Six districts, one goal of excellence

Study of successful low-income districts shows that scores can move up, but raises questions about sacrifices.
Educators often say change really occurs at the school level. If this is true, it will be a very long time before all schools in all districts across the country are achieving at higher levels. At the same time, corporate studies by people such as Tom Peters (1982) show that entire companies have transformed themselves into profitable systems producing uniformly high-quality goods and services.

If we could learn what principles might be applied to a school system that would enable the same kind of gains, superintendents and central office leaders would know where to focus their efforts on behalf of higher student achievement.

That was the reason for the School District Effectiveness Study (SDES), released in May 2001 by the Educational Research Service (ERS).

The study set out to identify a limited number of key factors leading to higher achievement levels in districts where all or most schools had made substantial gains in student achievement during the past five years. The districts chosen serve significant numbers of children from low-income families, a characteristic typically equated with the most serious achievement deficits in America’s public schools.

Chief state school officers and state education agency assessment staff, regional educational laboratories, state level administrator organizations, and other groups nominated districts, and districts also were identified through a literature search. Altogether, ERS examined about 80 districts. Four were selected for two-day visits, and two urban districts were also included for their progress although they did not fully meet the criteria.

**GOOD AND BAD NEWS**

The study showed that for districts to develop a system of schools in which each performs at a high level requires a districtwide restructuring. The six districts each examined and restructured all parts of their systems to afford the focus and incentives needed for significant change. Teachers and administrators needed training at every turn of the restructuring — hunkering down and focusing their teaching on both expected test items and on reteaching skills interim tests showed students did not master.

Changing to a high-performance system brought good and bad news. The teachers and administrators in those districts showed they know how to produce higher test scores — and more importantly, that they are willing to learn new ways of doing things. And the test results are impressive. The bad news is that higher standardized test scores on reading, mathematics, and sometimes writing aren’t a sufficient expression of how well students learned what they need to know. And educators are largely silent on the effects of this insufficiency on the balanced curriculum today’s children so badly need, such as in science, the arts, social studies, and health, areas which don’t necessarily show up on standardized measures.

**THE SIX DISTRICTS**

The districts selected for the study showed noticeable improvements:

- **Ysleta Independent School District, El Paso, Texas**
  
  In 1993, all 49 schools in the district were in the state’s two lowest categories based on the number of students passing Texas’s standardized tests in reading, writing, and mathematics. Currently, 43 of 52 schools are “recognized” or “exemplary.” And the achievement gap in the pass rate between whites and minority or disadvantaged students has been sharply reduced.

- **Barbour County School District, Phillippi, W.Va.**
  
  In 1997, 3rd graders scored at the 47th percentile on the SAT9 in total basic skills (reading, mathematics, and English). By 2000, they were at the 65th percentile. On the average overall, student achievement has increased about 25% on the state-required SAT9 over three years after districtwide reforms.

- **Twin Falls School District #411, Twin Falls, Idaho**
  
  Between 1995 and 1999, the district has recorded gains on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills of 16.4% in reading, 22.2% in language, and 32.6% in mathematics, where most of its instructional work was originally focused. Yet these gains have

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**Gordon Cavelti** is a senior research associate at the Educational Research Service. You can contact him at 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201, (703) 248-6253, fax (703) 243-8410, e-mail: gcavelti@ers.org.
Ysleta Independent School District
El Paso, Texas

Enrollment: 46,000 in 58 schools
Staff: 3,200
Racial/ethnic mix:
- White: 14%
- Black: 3%
- Hispanic: 82%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 0%
- Native American: 0%
- Other: 1%
Limited English proficient: 25%
Languages spoken: English, Chinese
Free/reduced lunch: 75%
Special education: 10%
Contact: Larry Trejo, communications director
9600 Sims
El Paso, TX 79925
Phone: (915) 434-0000
Fax: (915) 435-9561
E-mail: ltrejo@ysleta.isd.tenet.edu

Barbour County School District
Philippi, W.Va.

A largely rural district with most students coming from smaller communities throughout the county.
Enrollment: 2,700 in 10 schools
Staff: 222 teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:
- White: 98.3%
- Black: 0.4%
- Hispanic: 0.3%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.5%
- Native American: 0.5%
- Other: 0%
Limited English proficient: 0.1%
Languages spoken: English, Chinese
Free/reduced lunch: 60%
Special education: 19%
Contact: John H. Hager, superintendent
105 S. Railroad St.
Philippi, WV 26416
Phone: (304) 457-3030
Fax: (304) 457-3559
E-mail: johnhager@aol.com

Brazosport Independent School District
Clute, Texas

In 1991-92, only about one-half to two-thirds of minority or economically disadvantaged students passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Success tests in reading, mathematics, and writing, compared with about 80% of the white students. Today, the pass rates for all groups of students range from 92% to 98% in all three subjects.

Sacramento Unified School District, Sacramento, Calif., and
Houston Independent School District, Houston, Texas

After several years of concentrating on the tests, these large, urban systems have shown noteworthy gains. Significantly, more schools are in the higher achievement categories the districts set, but many schools still score in the lower ranges because of the enormous task of dealing with large bureaucracies. Both are making progress, but clearly require more time to get all schools up to significant levels of achievement.

A Change in Focus

As you’d expect, each district has a particular culture and set of traditions to face in the midst of its changes.

The Ysleta district is a remarkable story of a leader who helps educators develop a set of shared beliefs about high expectations that did not exist before he arrived. In a unique program, parents are required to attend summer school to qualify their children for the free program. The parents’ participation symbolizes to their children that even adults need to continue learning.

The Twin Falls program, called “50-in-a-Minute,” is a local invention designed to ensure that students practice math or reading skills until they retain the skills. Teachers use a page of mathematics problems or reading skills tests to practice occurred without much funding: The district ranks 100th out of 112 Idaho districts in per-pupil expenditures and also has a sizable migratory and low-income population.

Twin Falls, Idaho

Many migratory farm workers and families emigrating from other countries send students to school. The districts ranks 100th out of 112 Idaho districts in per pupil expenditures, and thus has accomplished its gains without favorable funding.

Enrollment: 6,721 students in 12 schools, plus preschool and juvenile detention program
Staff: 400 teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:
- White: 86.9%
- Black: 0.3%
- Hispanic: 10.8%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 1.5%
- Native American: 0.4%
- Other: 0%
Limited English proficient: 0.1%
Languages spoken: 19 to 26, varies daily depending on refugee center
Free/reduced lunch: 41%
Special education: 10%
Contact: Terrell Donicht, superintendent
201 Main Ave. W
Twin Falls, ID 83301
Phone: (208) 733-6900
Fax: (208) 733-6987
E-mail: donichtte@tsd.k12.id.us

Brazosport Independent School District
Clute, Texas

The district comprises several small communities west of Galveston on the gulf coast of Texas.
Enrollment: 13,175 in 19 schools
Staff: 793 teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:
- White: 55%
- Black: 9%
- Hispanic: 34%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 0%
- Native American: 0%
- Other: 2%
Limited English proficient: 8.1%
Languages spoken: English, Spanish
Free/reduced lunch: 39%
Special education: 14.4%
Contact: Becky Rinehart, Coordinator of Assessment
301 W. Brazoswood Drive
Clute, TX 77531
Phone: (979) 265-6181 ext. 143
Fax: (979) 266-2466
E-mail: rrinehart@brazosport.isd.tenet.edu
skills with students on a timed basis to be sure they retain the skill. The frequent practice appears to be one important change that has led to substantial improvement.

The Brazosport “Eight-Step Instructional Process” grew out of simply analyzing the teaching strategies of a few teachers who initially were getting good results in their classrooms. These teachers carefully analyzed their new students’ test results from the prior year to determine the students’ needs, then set up a schedule of the skills that needed to be taught by test time. They used interim assessments to judge students’ progress and decide if the student had mastered the skill and now needed enrichment, or had not and needed tutoring.

Barbour County’s early focus on aligning the curriculum with state standards was essential to the district’s transformation. The state education agency helped the district analyze test results and review the curriculum for alignment with state standards. The county also adopted supplemental reading and mathematics programs to help boost achievement.

Houston changed its policy to focus on results rather than staying with tenured principals, and today the district gives parents funds to attend other schools if they are dissatisfied with their child’s assigned school. The district also provided extensive staff development in reading and mathematics to help teachers improve teaching in these areas. In this district, the school board was a significant force in undertaking the restructuring needed to improve productivity.

Sacramento is working to fundamentally transform the way a large system operates to provide instruction by continually honing in on key system features and seven vital signs which are their agreed-upon indicators of progress. These include readiness tests for kindergarten, a 95% attendance goal, proficiency levels on reading and mathematics tests, and helping graduating seniors with what they call “productive life-choice options” such as additional data and information for other districts is available from the Educational Research Service report High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems (2001).
as college attendance or employment. The district has focused on setting high standards, providing quality instruction and staff development, setting up site-based management and budgeting, and encouraging parental participation.

**HIGH-PERFORMANCE TRAITS**

There are also common elements that describe what each district has done to transform itself into a high-performing system. Leaders who want to turn around a mediocre system of average or low achievement may find these elements useful in developing a strategy for change and a plan for the extensive staff development such transformation entails.

**Districts have to go beyond the rhetoric of “all students can learn” by developing programs, policies, and teaching strategies that lead to higher levels of achievement.**

Each district spent and was still spending time articulating a set of shared beliefs about learning and how the school system should operate, and a vision of the future. If the superintendent is content to make assumptions about this, transformation is doomed. The people in the system must begin to think differently about learning and the children they teach. The superintendent and other leaders must allow staff development time for staff to discover shared beliefs about learning, agree on standards, and determine indicators of progress on which to judge work.

**The district must decentralize management, including budgeting, to the building level, link individuals to results, and establish teams to monitor performance data and plan for improvements.**

Staff development was needed at every turn to accomplish these changes. Principals and central office leaders had to work out where responsibilities reside. The districts in this study had decentralized to various degrees. Decentralization is needed for greater accountability. Each principal and his or her staff was being held accountable for results. Principals had to learn how to identify teacher needs at the building level. They were given help to deliver staff development at either the building or district level. Some used their own building funds, and others helped teachers attend district training events. Staff development focused both
on planning changes needed to improve achievement, and on other topics such as working together or using student achievement data. The central office people in most districts set achievement level goals and encouraged teachers and principals to believe they had decision-making authority on using school funds. Central office leaders and teachers must work out a management information system that swiftly retrieves performance data and provides it to schools and teachers.

The district must provide staff development time to analyze whether local and state curricula and assessments are aligned.

Staff development time is needed to ensure that the intended, taught, and tested curricula are in sync. Leaders in these districts called on state education agency staff to help establish a timeline for the knowledge and skills to be taught throughout the year. The common approach was to compare the state framework and local textbooks or other instructional materials. But some districts also learned that analyzing student test responses item by item, data the testing agency frequently provides, was a swift way to determine if curriculum standards were being taught.

The district must be sure teachers routinely are able to 1) assess skills before introducing new material; 2) differentiate instruction for students at different levels, providing both enrichment and tutorial help; 3) reinforce learned skills throughout the year to ensure retention.

Brazosport uses its “Eight-Step Instructional Process” and Twin Falls has its “50-in-a-Minute” representing these instructional practices. Each district had moved in this direction, as advocated for years by many instructional leaders. Yet many teachers need training to incorporate these strategies into daily instructional activities. Principals were responsible for monitoring classes to ensure implementation.

Districts must be committed to research-based planning for improvement. In these districts, principals and their teachers take quite seriously their responsibility to plan improvement for the following year. In Twin Falls, for example, a district-wide leadership council made decisions on the strategies school teams would be encouraged to use. To do this, decision makers must be trained in what credible research says about the efficacy of such practices as pupil retention, Success for All, use of analogies in teaching, direct instruction, or whatever method is being considered. The primary source of such information tends to be professional journals, but there was also some evidence of help from regional labs and state education agencies. And whatever their choices, the districts’ experiences affirm that substantial improvements take time and schools suffer if they place their hopes on one or two minor changes in the system.

**TEST SCORES CAN INDEED BE RAISED**

These districts show it is possible to substantially improve test scores in all or most of their schools even when serving large numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

The downside is that the pressure of state assessments, which currently are limited mostly to reading, mathematics, and writing, are creating an instructional emphasis in these districts that leads to curtailing science, the arts, social studies, and health, and to less attention to the larger purpose of schooling and unmeasurables like civic virtue, thinking skills, and creativity. Some teachers feel overwhelmed by added programs and say students are less motivated because too much time is spent preparing for tests.

Clearly these districts will make adjustments for what is not in students’ best interests. The bright side is teachers are learning how to deliver on the great American dream parents have for their students and allowing all students to achieve regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

**REFERENCES**


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**SACRAMENTO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Sacramento, Calif.

Enrollment: 52,157

Staff: 3,036 teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

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Limited English proficient: 29%

Languages spoken: 54

Free/reduced lunch: 60%

Special education: 10.1%

Contact: Maria Lopez,
communications office
520 Capitol Mall
Sacramento, CA 95814
Phone: (916) 264-4440
Fax: (916) 264-4013
E-mail: marialo@sac-city.k12.ca.us

**HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Houston, Texas

Enrollment: 210,000

Staff: 11,700 teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

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Limited English proficient: 26.5%

Languages spoken: 60-plus

Free/reduced lunch: 75.4%

Special education: 10.4%

Contact: Rosalind Young,
chief of staff
3830 Richmond Ave.
Houston, TX 77027
Phone: (713) 892-6300
Fax: (713) 892-6763
E-mail: ryounghoustonisd.org