

# THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

## *Shared assessments open a* **WINDOW INTO THE CLASSROOM**

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**W**hen her father fell ill several years ago, Barbara Nakaoka watched a team of five doctors put their heads together to solve a plethora of problems by sharing their expertise.

“They were relying on real-time data. Whether by phone or in person, they were collaborating to figure out what was happening,” said Nakaoka.

“That was eye-opening for me. I saw that and I thought that this is what needs to happen for every single kid in our district,” she said.

As superintendent of the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, Nakaoka has tried to create that environment in her southern California school district. Initially as the district’s chief academic

officer and now as superintendent, Nakaoka crafted a plan for improvement characterized by a sharp focus on standards, creating and implementing common assessments, analyzing the data from those assessments, and determining what steps are necessary to fill the gaps in learning. Wrapped around all of that is work on developing principals and teachers into strong leaders and ensuring that teachers are collaborating with colleagues to make instructional decisions.

“We had hard-working schools prior to 1999, but they were not standards-based. We started the work on focusing on teaching and

learning and being results-oriented. Those are key elements in our schools now,” she said.

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**Unleash the problem-solving potential of educators by creating conditions that expect and support educators to collaborate and learn together.**

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## Create conditions for collaboration, learning with colleagues

**A**mong the many challenges facing public schools, educators' lack of self-efficacy receives the least attention. In spite of their education and experience, many educators lack confidence they can solve their schools' problems. They cite circumstances they do not control – lack of family support, decline of moral standards, a media saturated culture, school system bureaucracy – but they often fail to address school-based issues over which they *do* have control. The good and bad of most schools is due to good and bad decisions educators make, or productive and unproductive actions they take.

The National Staff Development Council takes a more hopeful approach, as expressed in one of its belief statements: “*Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.*” The statement does not limit the problems capable of solution to those that are simple or those that relate only to professional development. Instead, it refers to “*schools’ most complex problems.*”

As is true of many of NSDC's beliefs, this one goes against the grain of conventional wisdom. This belief does not assume that the central office, state department of education, state legislature, or federal government should or can solve local schools' problems. These interlocking layers of the public education system often act in ways that aggravate or ameliorate schools' challenges, but critics greatly exaggerate the control these entities have on day-to-day events within schools.

For educators to make the transition from problem-shifters to problem-solvers, school systems must take the lead. School boards and superintendents can begin by communicating their expectation that solving schools' problems is not solely the principal's job, but rather the responsibility of all educators in a school. One element of that responsibility is taking the

initiative to solve problems, rather than waiting for others to do so. School systems will want to recognize and reward instances where educators' collaboration and initiative leads to successfully solving a significant school problem.

At the same time, school systems will need to reflect on actions that have discouraged educators' problem-solving initiative. Has central office transferred a principal who solved problems by acting “outside the box”? Is there a school culture that isolates teachers who take extraordinary, but successful, actions to address students' learning problems? So long as such actions persist, educators will conclude there is more risk than reward in seeking to solve a school's problems.

The most effective antidote to educators' passivity is to foster each school's development of learning teams that engage all the school's professionals. With effective support and facilitation, these teams have potential to begin taking responsibility for identifying and solving their schools' “*most complex problems.*” Teams may be surprised to find the essence of a solution in the idiosyncratic practice of one of their own school's educators. Assuming the problem is pervasive, one or more educators are likely to have relatively greater success in addressing it than their peers. A learning team can search out and build on such a practice that can provide a pathway towards solving the problem.

Over many decades, public schools have evolved into cultures in which educators teach and learn while minimally engaged with their colleagues. This has denied them the valuable experience and intellectual resources of their peers, and the cost has been high. Now is the time for school systems to unleash the problem-solving potential of educators by creating conditions that expect and support educators to collaborate and learn together.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

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## What do you expect?

**A**n essential role for central office staff related to the Equity standard is to **communicate the district's high expectations for each student, teacher, and administrator** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 153.) High expectations means more than setting high goals and rigorous standards of performance; high expectations also means building systems of support so that district personnel have the capacity to attain those high standards. In part, it also means that central office staff believe that when principals and teachers develop the requisite skills and knowledge they will make a difference in the lives of students who have not typically been successful in school.

First, central office staff **create an ongoing system of staff learning to enhance teacher and administrator knowledge of and skills to teach struggling students.** A systemwide approach to improving instruction was one of the actions taken by high-poverty districts that were improving student achievement (Togneri & Anderson, 2003). These districts knew they would have to fundamentally change instructional practice to impact student learning and achievement.

Second, district staff **accept no excuses for a lack of achievement by subgroups of students.** The no-excuses attitude, according to Johnson (1999), means assuming that joint, collegial efforts can result in high levels of student achievement; knowing that there will be barriers but refusing to allow barriers to become excuses; and ensuring that high expectations are held for educators as well as students.

One strategy that can help schools target

learning and close the achievement gap is having central office **assist schools in analyzing disaggregated student learning data to determine the impact of programs on student learning — especially with struggling students.** The system helps schools identify whether their actions have made a difference.

District office staff also **share school data with the whole district in order to identify effective practices.** Assume the existence of *positive deviance*: namely that a search of schools and classrooms will result in identifying teachers and students who are thriving and successful even if the school that surrounds them is not. Once these good examples have been identified, learn what they are doing that makes their results different.

Finally, district office staff **challenge colleagues' underlying assumptions concerning student learning and the role of parents, SES, race, and background.** Central office staff begin by reflecting on their own beliefs and assumptions about what has a stronger influence on learning — external factors, such as SES or race, or high-quality instruction. Then, central office staff no longer accept statements like, *What do you expect? Do you see where these kids live?* They can counter with stories and research about schools and teachers who have beat the odds and accomplished high levels of learning for all students.

Working on equity issues has to be one of the hardest tasks for any district administrator. But, if district level staff begin to ask what educators expect of themselves and their students, they can begin to change the conversation into one that explores possibilities and not one that dwells on barriers.

**Equity:**

Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students; create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments; and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

# ANALYSIS OF PRACTICES AND RESULTS

See this issue's cover story to read about the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District in southern California, which has put a sharp focus on standards, creating and implementing common assessments, analyzing the data from those assessments, and determining what steps are necessary to fill the gaps in learning.

**A**t the beginning of the school year, assemble teachers to explore the results of the most recent statewide assessment. You can use this as a guide for creating an appropriate review sheet that teachers in your district can use to examine these results.

Arrange teachers into grade-level groups. Provide each group with a set of the results from the most recent statewide assessment.

Ask teachers to create a list of their students, ranking them from the highest to the lowest level of performance based on the results of the most recent statewide assessment. Have them create one list for each subject. For example, create one list of student performance on the statewide math assessment and another for the statewide language arts assessment.

They will need this list in order to answer the following questions.

Plan to provide teachers with several hours to do this work. Ensure that you build in adequate discussion time following each section so teachers are able to talk with colleagues about what they learn when they study the data and how they plan to respond to what they have learned.

**Examine the previous year's statewide assessment results for your grade level.** \_\_\_\_\_

How many students in your grade level achieved at the Proficient or Advanced level of the statewide assessment?

**Language arts** \_\_\_\_\_ **Math** \_\_\_\_\_

How many of your students achieved at the Proficient or Advanced level of the statewide assessment?

**Language arts** \_\_\_\_\_ **Math** \_\_\_\_\_

Of those students, how many were:

**Language arts**

Male \_\_\_\_\_  
 Female \_\_\_\_\_  
 English language learners \_\_\_\_\_  
 Special education \_\_\_\_\_  
 Black \_\_\_\_\_  
 White \_\_\_\_\_  
 Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_  
 Asian-American \_\_\_\_\_  
 Native American \_\_\_\_\_  
 Free or reduced-price lunch \_\_\_\_\_

**Math**

Male \_\_\_\_\_  
 Female \_\_\_\_\_  
 English language learners \_\_\_\_\_  
 Special education \_\_\_\_\_  
 Black \_\_\_\_\_  
 White \_\_\_\_\_  
 Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_  
 Asian-American \_\_\_\_\_  
 Native American \_\_\_\_\_  
 Free or reduced-price lunch \_\_\_\_\_

What trends do you see in your grade-level results?

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

In language arts, which area was the strongest for your students? \_\_\_\_\_

What percentage of your students achieved Proficient or Advanced in this area? \_\_\_\_\_

In math, which area was the strongest for your students? \_\_\_\_\_

What percentage of your students achieved Proficient or Advanced in this area? \_\_\_\_\_

In language arts, which area was the weakest for your students? \_\_\_\_\_

What percentage of your students achieved Below Basic or Far Below Basic in this area? \_\_\_\_\_

In math, which area was the weakest for your students? \_\_\_\_\_

What percentage of your students achieved Below Basic or Far Below Basic in this area? \_\_\_\_\_

**Use what you learned from examining the previous year's statewide assessment results for your grade level so you can plan more effectively for the coming school year.** \_\_\_\_\_

Name the students in your class who will move out of Below Basic or Far Below Basic this year.

**Language arts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Math:** \_\_\_\_\_

Describe how you will change your instruction in order to move these students to higher levels of learning.

**Language arts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Math:** \_\_\_\_\_

Name the students who achieved at the Basic level that you will target to move up to Proficient or Advanced.

**Language arts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Math:** \_\_\_\_\_

Describe how you will change your instruction in order to move these students to higher levels of learning.

**Language arts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Math:** \_\_\_\_\_

Name students who achieved at the Proficient and Advanced levels.

**Language arts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Math:** \_\_\_\_\_

Describe how you will ensure that these students do not drop a level.

**Language arts:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Math:** \_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from  
Bonnie Wilson,  
principal of Baldwin  
Academy, Hacienda  
la Puente Unified  
School District.

## Shared assessments open a window into the classroom

### LEARN MORE ABOUT ASSESSMENTS

► The tool on pages 4-5 demonstrates what a district leader needs to know about helping teachers analyze practices and student learning results.

► See the Winter 2008 *JSD*, which focuses on English language learners.



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Cindy Harrison, an educational consultant who has worked in the district for several years, said Nakaoka “has an academic vision and she provides academic leadership. She pushes but she supports as well. She gives schools a lot of freedom but she also holds them accountable.”

Likewise, union president John Crowther said the culture in the district has shifted quite a bit under Nakaoka’s leadership. “She has really walked the talk. She walks into classrooms and lets teachers know that we’re all in this together. This is not about her, this is all about us and the work that we all have to do together,” he said.

### BEGIN WITH THE STANDARDS

Nakaoka’s work began by ensuring that California’s content standards were the focus of every teacher’s work. In part, she did this by requiring that teachers develop common assessments — initially one per course at the secondary level and one at each grade level in elementary. “It was not smooth at all. We had speed bumps,” she said. “But the (teachers) association and the board of education were really on board with moving in this direction. That helped a great deal.”

Having teachers write assessments together is a very concrete way of getting into the open their often conflicting ideas about how to teach a unit or a lesson. The assessment becomes the tool around which they can have that conversation. Then the results of the assessments offer a window into classroom instruction and start to point the way to effective and less effective practices. The results also can be used to determine what teachers need to learn in order to improve their instruction.

In addition, the district moved to K-5 standards-based report cards because they provided another way to keep teachers and students focused on standards. Instead of receiving a single grade in a subject, students are graded on whether they have mastered each state-identified content standard. That also ensured that teachers kept the standards at the front of their work.

“You have to work on multiple fronts. If I

knew then what I know now, maybe we wouldn’t have had those speed bumps. But those speed bumps actually helped us learn more,” Nakaoka said.

Nakaoka believes that all schools have to be held to the same standard but that each school can determine for itself the best route for achieving that standard. For example, a school serving relatively high-achieving Asian students whose parents enroll them in after-school and Saturday tutoring programs would probably use different language arts strategies than a school serving a large population of non-English speaking Hispanic students. But the standard of proficiency for every student would be the same.

### IMPROVEMENTS AT BALDWIN

Some of the most dramatic changes in Hacienda La Puente have occurred at Baldwin Academy, a K-6 school that has moved up more than 300 points in California’s Academic Performance Index, the state’s measure of student achievement in a school.

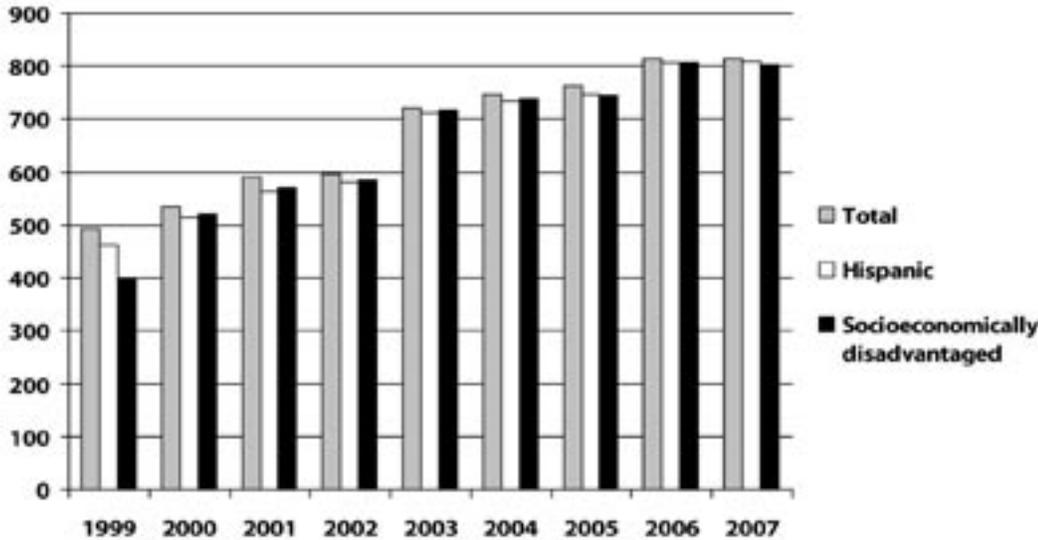
The overwhelmingly Hispanic school has had an API score of more than 800 — the level that is considered proficient in California — for the last two years. More than 80% of Baldwin’s students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches and 46% are English language learners. Baldwin has 816 students and 36 classroom teachers.

“When I came here 15 years ago, Baldwin teachers taught what they wanted to teach because there were no standards in place. Everyone was doing their own thing. The staff was not very cohesive,” Wilson said.

Now, she said standards-based education is present in every classroom. Baldwin teachers do a lot of sharing, visiting each other’s classrooms and looking for opportunities to work together. Teachers use common assessments and share the results of those assessments. Baldwin teachers do not have common time to work together during the workday but they voluntarily work with colleagues during lunch, recesses, and often before or after school. “They’ve become great

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## BALDWIN ACADEMY'S ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE INDEX



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friends,” she said.

“The success in my schools has not been because of me. It’s been because of the teachers,” she said.

“We have put in place a culture that says it’s OK that you don’t have all of the answers. What’s not OK in our culture is not asking for help. Teachers are not afraid to say, ‘I need to watch someone do this or I need to have someone come into my classroom and watch me try this,’” Wilson said.

Part of Baldwin’s success is due to the school’s relentless focus on a few key strategies. For example, when Wilson wanted a high-quality writing program appropriate for her students’ needs, she hired teachers to work during the summer to study various writing options and pick one that was right for Baldwin. For three years, Wilson allocated a portion of the school’s professional development money to bring the same trainer into the school for day-long workshops followed by demonstration lessons and observations.

When other schools began moving in other directions on writing, Baldwin stuck with the approach that was producing results for its students. “We just keep going deeper. We do not go wider. I’ve decided that it probably doesn’t matter as much which strategy you use. But you have to go deeper and deeper into it,” Wilson said.

If a child isn’t successful, it isn’t the child’s fault. It is ours because we haven’t figured out what works for that child yet, Wilson said.

The district has allowed Wilson to muster her resources to support the work that she and her staff believe is necessary for every child’s success.

For example, Baldwin eliminated instructional aides in favor of using those funds to support two school-based coaches — known as Teachers on Special Assignment. These coaches support new teachers, help teachers locate resources, work with small groups of students, and do demonstration lessons.

When 3rd-grade teachers were disappointed in their math results, Wilson found funds to pay them to work an extra hour a week after school for 20 weeks to design new math lessons. During the next round of testing, scores for those students jumped higher than any other group in the school. This year, she’s created the same opportunity for the 4th-grade teachers.

Wilson also hires what she calls “roaming subs” who free teachers to visit other classrooms to observe their colleagues teach.

Wilson said she appreciates the support from the district which makes clear what’s expected of each school. “If you can’t get yourself where you need to be, they will tell you what you need to do. But if you have some success, they just let you keep on moving,” she said. ■

**If a child isn’t successful, it isn’t the child’s fault. It is ours because we haven’t figured out what works for that child yet, Wilson said.**

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*for important 2008 learning deadlines*

**Feb. 1:** Deadline for proposals to present at NSDC's Annual Conference in the Washington, D.C. area, in December 2008 are available now on the web site.

[www.nsd.org/conference08/proposals/](http://www.nsd.org/conference08/proposals/)

**Feb. 18-19:** Leading for Results workshop with NSDC Emeritus Executive Director Dennis Sparks, Phoenix, Ariz.

[www.nsd.org/connect/workshops.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/connect/workshops.cfm)

**Feb. 28:** Deadline for submitting applications to join the next NSDC Academy for Staff Developers.

[www.nsd.org/connect/academy.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/connect/academy.cfm)

**April 30:** Deadline for early bird registration for NSDC Summer Conference for Teacher Leaders and the Administrators Who Support Them.

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