

# **The NCEA Core Practice Framework:**

**An Organizing Guide to  
Sustained School Improvement**



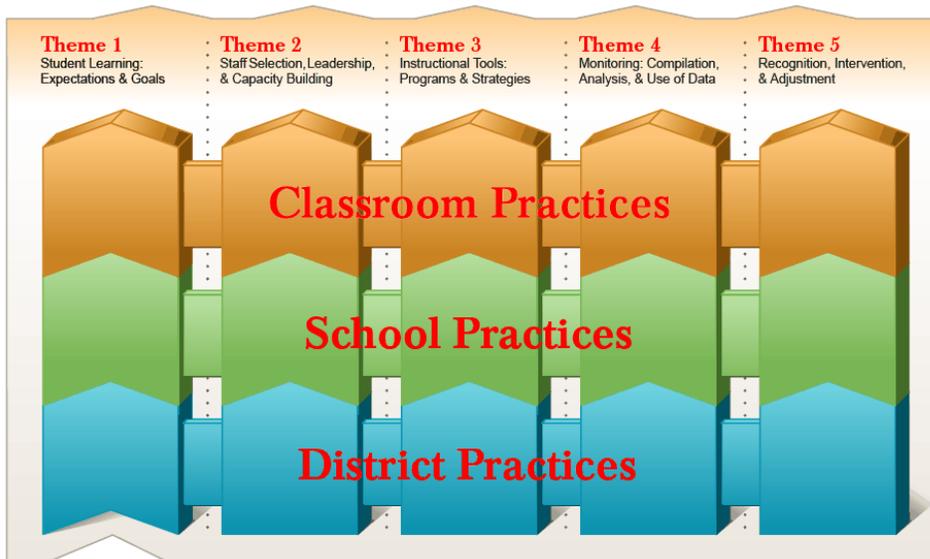
The National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) is an ACT-owned non-profit, non-partisan organization. Our goal is to support efforts to reach excellence in education—to raise academic expectations and to promote the practices that will help more students reach college/career readiness. We have been working over the last decade to build a continuous cycle for improvement based on an honest and diligent focus on student performance, the careful examination of effective practices of proven high-performers, and using what is learned to support targeted improvement planning and implementation.

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# Introduction:

## The Need for a Coherent Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning

America's educational needs have grown. Currently, only a minority of students receive an education that prepares them well for the challenges required by college, skilled careers, and informed citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Yet the demands of fairness, democracy, and economic growth compel us to provide such an education to all students. These demands might be viewed as a disconcerting attempt to require educators to do the impossible—or as a golden opportunity to build support for what must be done to accomplish this goal.

Concerned citizens and policymakers often see educational improvement in terms of isolated reforms: performance pay for teachers; higher salaries for teachers in shortage areas; better teacher training; more student incentives; smaller schools; better textbooks; better reading and mathematics programs; better tests; more parental choice options; more parental involvement; better student discipline; or any of a myriad of other changes that might be expected to improve student learning.

*The lack of a coherent, big-picture approach to improvement can help to explain the disappointing lack of success of many apparently promising educational reforms.*

By contrast, the study of higher performing schools and school systems leads to a very different view of educational improvement. Educators in these systems tend to view reforms not in isolation but as interlocking puzzle pieces; the fitting together of the pieces to make a complete puzzle is as necessary as the individual pieces themselves. An incorrect fit, the insertion of a piece that simply does not belong, or the failure to redesign the entire puzzle if that is what is needed, can cause the separate pieces not to make their expected contribution. The lack of a coherent, big-picture approach to improvement can help to explain the disappointing lack of success of many apparently promising educational reforms.

### **What fundamental ideas from higher performing schools underlie a coherent approach to educational improvement?**

First, only a system-wide approach to improving teaching and learning can make it possible for students to receive good teaching, year after year, across different subjects. Given the difficulty of the task, isolated and uncoordinated efforts by individual educators are not enough.

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<sup>1</sup> ACT, Inc. (2008). Research by ACT also identifies that the skills needed for college are increasingly similar to those required to prepare for skilled occupations, even for those with no plans to attend college (ACT, 2006).

Second, improvement efforts must be coordinated across schools from preschool through the end of high school, since students do not stay in the same school for their entire educational careers.

Third, students must be placed on the path to college and career readiness as early as possible—ideally in preschool and elementary school, but no later than middle school. Waiting until high school to boost poorly prepared students onto a path to college and career readiness places “an extreme degree of difficulty” on educators and is unfair to students.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, efforts to improve teaching and learning must give first priority to the behaviors most closely related to the teaching-learning transaction by addressing each of the following five key questions:

1. What do we expect all students to know and be able to do, in each course or grade and subject?
2. How do we select and develop the leaders and teachers needed to ensure that every learner in the system achieves these learning goals?
3. What programs, strategies, materials, and time allocation do we use to teach the necessary content and skills to students?
4. How do we know if students learned what we said they should learn?
5. If students are not learning what they should, what are we going to do about it?

This paper discusses how educational leaders and policymakers can use research on higher performing schools and districts to address these five questions and promote a coherent, big-picture approach to educational improvement. First, we discuss how to determine whether your school system currently lacks such an approach. Second, we introduce an organizing guide, the NCEA Core Practice Framework, which can be used to develop such an approach based on a systematic comparison of local practices with those in higher performing schools. Next, we describe how the Framework has been derived from research on consistently higher performing schools. Finally, we provide an example of how information on the practices in the Framework is organized, and discuss how the Framework can become a guide to align local practices with those of higher performers and keep those practices coherent.

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<sup>2</sup> See Neild and Balfanz (2006). NCEA's own research that for students who are poorly prepared leaving Grade 8, even the highest performing high schools succeed in boosting only about 10-15% of those students to college and career readiness (Dougherty and Mellor, 2009a and 2009b).

# Symptoms that a Coherent Improvement Approach is Missing

How can an observer tell whether a school district has a coherent, system-wide approach to improving teaching and learning? Based on our research on how average-performing school systems miss the mark, the symptoms that such an approach is absent are easy to spot:

- Many students who thought they were doing well in one level (say, elementary or middle school) discover later that they were poorly prepared for the next level. The curriculum the students receive can be unintentionally repetitious (four separate units on dinosaurs in elementary school, for example), while important content with which teachers are less familiar is omitted. There is large variation across classrooms and schools in what students learn and how much academic challenge they face. Meanwhile, teachers complain about the skills they see in the students who come from their own district's prior grades and classrooms, but this does not lead to action to correct the situation.
- Teachers, especially new teachers, feel that they have little support from district- or school-level leaders in the areas of curriculum and instruction. On their part, district and school administrators believe that those areas are mainly the domain of classroom teachers. Teachers work in isolation from one another and, lacking support, feel overwhelmed or oppressed by the demands placed on them by the state and district accountability systems. Teachers rarely, if ever, visit other teachers' classrooms or discuss what is or is not working instructionally.
  - The district has many programs or initiatives layered on top of one another. New programs and initiatives are adopted with little analysis of how they fit in with or replace what is being done already. Often, new programs are adopted before teachers have had time to assimilate the old ones. Turnover in leadership leads to almost automatic turnover in programs, initiatives, and strategies. District personnel have little idea how well programs are being implemented or what impact, if any, they are having in classrooms.
- The district's response to standards and accountability seems to focus heavily on test preparation and other short-term measures to keep schools from being labeled low performing. "Bubble students," who appear to be close to the margin of passing or failing the state test, receive a disproportionate share of attention. If a school is rated

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unfavorably, conversation focuses on the number of students by which the target was missed, rather than on the practices that led to the low rating in the first place. Untested subjects are given short shrift. At the elementary level, K-2 teachers are not included in conversations about student performance on state and district assessments in grades 3 and higher.

- The instruction that students receive does not take into account whether they are academically ahead, on grade level, or behind. Students who have already mastered the curriculum continue to do the same work as other students who have not, or are given extra worksheets to complete. Students who do not master the taught objectives continue on to the next objective; thus, the gaps in their learning accumulate over time. Developing strategies for students who are behind is treated as a problem for each teacher to solve alone. Often, the extra help that these students receive, if any, is not well matched to how far behind they are.

All of these behaviors and practices are symptoms that the school system lacks a long-term, coherent, and sufficiently comprehensive approach to improving teaching and learning.

# The NCEA Core Practice Framework:

## Supporting a Coherent Improvement Approach

The NCEA Core Practice Framework is designed to help educators and policymakers develop and support a coherent, comprehensive, and sustained approach to their improvement efforts. The Framework provides both *structure*, a way of categorizing those educational practices that distinguish higher performing schools from others, and *content*, a collection of information on the practices themselves. As such, it provides an organizing guide for all improvement decisions. Such a guide has been sorely missing from the majority of educational discussions.

The structure of the Framework is built around five primary challenges (themes) that must be addressed in order to improve teaching and learning in a school system. These themes reflect the five key questions presented earlier.

*Theme 1: Student Learning: Expectations and Goals*—clarifying what is to be taught and learned by grade and subject.

*Theme 2: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building*—creating and fostering high-capacity leaders and teachers who collaborate to ensure that students reach ambitious learning goals.

*Theme 3: Instructional Tools: Programs and Strategies*—systematically identifying, adopting, and modifying what works and discontinuing what does not work; ensuring that leaders and teachers have the strongest and most proven resources available.

*Theme 4: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data*—using assessment information to keep track of where and when learning is taking place and whether students are meeting growth and performance goals.

*Theme 5: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment*—responding quickly and appropriately to the feedback provided by the data.

For each of these challenge areas, there is an optimal division of labor among the school system's three organizational levels—district, school, and classroom—to meet the challenges. Failure to divide the labor correctly across these three levels places an excessive burden on one or more of the levels and reduces the odds that sustainable reform can be achieved. The combination of five themes and three organizational levels provides the framework for the 15 *core practices* shown in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup>

The NCEA Core Practice Framework provides a general description of each of the 15 core practices, as shown in Figure 1. In addition to these descriptions, NCEA's research has provided a wealth of additional detail on each practice. This detail does not consist of a set of recommended lesson plans or methods for teaching specific topics. Rather, it is a set of aligned behaviors and processes intended to guide the development of a long-term, coordinated team approach to improving teaching and learning in a district, school, or classroom.<sup>4</sup> Educators seeking solutions to immediate problems

*The practices are interdependent and should not be viewed in isolation.*

should not overlook the value of creating a system that eliminates the constant need for short-term fixes. For example, while the content of the Framework does not detail specifically how to motivate students in a particular classroom, careful development of the Framework practices can lead to solutions that eliminate many of the root causes of low motivational levels.

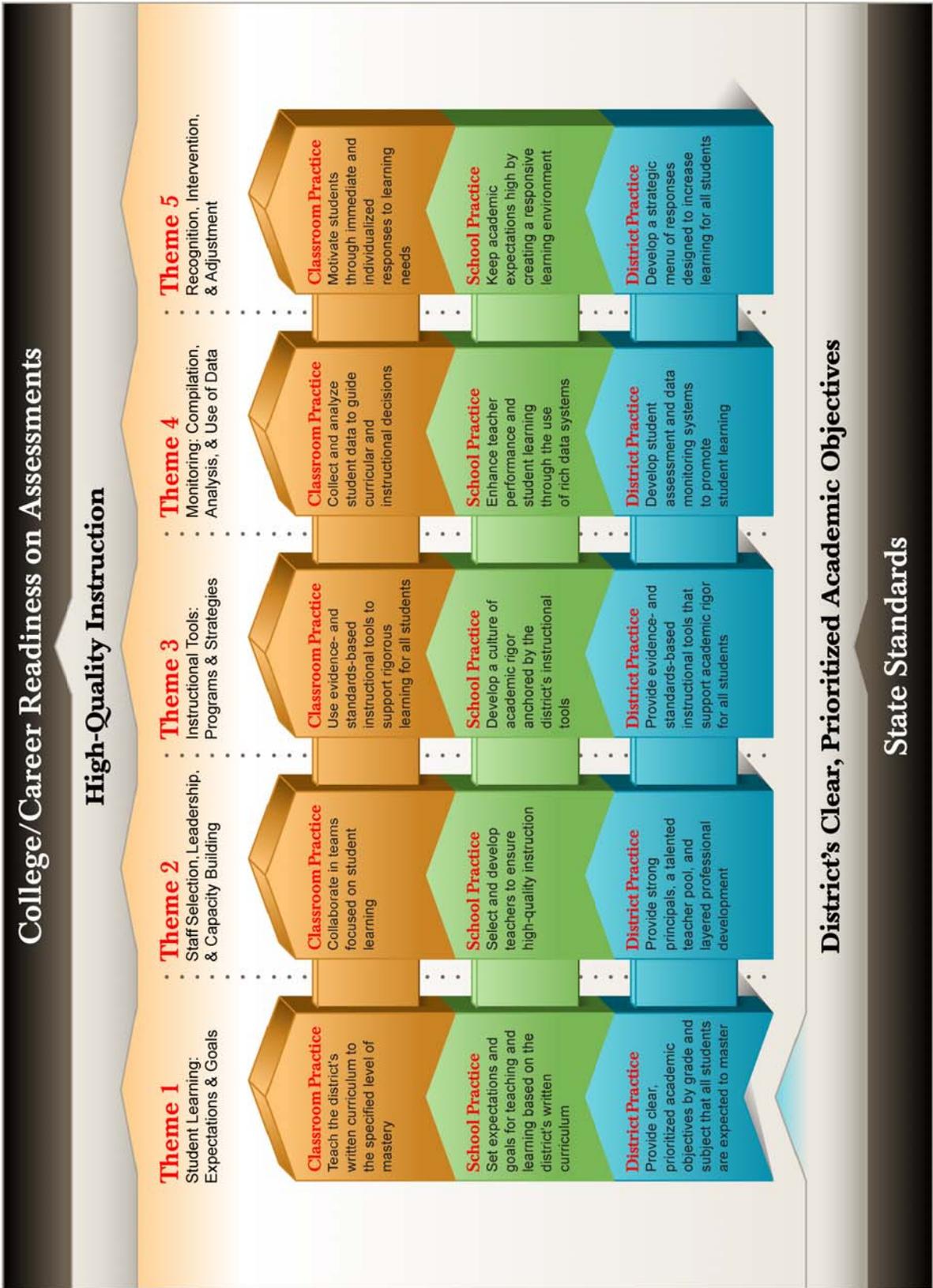
The practices are interdependent and should not be viewed in isolation. For example, in order for teachers to collaborate to use the results of district-administered tests to diagnose student needs and adjust their own teaching (Theme 2), they must: have access to data from high-quality tests (Theme 4), understand the core curriculum that is being taught and assessed by the test (Theme 1), use that information to assess the strategies that they use (Theme 3), and be able to decide on a suitable set of interventions for students who are falling behind (Theme 5).

<sup>3</sup> We describe these practices as “core” to communicate their central and essential role in teaching and learning.

<sup>4</sup> NCEA's Core Practice research reports and case studies discuss these more detailed behaviors, which are not shown in Figure 1 ([www.nc4ea.org](http://www.nc4ea.org)).

Figure 1

# The Core Practice Framework



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Underlying the Framework is the idea that educators must systematically ensure that students acquire the knowledge and skills in each grade or course needed to prepare them for the grade or course that follows, and ultimately for college, skilled careers, and informed citizenship. “A systemic failure to teach all children the knowledge they need in order to understand what the next grade has to offer,” prominent educator E.D. Hirsch notes, “is *the* major source of avoidable injustice in our schools.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, clear, prioritized objectives describing the academic content that students should master by the end of each grade level in each subject serve as the foundation for the Framework’s 15 core practices (Figure 1).

In today’s policy world, states provide academic content standards, but districts must add more specificity to those standards. In addition, if states set their proficiency and growth targets too low to put students on track for college and careers, school district leaders must set their own higher targets. Thus, the Core Practice Framework acknowledges both a state and a district role in setting standards.

As indicated near the top of Figure 1, high-quality instruction results from the implementation of the 15 core practices based on the district’s clear and specific learning objectives. High-quality instruction enables students to meet ambitious academic goals. A variety of assessments should provide evidence that students are meeting these goals.

Today’s reformers understand the critical importance of high-quality instruction. Yet without the core practices, only a few fortunate students taught by the district’s very best teachers are likely to experience such instruction. Although strong instruction is often viewed as the exclusive responsibility of classroom teachers, the Framework clarifies that district, school, and classroom practices are all critical to ensuring high-quality instruction in all classrooms. Without a coherent system of practices at all three organizational levels to support teachers’ work, we observe a common pattern of discouraged teachers leaving the profession or avoiding employment in high-poverty schools.

## How NCEA’s Core Practice Framework was Constructed

The intellectual predecessors of the Framework are the effective schools research of the past 40 years and the closely related literature on systemic reform—the idea that standards, assessments, instructional strategies, and professional development all need to be coordinated and aligned.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hirsch (2002).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Smith and O’Day (1990) and Lezotte (1991).

*The Framework is not simply a summary of practices in higher performing schools, but rather of those practices in higher performing schools that differ consistently from those in average-performing schools.*

The Framework was constructed over time by conducting research in more than 550 schools in roughly 300 school districts in 20 states. This research compared practices in higher performing schools—those that are “beating the odds” compared with other schools serving similar student populations—with those in average-performing schools.<sup>7</sup> The Framework is not simply a summary of practices in higher performing schools, but rather of those practices in higher performing schools that differ consistently from those in average-performing schools.<sup>8</sup>

The research team identified higher and average-performing schools using scores on state tests designed to assess whether students are learning the state’s academic content standards.<sup>9</sup> To assess school performance, the researchers used a standard statistical value-added analysis with controls for student demographics and (in middle and high school) prior academic achievement. Although schools in both affluent and low-income neighborhoods were studied, the majority of schools studied serve mainly disadvantaged students.<sup>10</sup>

A major distinguishing feature of the school identification process was the use of at least three years of performance information. Since school performance is often inconsistent, the research team made an effort to identify schools that outperformed others not just in a single grade or year, but consistently across grades and years.

Once the schools were identified, researchers visited each school on a two-day site visit and interviewed the school leader, other individuals on the school leadership team, and members of teacher teams. Researchers also collected documents from the schools to provide evidence of the implementation of behaviors described in the interviews. Since the district role in school improvement is a key topic of investigation under the Framework, the research team also interviewed the superintendent and other key individuals from the district central office and collected documentary evidence of reported district policies and practices.

<sup>7</sup> Because we used a value-added approach, students in these schools were higher performing compared with their demographic peers. However, these higher performing schools did not necessarily have the highest performing students across all demographic groups.

<sup>8</sup> As examples of practices that would not differentiate higher performing schools from average-performing schools, teachers in both types of schools regularly take attendance and provide report cards to students’ parents.

<sup>9</sup> The discussion in this and the following paragraphs applies to states where the required longitudinal student data were available. In some states, only “snapshot” test score data were available so that the middle and high school analysis could not take the same students’ prior performance into account. These snapshot statistics typically consisted of percentages of students meeting the state’s proficient and advanced standards.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the majority of schools studied were schools with more than 50% of students eligible for the free and reduced-price lunch program.

This approach to collecting and comparing qualitative information from more and less successful organizations is similar to that used in the “best practice” business management literature which compares the management practices of more and less profitable companies.<sup>11</sup> This approach is normally used in situations where the research questions do not lend themselves to the use of experimental methods—a situation common to both successful business organizations and successful school systems.<sup>12</sup>

The findings of our research support and extend earlier findings from effective schools research. For example, the effective schools literature emphasizes the importance of strong leadership. Our research further explores the methods that higher performing schools use for securing and building that leadership, as well as the specific leader behaviors associated with instructional success. The effective schools literature emphasizes the importance of frequent student assessment. Our research delves into the contrast between how teachers and leaders in higher and average-performing schools use the assessment data. Many studies of effective schools emphasize differences in the beliefs and attitudes of the adults in those schools: higher expectations, a culture of collaboration, and a belief that adults can make a difference. Our research focuses on the differences in adult behaviors that accompany these differences in beliefs.

Because educational practices and the policy environment are constantly changing, the content of the Framework must be periodically updated. NCEA researchers use a two-year study cycle to refresh this content. During the first year, NCEA researchers identify higher and average-performing schools and conduct site visits to those schools. In the second year, the information gathered is analyzed, and new questions are identified for investigation in the subsequent two years.

## The Organization of Content in the Framework

The 15 core practices within the Core Practice Framework represent the behaviors and processes found in higher performing school systems—either more often or in different quality—than in average-performing school systems. While the top layer of the Framework provides a short description of each of the 15 practices, Table 1 provides an example of the additional detailed information on each practice that NCEA’s research has made available.

Each practice is defined in a *Practice Summary*. Our example (Table 1) highlights the classroom-level practice within Theme 2—Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building. Following the summary, each practice is

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Collins (2001) and Peters and Waterman (1982).

<sup>12</sup> “Experimental methods” are generally defined as those in which study subjects (e.g. students and/or educators) are randomly assigned into treatment and control groups.

*Table 1*

## Information Available for Critical Attribute #2 of Theme 2, Classroom Level in the Core Practice Framework

**Theme:** Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

**Organizational Level:** Classroom

**Practice:** Collaborate in grade-level or subject-area teams focused on student learning

**Practice Summary:**

Teacher collaborative planning is a hallmark of higher performing schools. Collaborative reflection on student performance data, standards, common assessments, and peer observations serve one end: teachers learn how to do a better job of reaching every student. Structured collaboration intensifies and accelerates knowledge sharing among teachers. Comparing their students' results helps teachers identify best practices and modify instruction as needed to best serve students. Teachers actively visit each others' classrooms and seek additional assistance from available resources (e.g., instructional coaches) to ensure continual improvement of instruction.

**Critical Attribute #2:**

Teachers participate actively and often in open discussions devoted to curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

**Critical Attribute Summary:**

Well-established, frequent collaborative team meetings are a staple of higher performing schools. While teams meet at least weekly, most educators at higher performing schools indicate they meet far more often (e.g., daily). These teams share collective responsibility for all students' success, taking solution-centered approaches to learning needs. Inquiry, reflection, and problem-solving behaviors on the part of team members are highly valued. The teams provide strong support for new teachers.

Often referred to as learning communities, teams of teachers—within a particular grade level or subject area or cross departmentally—focus on the development of ongoing and honest discussions based on standards and data. Teachers, school leaders, and instructional coaches discuss peer observations, analyze student performance data, and design instructional strategy adaptations and modifications. Members of the teams view themselves as “learners.”

Common, standards-based lessons may be developed by teams, delivered in multiple classrooms, commonly assessed, and then discussed by efficacy of results. Two of the primary learning tools within collaborative teams are student work products and common assessment results. Student work samples and exemplars help teachers understand the level of knowledge that must be attained by students to demonstrate mastery of a specific objective. Common assessments of standards allow for intensified, accelerated knowledge sharing. Comparing results helps teachers identify best practices and to modify instruction.

Through the work of collaborative teams, teachers ensure that there is strong consistency in learning across classrooms at grade level or within subjects and that there are no gaps or redundancies across grade levels or subjects. To further ensure an aligned learning experience, teachers often participate in vertical teams with teachers above and below their own grade level.

**On Target:**

Horizontal teacher teams (teams made up of teachers within a particular grade level or subject) meet regularly and frequently to collaborate. Instructional activities, such as studying the curriculum or sharing effective teaching strategies and lesson plans, are the foundation of teacher collaboration. Comparing and analyzing student work and performance data are commonplace in collaborative meetings and are seen as development opportunities.

**Missing the Mark:**

Teachers work independently of subject- or grade-level peers to address curricular and instructional issues. If teachers do collaborate, instructional issues are not the focus: collaboration is typically described in terms of social activities. Teachers are reluctant to review their students' achievement with other teachers.

*Table 1 (continued)*

### Information Available for Critical Attribute #2 of Theme 2, Classroom Level in the Core Practice Framework

#### Higher Performing School Example:

Focus Lesson meetings have been instituted to build leadership and capacity around data-based instruction. Administrators and teachers from at least two departments meet, and one staff member shares a lesson based on a focus standard. The team discusses instructional strategies and materials that might enhance the lesson. The Focus Lesson is then delivered to all students in at least one of each participating staff member's classrooms. At the end of the lesson, an assessment is given. The student achievement data are then brought back to the Focus Lesson Meeting and discussed. Adjustments are made to enhance the lesson based on the collected data.

#### Core Practice Inventory Items:

- How often are team meetings focused on curricular, instructional, and assessment issues?
- How often do teachers share ideas, materials, and strategies freely in your school?
- How often do teachers discuss how to convey specific concepts or objectives to students?
- How often do teachers study student work together?
- How often do teams of teachers across grades or subjects meet to coordinate instruction?
- How often do you meet with other teachers to discuss the results of assessments?
- Do teachers meet at least weekly to collaborate in grade-level or subject-area teams?
- Are teachers in your school comfortable engaging in problem-solving discussions about learning needs in someone else's classroom?

#### Guided Discussion:

1. Review the information found on the Resource Pages (pages 3 and 4 of this document). Create two lists on the board—"Strengths" and "Challenges"—according to what the participants recorded during their pre-work. If there is disagreement, put the activity on both lists.
2. Review your Core Practice Inventory Results for Theme 3, Classroom Level, Critical Attributes 2 and 3.
  - Compare your responses on each question to those typical of a higher performing school. A large percentage of the faculties of higher performing schools answer "All," "Always," and "Yes" to the question you are studying.
  - Which of your actions are most similar to those in higher performing schools? Which are least similar to those in higher performing schools? Add these observations to your lists of strengths and challenges.
3. Using the Critical Attribute Summaries (pages 3 and 4), your Core Practice Inventory Results (online), and the list you created on the board, discuss the Collaborative Actions on the Note Taking sheet (page 2) and determine if they are strengths or challenges for your team. For each challenge, discuss any barriers to improving that collaborative action and methods of addressing these barriers. Record your discussion in the Addressing the Challenges Notes space.
4. Post your team's collaborative strengths and challenges and any discussion notes as a Comment in the Discussion section on the CoreWork™ website. Please be sure to attribute your notes to your team (e.g., 4<sup>th</sup> grade team meeting).

further defined through the identification of *Critical Attributes*—a list of individual elements or components that collectively define the practice. In this example, Critical Attribute #2 of the practice has been selected for review.

To ensure that the user has highly detailed information about the practices of educators within higher performing schools, the behaviors associated with each Critical Attribute are further defined through five additional features:

1. *Summary of the Critical Attribute*  
A detailed description of the Critical Attribute
2. Description of *On-Target* behaviors versus those that are *Missing the Mark*  
Short descriptions of behaviors that exemplify the Critical Attribute (On Target) and those that are typical “misses” (Missing the Mark)
3. *Higher Performing School Examples*  
Actual case study examples of the Critical Attribute from a school that NCEA researchers have identified as higher performing and that researchers have visited
4. Core Practice Inventory *Survey Items*  
Specific questions that allow educators to determine the level to which a particular Critical Attribute might be present or absent in their own schools
5. *Guided Discussion Outlines*  
Structured learning sessions constructed to explore the Critical Attribute within one’s own grade-level or subject-area teams

Table 1 provides the above information for our current example—Critical Attribute #2 of the classroom-level practice within Theme 2 (Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building).

Using the detail available through the Core Practice Framework, educators can come to a better understanding of which specific changes in adult behaviors are likely to lead to better performance outcomes for students. We believe that educators who consistently attend to these behaviors will be more capable of sustaining improvement through events that normally produce instability, such as changes in school and district leadership.

## Conclusion

A repeated lesson from the research on higher performing school systems is that focusing on any single solution in isolation will not lead to the needed improvements in teaching and learning. Yet public conversations about education reflect a yearning for such a solution, and both educators and policymakers have a strong desire to identify a single factor that makes the difference between higher and average-performing schools: “What programs

*The creation of a coherent improvement system is valuable in a school system serving advantaged students, but is critical in one serving disadvantaged students.*

do they use?” “How large is the school?” “Does the school have total autonomy to make decisions?”

A description of the detailed practices of higher performing schools will disappoint those who look for easy answers or brand new solutions. Higher performing schools and school systems typically do a better job than average performers of staying focused on those fundamental questions that most strongly affect teaching and learning, questions reflected in the Framework themes. And they have developed coherent systems for improving teaching and learning that coordinate efforts across organizational levels—district, school, and classroom.

The creation of a coherent improvement system is valuable in a school system serving advantaged students, but is critical in one serving disadvantaged students, whose learning gaps are less likely to be filled outside of school. These students must be guaranteed access at school to the prerequisite skills for each learning task—made possible through a tightly aligned and intentional system across classrooms, grades, and schools.

**How can school district leaders work to develop such a system?**

- First, they can identify performance targets on state and local assessments—in each grade and subject—that indicate that students are on track to college and career readiness by the time they graduate from high school. State education agencies and organizations such as NCEA and ACT can assist with the identification of these targets.<sup>13</sup> District and school leaders can then identify how many students in each grade and subject are reaching these targets.
- Second, they can use the NCEA Core Practice Framework and Core Practice Inventory to do a systematic comparison of its own current practices and initiatives with those of higher performing schools. They can categorize the district’s current initiatives based on the 15 core practices in the Framework to determine which practices are successfully addressed and which are not. Such a comparison can search for mismatches (practices that are inconsistent with those of higher performing schools) and “holes” (areas where the needed practices are simply absent or unaddressed). The information on

<sup>13</sup> For example, ACT has developed College Readiness Benchmarks on the ACT exam that are associated with a 50% probability that a student will earn at least a B and a 75% probability of at least a C in entry-level college courses (Sconing and Allen, 2005). ACT has backward-mapped these benchmarks to the EXPLORE and PLAN exams in grades 8 and 10. NCEA, in turn, has mapped the ACT benchmarks to state test results in states where it is active, establishing college and career readiness (CCR) performance targets on state tests in grades 3-11.

these practice mismatches and holes can become the central focus of school and district improvement planning.

- Third, they can work with external constituencies to gain support for a sustained, coherent improvement effort that is not derailed by the latest education or policy fad or by changes in school or district leadership.

**What can policymakers do to encourage coherence in educational improvement efforts?**

- First, they can use an organizing structure such as the Core Practice Framework to analyze whether their existing policies are consistent both with each other and with the practices described in the Framework. They can do the same for any proposed new policies.
- Second, they can work with researchers and educational practitioners to identify the greatest discrepancies between common practices in the field and the core practices in the Framework. They can then consider what public policy steps they might take to assist educators in reducing these discrepancies.
- Third, they can communicate that education policy and practice should give priority to coherent, comprehensive, long-term solutions that enable students to reach high academic standards in all subject areas—to be well prepared for college, for career opportunities, and for informed citizenship. Accountability systems should focus on transparency to enable both educators and the public to understand the progress that schools and districts are making.

If our goal is to prepare all students for the intellectual challenges of the future, isolated reforms will not produce this result. Making progress towards this ambitious goal requires persistent, sustained improvement that is coordinated across the district, school, and classroom levels. From expectations and goals for student learning, to teacher and leader selection and development, to instructional programs and strategies, to assessment and data use, to instructional interventions and adjustments based on that data—proven practices must be institutionalized. The NCEA Core Practice Framework can guide this effort and increase the odds that it will succeed.

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## **NCEA | ACT**

The National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization whose mission is to raise academic expectations and promote successful educator practices to help more K-12 students reach College and Career Readiness (CCR). NCEA is an established leader in the use of longitudinal data to raise student achievement and in identifying and promoting the educator practices that distinguish consistently higher performing schools.

NCEA is owned by ACT, Inc., an independent, not-for-profit organization that provides assessment, research, and program management services for education and workforce development.

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