive Academic Focus. This practice might be described as district direction, with school and classroom implementation. The “written, taught, and tested” curricula

are consistent. The academic basics of reading, writing, and mathematics are emphasized, without abandoning attention to science, social studies and the arts. The district promotes content and instructional alignment based on the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCS) by providing district-wide pacing guides by content area and/or course (often collaboratively developed by teachers). Other subjects may be addressed by developing integrated lessons that can be shared among teachers. In many instances, districts provide diagnostic assessments every six or nine weeks based on content standards and instructional pacing guides. District pacing guides and periodic assessments ensure that all teachers cover the NCSCS and are working on the same goals and objectives at about the same time throughout the district. They also provide timely information on areas or student groups that may need extra attention.

Use of Assessment Information. Frequent and diagnostic use of assessment data (state and local assessments) is critical and is used to create a sense of urgency as well as to direct planning and instruction. Using item banks to develop district-level diagnostic tests contributes to alignment and pacing of instruction; it also allows teachers to develop their own diagnostic classroom assessments. Assessments are not limited to multiple choice tests. Disaggregation of data across various subgroups and levels of achievement is clearly evident. While district assessments frequently are multiple choice in nature, numerous districts also provide professional development and staff collaboration to develop portfolios of student work. Such portfolios can be used to show evidence of student achievement and progress over time. [Note. Discussions among teachers about what constitutes quality work are an important aspect of assessment that enhances instruction and consistency across classrooms. See *Evaluation Brief*, Volume 2, No. 1 for elaboration of the importance of student work and standards of quality.]

An Empirical Basis for Practice. Instruction that follows research-based practices is most likely to yield powerful results. Districts can provide this type of research information, as school leaders and classroom teachers rarely have time to do such exploration. Some practices are applicable regardless of the particular student population; others may prove especially relevant for a given type of student. Practices promoted by a district are consistent with the vision and direction of the school and district. One district worked with an outside consultant to develop its research base of good practices. Then they ensured that long-term professional development reinforced understanding and use of these practices.

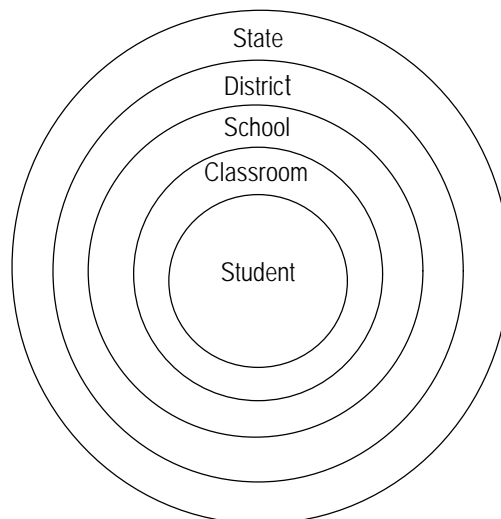
Coherent and Consistent Professional Development. One of the most important roles of the central office is to provide the opportunity for focused and sustained professional development consistent with the district's overall vision of learning, the NCSCS, and the type of instructional strategies desired. Professional development is based on long-term goals, builds school and district capacity, focuses on content and instruction, is based on research-based practice, and is aligned with the overall direction and initiatives in the school and district. While individual schools may have their own professional development to implement specific approaches they have chosen, districts making significant progress for students, especially among poor students, provide leadership in supporting professional development consistent with the district vision and goals.

The District Staff as a Service Organization. One of the most striking observations from our district visits/interviews is that central office personnel in some of these districts see themselves as a “technical assistance team” to the schools. They are present in the schools; they problem-solve with schools; they identify research and resources for schools; they help schools use time creatively to allow for collaborative planning among teachers; and they observe in classrooms and give formative (*not* performance appraisal) feedback to principals. In one case, central office assistance team members serve as coaches to teachers when needed.

Flexible and Creative Use of Funding. Schools can leverage resources best when the central office provides leadership and flexibility for use of funds and personnel. For example, one district has given schools explicit permission to order supplementary materials with textbook money, recognizing that many other resources are available to teach the content goals and objectives. Collaborative planning among schools and the district for use of categorical funds and personnel may lead to more efficient use of and greater impact from these resources.

Summary

Student and school performance are most likely to be enhanced if *true* systemic reform occurs. Everyone - every component of the education system - has a role to play, each supporting the other in maximizing student learning. While schools are the key unit of change, support of individual teachers in their efforts to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms is critical – the place where students are most directly touched. Similarly, central office staff can provide direction and support for schools in the district as they choose their unique approaches to school improvement. School boards can support their superintendent and district staff. State level policy and technical assistance plays a role in supporting both district and school-level reform efforts for statewide coherence and sustained school improvement. All of these components need to be aligned and moving in the same direction.



A Brief Glimpse: Examples of District Roles

The following excerpts are offered as examples of some of the findings from the district level. They are meant to be illustrative. Other LEAs may be doing some of these same or different activities. These districts are also doing more than can be captured here.

Halifax County: A Case in Point

Halifax County has the highest gain (1993 to 1999) in the state in grade-level proficiency for black students in both reading (28.2% increase) and mathematics (42.2% increase). Some elements of their success include:

- Strategic planning - began with a curriculum audit that found curriculum and instructional approaches to be fragmented. Committees worked for a year to identify what was important to teach and measure in reading, writing, and mathematics. The district has developed a comprehensive strategic plan. School teams generate priorities for their school improvement plans that are based on analysis of state testing data and are consistent with the district plan and goals. School teams take these priorities down to the department and class level. Planning is done in teams and is continually refined.
- District-wide pacing guides based on NCSCS. Six-week tests are created in the summer using test-item banks; teachers use these item banks as well. Item analysis of 6-week tests is sent to schools along with strategy books. Strategy books include integrated, thematic units developed by grade-level teams over time.
- Extensive analysis of assessment data, both state and local. Examination of performance by Achievement Levels, by goals, by percent correct, etc. is conducted to assess progress and to target students for early intervention and remediation.
- Sustained focus on academics and instruction. Although schools are permitted to choose how they reach their goals, some aspects of instruction are promoted district-wide. Training has included integrated, thematic instruction units as well as multiple intelligences and higher levels of thinking. Central office staff “monitor” instruction when they visit classrooms, using a rating instrument that includes content, processes, and context for instruction.
- Central office as service organization. They see themselves as a resource to schools. They monitor classroom instruction using a standard rating form that includes diverse instructional strategies emphasized by research and district priorities. Feedback is given to the principals. The central office team meets regularly to talk about what they have seen in the respective schools. An Assistance Team of former teachers and principals is available to schools when they need help with curriculum and instruction, coaching, or other types of assistance.
- A revamped budget process. Schools decide how to spend textbook funds (may choose to order supplementary materials). A budget component of the school improvement plan will now require more direct linkage between funding and identified school strategies.
- An involved, visible superintendent. The superintendent visits schools regularly. He adopts 3 classrooms each year, talking to the students each month, and taking them on field trips. A recent district-wide student survey showed that all students knew who he was.

In summary, Halifax county has created a sense of ownership and community, holds everyone accountable for student achievement, and implements strategies that reflect the belief that all of their students can learn to high levels

Wilson County: Everyone Is Accountable

In an effort to convey that all parties are accountable for results, Wilson County has an Accountability Agreement that the student, parent, and teacher sign. This agreement spells out the expectations of each party and the role of each in overall student performance in school.

Craven County: "Quality" Principles

Craven County has worked with Total Quality principles since 1993. Their LEA growth shows consistent and sustained growth since 1993, unlike some LEAs that have made most of their growth since the ABCs Accountability Program was started.

They have focused on comprehensive alignment and extensive use of data to make decisions. There has been some LEA staff development across schools, with other staff development selected by individual schools to reflect their own strategies and approaches.

Chapel Hill/Carrboro City Schools: Selected Aspects of a District Focus

In 1999 CHCCS was among 6 districts where the black-white achievement gap reduction exceeded the statewide gap reduction by at least one-half a standard deviation. They began a targeted focus on minority student achievement in 1992 with a Blue Ribbon Task Force. Community and business leaders and parents have been part of their efforts throughout. A district-level focus is credited with creating culture that says this issue is a priority and with providing targeted financial and personnel resources. Selected elements in this multi-faceted effort over time have included:

- Development of student proficiency and promotion standards at grades 5 and 8 in 1993-94; standards effective 1998-99.
- A 4-year implementation plan, with ongoing and extensive professional development and curriculum alignment.
- Starting the first year, personalized education plans required for all non-proficient students at every grade level.
- Proficiency portfolios established in grades 5 & 8 – include state assessments and authentic performance tasks. A district committee reviews portfolios. Some schools elect to have such portfolios at all grade levels.
- Summer school required for all non-proficient students. Summer school is decentralized and taught at each school; thus teachers know students well.
- Grade 5 & 8 students not proficient after summer school are retained and placed in Prep Academies (starting 1999-2000). Numbers were lower than expected, likely due to ongoing intervention efforts.

The district is continuing to learn and revise as they learn. Considerable local resources have been devoted to these important efforts, along with state resources. They are now part of a national Minority Student Achievement Network that helps the district to maintain the focus.

Kings Mountain City: Growing All Students

Kings Mountain is among the top gaining districts for all students in both reading and mathematics since 1993. They are among 12 districts that exceed the state mean gain since 1993 for black students in both reading and mathematics by a half standard deviation.

With the beginning of the state accountability program, KM began to pay close attention to the status of achievement for all students. Growing all children continues to be the top priority of the superintendent and board. The superintendent meets with principal to discuss individual and school growth and to share his plans to address needs of all students. The testing coordinator share disaggregated data for schools to use in the planning process. School improvement plans *must* speak to subgroups of students.

Other selected district features include:

- Optional (most teachers use) district-level pacing guides at every grade level. These guides reflect an integrated curriculum in K-5, using a reading foundation to teach science, health, and social studies.
- A revamped gifted program at 2 levels: pullout students and students on the "cusp." Both approaches include higher expectations for gifted students.
- District-wide instructional strategies include: Training in "Thinking Maps," which are used to teach all subjects; intentional time to teach (e.g., 2-hour blocks to teach English language arts and 1 hour for mathematics); schools design interventions and teachers do their own remediation at middle and some elementary schools; new preschool classes in collaboration with Smart Start; and specific instructional programs (e.g., Saxon Math, CORE, Saxon Phonics).