NO RESTING

SUBURBAN CHICAGO CONSORTIUM LEAVES POWERFUL LEGACY

BY PRISCILLA PARDINI

Ten years ago, the superintendents of 19 high-performing suburban Chicago school districts, determined not to rest on their laurels, banded together to form a consortium dedicated to pursuing a world-class education for their students.

Today, although the consortium no longer exists, a number of those superintendents say they're still using much of what they learned from the consortium experience as the impetus for continuous progress they insist is not only possible, but critical for districts already performing at high levels. The key ingredients to their approach: strong motivation to keep improving; high-quality, research-based professional development that focuses on best practices; and leadership that inspires teachers and supports their work

"Never, ever can you sit on your laurels and say you can't do better," says Linda J. Vieth, superintendent of the Northbrook/Glenview, Ill., School District 30, one of the districts that participated in the First in the World Consortium from 1995 to 2002. "You can always take things in a new direction, always stretch a little further. Sometimes, it's a matter of determining who is ready for what skills and addressing that. Or identifying the one child who isn't meeting or exceeding standards. You can always do more."

COMPETING AGAINST THE WORLD

Consortium leaders began their work focusing on math and science, taking steps to find out if students enrolled in high-performing U.S. school districts could compete successfully against the highest-achieving students in the world. They convinced then-U.S. Secretary of

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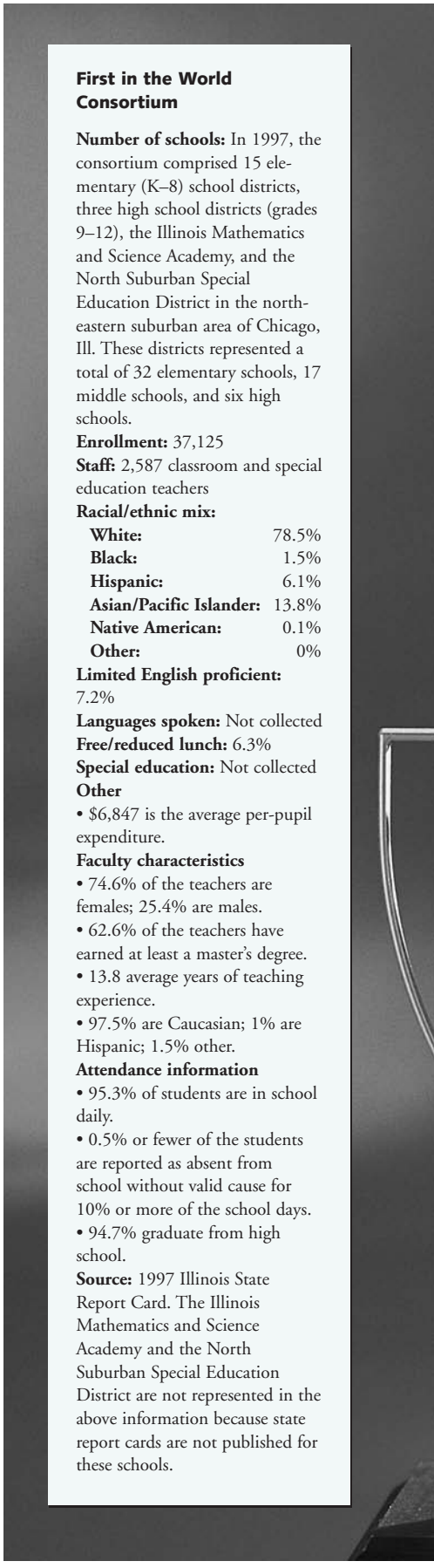

First in the World Consortium

Number of schools: In 1997, the consortium comprised 15 elementary (K–8) school districts, three high school districts (grades 9–12), the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, and the North Suburban Special Education District in the northeastern suburban area of Chicago, Ill. These districts represented a total of 32 elementary schools, 17 middle schools, and six high schools.
Enrollment: 37,125
Staff: 2,587 classroom and special education teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	78.5%
Black:	1.5%
Hispanic:	6.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	13.8%
Native American:	0.1%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 7.2%
Languages spoken: Not collected
Free/reduced lunch: 6.3%
Special education: Not collected
Other
• $6,847 is the average per-pupil expenditure.
Faculty characteristics
• 74.6% of the teachers are females; 25.4% are males.
• 62.6% of the teachers have earned at least a master's degree.
• 13.8 average years of teaching experience.
• 97.5% are Caucasian; 1% are Hispanic; 1.5% other.
Attendance information
• 95.3% of students are in school daily.
• 0.5% or fewer of the students are reported as absent from school without valid cause for 10% or more of the school days.
• 94.7% graduate from high school.
Source: 1997 Illinois State Report Card. The Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy and the North Suburban Special Education District are not represented in the above information because state report cards are not published for these schools.

ON LAURELS

Education Richard W. Riley to allow their students to be assessed as a single group in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 1996 and the TIMSS-R, a repeat of the study, four years later. That meant the consortium students were, for purposes of this test, considered a separate nation. Their achievement was measured against that of students from 41 countries.

Consortium students did well on both tests. In 1996, 8th graders scored higher than every nation except Singapore in science, and higher in math than all but four countries (Singapore, Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong). In 2000, consortium students placed sixth in math and third in science. In both cases, consortium students scored significantly higher than the sample of U.S. students who took the tests.

The consortium districts were used to doing well: Their students consistently scored at the top of the charts on state standardized tests. To be sure, the students were predominantly white and came from upper- and upper-middle-class families. What's more, consortium leaders point out that school spending in their small, mostly K-8 districts was far above average — $8,922 per pupil in 1996 versus a statewide average of $5,922.

High scores on the TIMSS, however, put the achievement of students in the consortium districts in a new — and more meaningful — context. "That kind of mirror," says Arie van der Ploeg, a senior researcher at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) and the agency's lead researcher on the project, "gave [the superintendents] a chance to take a closer look at and begin asking questions about what they were doing. Being told you're good, with room for improvement, is a whole lot more helpful than being told you're the best over and over again."

Paul L. Kimmelman, former superintendent of West Northfield District 31 and the consortium's first

president, says taking the TIMSS assessment as a group was risky. "We had no idea we'd do as well as we did," says Kimmelman, now senior advisor to the CEO and executive director of Learning Point Associates/NCREL. "Japan, Singapore — comparing favorably to them gave us a context in which to do our work." The payoff, he says, came in the form of a wealth of highly reliable data that enabled the consortium districts to make decisions about teaching and learning.

Once van der Ploeg and other NCREL researchers had analyzed reams of that data, consortium members used the information to answer questions raised in the pursuit of various math and science research projects. "The idea was to really learn from the data sets and see where we could improve … to create tools to help school districts analyze the gaps in their own curricula and then make improvements," says David J. Kroeze, superintendent of Northbrook School District 27. "As good as you are now, there's always room for improvement. And what brings us success today is not necessarily what is going to bring us success in the future."

KEY FACTORS IN SUCCESS

To Linda Marks, superintendent of Golf School District 67, the "incredible importance of staff development" may have been the biggest lesson learned from consortium. Once it became clear, for example, that 8th graders in the highest-performing countries were proficient in algebra, "all of us decided to push our curriculum down to better mirror what the high-performing countries were doing," says Marks.

Teachers then worked together to condense the curriculum so students were ready for Algebra I by 8th grade, making sure in the process that all teachers had the skills they needed to succeed under the new model. Marks particularly liked the fact that the teachers worked together across districts. "It was great for them to be able to call upon each other as resources," she says.

One of the tools the consortium developed, Teacher Learning Networks, engaged teachers in determining whether their teaching methods reflected their own beliefs about teaching as well as the newest research on teaching and learning. Other projects compared the breadth and depth of the material being taught in the consortium districts with what was being taught in the top-achieving nations, sought ways to make teaching middle and high school science more cohesive, and focused on reinforcing the relationship between inquiry and problem solving in teaching science and math.

Professional development sessions generally took place at a central site during the school day. Teachers were released from classes, sometimes for full days, with consortium grant money covering the cost of providing substitute teachers to cover classes.

Van der Ploeg says he can't be certain that the work undertaken by the consortium districts was directly responsible for boosting student achievement. "There's no way to prove it, and it's difficult to draw a link," he says.

On the other hand, it's easy to draw a "tight link" between increases in student achievement and a teaching staff that is well-qualified, eager, and enthusiastic, adds van der Ploeg. "And eager teachers retain their enthusiasm because of opportunities like this," he says, referring to the professional development the consortium provided. Particularly effective, says van der Ploeg, were summer workshops at which teachers were given the time and opportunity to work with investigators from NCREL to analyze the TIMSS data and determine what the data revealed.

LEADERSHIP CRITICAL

Kroeze believes the role of the consortium superintendents was critical to the project's effectiveness. In fact, once turnover began to deplete the ranks of the 19 original superintendents, enthusiasm for the effort waned. "The new superintendents told us that while the consortium was worthwhile, they were trying to implement a somewhat different vision. And after we'd heard that seven or eight times, we realized we were at a crossroads." The fact is, adds Kroeze, "without that leadership piece, you're dead."

But Kroeze also is convinced that much of the work the consortium undertook has had a lasting effect, including a commitment to and means of achieving continuous improvement. "If it weren't for the consortium," he says, "we wouldn't be where we are today. Without these tools, we never would have gotten here."

He notes that although the consortium disbanded, its work lives on in the districts, largely because of the support of their current superintendents. For example, several consortium districts have adopted the Exemplars Math Program, a move that grew out of the Teacher Learning Networks. According to the Exemplars web site, the program calls on students to find solutions to sets of performance assessment tasks designed to meet national standards. In professional development workshops and institutes during the school year and over the summer, the focus is on using rubrics to assess student work, using results, and managing the standards-based classroom.

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Vieth says one group of teachers

in her district opted to try Exemplars after researching new ways to teach math. "The problems are messy and don't have quick, easy solutions," says Vieth, who was an assistant superintendent and principal in another of the consortium's member districts during the late 1990s and wrote her doctoral dissertation on its work. "The students need to construct charts, draw pictures, and come up with a plan that usually involves various operations in order to solve them."

These days, Vieth's district also is using a staff development model that she says was influenced by the consortium's work. The model, known as the Technology Immersion Program, calls for small groups of teachers to meet together for a half-day a month for four years to pursue projects and study focused topics related to using technology in the classroom. Specifically, it seeks to help teachers find ways to infuse technology into the curriculum and to improve their instruction.

Vieth says the program's value can be traced to the fact that it is sustained and zeroes in on teachers' classroom practice. It also is teacher-led, with the district's technology coordinator (who comes from the teaching ranks) or individual teachers in charge. The sessions, which typically are workshops and seminars, focus on topics such as how to engage students in their own learning, developing appropriate learning environments, and effectively using technology in the classroom. Vieth says the topics often grow out of individual teachers' research.

CONTINUOUS GROWTH

While Vieth agrees with van der Ploeg that it's difficult to gauge the direct effect of these efforts on student achievement, she notes that her district's test scores on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test have climbed. In 1999, the first year the test was administered, 49% of 3rd graders exceeded state standards in math, compared with 71% in 2005. Eighth graders also made big gains, with 25% exceeding standards in 1999 and 54% exceeding standards in 2005.

Scores also are higher in Kroeze's district. In 1995, 88% of students performed at or above the national mean on the Terra Nova achievement test, compared with 94% in 2004. Even more gratifying was the jump in the percentage of students scoring in the top quartile: from 61% in 1995 to 72% in 2004. "To me, moving more kids into the top quartile is a big deal," says Kroeze. "The fact is, the ceiling is right there; the room for growth is not that great."

Kroeze traces the improvement, in part, to a curriculum-mapping project undertaken through the consortium in conjunction with Michigan State University. The project compared the district's math curriculum with those of the highest-achieving countries in the world. After analyzing the differences, both the curriculum and teachers' lesson plans were adjusted to more closely match what was happening in places such as Hong Kong and Japan. "Our scores jumped and have held," Kroeze says.

More recently, a similar effort undertaken in partnership with the American Association for the Advancement of Science resulted in revamping strategies teachers use to teach science. This year, just one year after teachers completed training in the new strategies, 92% of 4th graders met or exceeded state science standards, up from 84% in 2000. Scores for 7th graders went from 90% in 2000 to 95% in 2005.

Kroeze also attributes to the consortium a decision made four years ago to increase the amount of time devoted to professional development from four to seven days a year. "We saw the value of what was done through the consortium, and, as it was winding down, we decided we wanted to keep [the professional development] in our district. You can make all the changes you want to curriculum, but if you don't increase teachers' capacity to teach students, then the improvements aren't going to be realized."

Marks says an effort under way in her district to improve the teaching of reading skills, particularly in middle and high school, is similar to the process used to improve math under the consortium. She says it calls on teachers to pursue brain research and to participate in focus and reading groups. The ultimate goal is to help them teach in different and more effective ways.

Marks takes comfort in the fact that standardized test scores in her district have remained steady, despite an influx in the last few years in the number of students coming into the district from the Chicago Public Schools. As a result, demographics in the district are changing. Today, almost 50% of the district's students speak a language other than English at home.

Howard Bultinck, superintendent of the 525-student Sunset Ridge School District 29, argues that steadily increasing test scores aren't the only measure of continuous progress. "My scores are so high already, and my district so small, it's hard to keep showing statistically significant, incremental progress," says Bultinck. (According to Bultinck, 95.2% of students at Sunset Ridge met or exceeded state standards in math and reading this year.) Yet he remains convinced that being a member of the consortium made Sunset Ridge a better school district. "It gave us a really good indicator of how our kids are competing on a worldwide basis, and forced us to try to get better," he says.