

Springboard Research

Minding the Gap:



New Roles for School Districts in the Age of Accountability

A Study of High-performing, High Poverty School Districts in California

By Springboard Schools

Spring 2006



Acknowledgements

Funding for this study was provided by the San Francisco Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Annenberg Foundation.

Springboard Schools would also like to thank the district and school staff and the students in all of the districts involved in this study. We especially would like to thank those staff members who generously shared their time and work with us at our 3 featured “High-Performing” districts: Oak Grove Elementary School District, Rowland Unified School District, and Elk Grove Unified School District.

Finally, we would like to thank all the staff at Springboard Schools and the following individuals for their hard work on this report:

Yasuyo Abe and her team at Berkeley Policy Associates
Caren Arbeit
Tola Atewologun
James Brown
Amy Dabrowski
Ben Delaney
Jeneka Joyce
Cecelia Leong
Ben Martinez
Ida Oberman, Project Lead
Jon Rendell
Sara Shenkan
Cathy Townsley
Julie Trott
Merrill Vargo
Kiley Walsh

Springboard Schools is located at 181 Fremont Street, 2nd floor, San Francisco, CA 94105.
Phone 415.348.5500 | info@SpringboardSchools.org | www.SpringboardSchools.org

Minding the Gap: New Roles for School Districts in the Age of Accountability

Contents

Preface	3
How we did the study	9
Findings from the Survey	12
CASE STUDIES	
Focusing on Explicit Equity Goals: OAK GROVE SCHOOL DISTRICT	20
Promoting Unity Without Demanding Uniformity: ROWLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT	33
A District Supporting Data-Driven Decision-Making: ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT:	47
Conclusions and Recommendations	60
Appendices	64
Appendix I: Tools and Artifacts	
A. Oak Grove Elementary School District	65
B. Rowland Unified School District	69
C. Elk Grove Unified School District	74
Appendix II: Performance Data	78
Appendix III: Evidence of Sustained Growth 2004–2005	81
Appendix IV: Glossary	83
Appendix V: Further Reading	85
Appendix VI: Springboard Board of Trustees	87

Preface



In surveys, Americans consistently give their local schools a grade of “A” or “B,” while they give schools in general or the school system a “D” or “F.” Many commentators have concluded that this is a sign of either fuzzy thinking or local prejudice. It is possible, though, that people are right. About two thirds of respondents to these surveys give out As and Bs for local schools; and arguably, two thirds of our schools are doing a good or even excellent job. But when people are asked to rate schools in general, they may well understand the question to be “how are we doing at creating a school system that guarantees a good education to all?” If that’s the question, a “D” or “F” is probably the right answer.

The question of how to create a high-quality school system, one in which excellence and equity are characteristic of all its schools, leads directly to the focus of this study: the role of the school district, by which we mean the Board, the Superintendent, and the central office staff. Good schools for all require more than a policy context that focuses attention on high standards, quality curriculum, and challenging goals. Good schools also require high-quality *local* support in the form of professional development, staff recruitment and hiring, data and information management systems, and assessments. But where will these come from? This study is important because it suggests that the answer may be right before our eyes: the school district.

Does taking on this role require a redefinition of the traditional role of the district office? Absolutely. Before improving teaching and learning became everybody’s business, many district offices were organized to address primarily administrative issues: school facilities, personnel issues, transportation, budgeting, public relations, sports, lunch programs, etc. Improving the quality of teaching and learning was either low on the long list of things to worry about, or not on the list at all. It rarely felt urgent. And it was seldom the central focus of everyone’s work.

Today, all that is changing. This study is a snapshot of some school districts in California that are slightly ahead of their peers, though still in the early stages of this change process. What is important about the study is, first, the optimistic finding that capacity to support schools and school improvement can be built within school districts, at least in those large enough to support a central office staff. And, second, the study sheds some light on some of the high-leverage strategies that district leaders are adopting to replace the old focus

on administration and compliance. We use the word “strategy” to mean a broad approach to change. The new strategies being adopted by the most successful districts include building consensus in favor of a new set of goals, creating and using data in a continuous improvement process, and building professional learning communities for education professionals. This is likely not a complete list of possible strategies and this study certainly does not offer a complete picture of any one strategy.

However, the importance of having a strategy is arguably the key finding of this study. Each of these districts studied has adopted one or two such key strategies. This is relatively rare: most school districts have goals, programs, and activities, but these can easily fail to reflect or add up to a strategy. The districts we studied had strategies for two things: strategies for maintaining focus and strategies for building capacity. These always complemented each other, and often, but not always, they were overlapping. In two of our three cases, it was strategies (more than programs, for example) that were maintained in the face of leadership changes.

One example is Oak Grove, where their intent to close the achievement gap for African American and Latino students was a powerful focusing mechanism. Since this goal was adopted at the Board level and articulated continually by the Superintendent, competing priorities tended to be shunted aside. Yet this district’s story suggests what many others have learned as well: internal priorities cannot hold unless they are embraced by external stakeholders. Oak Grove’s continual effort to reach out to parents—often in race-based “affinity groups”—and to hold community meetings, create committees, and build partnerships with community groups makes sense as a way of building a constituency for the district’s goals. This active effort at constituency-building puts the district in a proactive role of shaping local politics, rather than being shaped by them.

Oak Grove’s capacity-building strategy reflects its focus on closing the achievement gap. The district practices what it calls the “cycle of inquiry”—a process of data-based continuous improvement—at multiple levels. At the classroom level, teachers identify “focal students” who are typically African American or Latino students and engage in four- to

six-week cycles in which they agree to use a new instructional strategy, collect data, and reflect with colleagues about the impact of their efforts on the learning of these students. At the level of the school or district, cycles more often involve examination of the progress of groups of students or teachers and/or the impact of particular programs or activities on these students or teachers. The intersection between the focusing strategy of setting explicit equity goals and the capacity-building strategy of the cycle of inquiry gives the district a way of counteracting the many forces, ranging from state policy to categorical program requirements to local politics, that push districts toward fragmentation.

The other districts highlighted in this study use different strategies. Elk Grove, for example, used its rapid growth rate as the opportunity to create an in-house teacher credentialing program that helps ensure a consistent approach to teaching across the district. Teachers in Elk Grove have become a constituency for a coherent approach to curriculum and instruction. For capacity-building, Elk Grove’s substantial investment in a sophisticated home-grown data system provides both teachers and school leaders with the information they need to make informed adjustments in their program in real time—not six months later when the test scores come in from the state. It is notable that in both of these two districts, the capacity-building strategy relies on some kind of continuous improvement process and that it seeks to build capacity in both individuals and in the organization.

This relatively small study is certainly suggestive rather than conclusive. It suggests a new, important, and exciting direction for future research. But it also reminds us of an important policy opportunity: the creation of organizations that exist to carry out public purposes. In a society that has largely lost faith in government, but that has not yet created viable alternatives in many policy areas, this reminder is important. School districts can function well in the service of important goals, and districts can take on roles and carry out a mission that no conglomeration of private providers is likely to own. Chief among these is the creation of a far more equitable school system. If equity—good schools that help all children meet high standards—matters to America, then school districts are worthy of our attention.

Executive Summary

Overview

For decades, school district offices were cast as villains in the drama of school reform—intractable bureaucracies that either got in the way or, at best, were irrelevant to the task of improving schools. In contrast, this study suggests that school district offices can play a key role in improving schools, especially for students on the wrong side of the achievement gap. Leaders of the most effective districts help schools most when they embrace neither centralization nor decentralization of power, but rather when they hit a balance between the two. And these districts help poor children and English Language Learners the most not by embracing mantras like “all students can learn,” but when they “mind the gap” by focusing attention on the groups of students who need the most help.

Despite the emerging consensus that districts can play a leadership role in improving teaching and learning, many do not. The goal of this study is to shed light on the specific strategies effective districts—by which we mean central office, board, and superintendent—use to lead and foster a process of improvement. To do the study, Springboard Schools conducted a comprehensive analysis of test score trends over the past three years in California school districts. We selected districts that served at least 1,500 students in total and high percentages of students in poverty and English Language Learners, and then sorted these districts into a high-performing and a lower-performing group. We surveyed principals to look for differences in the approaches taken by the two groups of districts. Finally, we conducted three in-depth case studies—Elk Grove Unified in southern Sacramento, Rowland Unified in Los Angeles, and Oak Grove Elementary in south San Jose—that gave us a more detailed look at what high-performing districts do.

Findings

This study makes a strong case that there *are* systematic differences between high-performing districts and lower-performing districts. Successful districts share the following characteristics:

- **The leaders of the most effective districts ensure that student testing does not stand alone but is part of a larger continuous improvement process.** Leaders in these districts have used scarce resources to build systems to help teachers and principals use testing data to drive a process of continuous improvement. In Oak Grove, for example, teachers form Continuous Improvement Teams that work together in a structured way to understand and respond to the gaps in their program. In this way, the leaders of the most effective districts build on and leverage state and federal accountability requirements. These requirements are an essential part of the reform strategy of these districts, but they are just the first step in a much more complex process of change.
- **The successful school districts place a premium on professional development so that administrators’ and teachers’ knowledge is continually updated and that they are provided with the tools they need to raise student achievement.** While the formula for standards-based reform may under-emphasize professional development, successful school districts don’t. Professional development in high-performing high-poverty districts goes beyond events like workshops or training sessions and even beyond new roles like teacher coaches. The most effective districts appear to use all of these strategies and more to create both school- and district-level professional learning communities that focus on improving teaching for underperforming groups. For example, almost two-thirds of principals in the highest performing group of districts strongly agreed with the statement “my district provides teachers

with professional development on differentiated instruction,” while less than one-fifth of principals in lower-performing districts agreed with this statement.

- **Leaders in the most effective districts get results by finding a clear and workable balance between centralized and decentralized strategies.** For years, those seeking to improve schools have been divided into two camps. One camp focuses on decentralization, while the other focuses on the opposite. De-centralizers talk about “site based decision-making,” charter schools and choice. On the other side, the centralizers argue for a “managed improvement” approach to reform. While the debate continues, the leaders of the high-performing high-poverty districts that we studied embraced neither extreme, but instead made strategic choices to centralize some things and decentralize others. These choices were quite different from district to district. For example, Rowland decentralizes many budget decisions, but requires that all teachers give a common set of benchmark assessments. The more typical response is to centralize budget and decentralize assessment. What seems to matter is that districts hit a workable balance between the two approaches and that school-level leaders have clear understanding of which decisions are theirs and which belong to the district office.
- **District leaders endorse the same, three-step, standards-based reform process, but they don’t follow it blindly.** Under the *No Child Left Behind* act (NCLB), federal policy assumes a consistent and coherent strategy for creating better schools: first, align the curriculum with standards; next, put in place the diagnostic assessments to monitor student progress; and finally, create the intervention programs to help struggling students. This approach makes sense. Everyone seems to agree. But, not surprisingly, reform is not as linear as policymakers sometimes seem to assume. Some district offices do in fact begin with work on curriculum alignment. But, other equally effective ones begin by investing much more heavily in assessment systems than in curriculum, in some cases even using assessment to help teachers align their own curriculum. Ultimately, all three steps seem to matter, but both order and emphasis vary widely.

Recommendations for District Leaders: New Roles for School District Central Offices

The leaders of districts that get the best results with challenging populations of students embrace new roles and new ways of thinking about the work they do. Specifically, this report suggests district leaders should:

- **Be explicit about both student learning goals and strategies for achieving those goals**
Innovative leaders in every sector often operate from intuition—they know *what* to do, but not *why*. District leaders, even in the most successful districts, rarely have a ready answer to questions about strategy. But a central recommendation that emerges from this study is that district leaders develop and implement deliberate strategies to maintain focus and build organizational capacity. The raw materials for such strategies are common enough: goal setting, data systems, professional development, community outreach. Every school district central office undertakes activities in each of these categories. What seems to set the most successful districts apart is that they weave these elements into a coherent strategy—mere activity does not constitute a strategy. Strategy requires not only a coherent and interconnected set of steps; it also requires that these be carried out over the long term. As one Superintendent put it, “it’s not a sprint, it’s a marathon.”
- **Invest in and use multiple assessments allowing for quick, accurate, and user-friendly reporting on student learning**
Education leaders are under continual pressure to invest scarce resources in providing direct services to students rather than in building infrastructure. But it is becoming more and more clear that the most successful district offices invest in the systems to provide timely feedback to teachers and school sites. Human feedback is provided by teacher-coaches and/or administrators who arrange their day to include spending time in classrooms. But feedback about professional practice from these sources is combined with feedback from multiple assessments and user-friendly data systems that together provide teachers with useful data about student performance. Three quarters of principals agreed that their high-performing district “encourages the use of multiple assessments,” while only about a third of principals in lower performers agreed with this statement. Seventy percent of principals in high-performing districts agreed that their district’s data system “allows teachers to track their students’ progress over time.” Only 40% of principals in lower-performing districts agreed with this statement.
- **Focus on building human and organizational capacity through systems, structures and processes that allow for shared learning**
Education is a human endeavor, and the leaders of the most effective districts do an effective job of recruiting, managing, and developing their people. For example, each of the effective districts we studied invested in a variety of strategies for creating school-based learning communities for teachers. But the leaders of these districts also build organizational capacity at the same time that they invest in individuals. Organizational capacity includes systems, structures, and processes, and it also includes the culture that underlies these. It is by paying attention to organizational capacity that school districts insure against the upheaval that can result from leadership turnover
- **Create a constituency for focus by reporting regularly to staff and the public on goals and progress towards goals**
It is a cliché to bemoan the many forces that tend toward fragmentation in school districts: changing policy perspectives at the federal, state, or local level; overly prescribed requirements for a blizzard of categorical programs; a plethora of interest groups and service providers; the need of new leaders to carve out new territory; a culture that translates urgency into an effort to do everything at once—the list could continue. What is new is from this report is concrete examples of the ways that leaders in several districts have created counterbalancing forces. One strategy these district leaders embrace is reporting to the public. It was striking that over 90% of principals in the most effective districts—and only 50% of those in less effective ones—strongly agreed with the

statement that “my district reports to the public on the achievement of all student subgroups.”

- **“Mind the Gap” by owning the challenge of English Language Learners**

One of the most striking findings from the survey of principals was the picture it painted of a proactive role for district offices with regard to English language learners. Principals in the districts getting the best results with these students reported that their district offices were active in supporting teacher training for teachers with ELL students, in ensuring principals know which students are English learners, in developing an intake system that meets the needs of ELL students, and in using assessment

data to track these students. And the proactive role of the district office with regard to English language learners does not stop at the classroom door. Sixty-four percent of principals in high-performing districts strongly agreed with the statement that “my district’s central office encourages principals to structure alternative grouping so teachers can target instruction to students’ proficiency levels,” whereas only 30% of principals in lower-performing districts strongly agreed. Leaders of the highest-performing districts clearly treat the education of English learners as a system-wide responsibility, not just a function of the categorical programs office.

What Effective Districts Do—But Don’t Get Distracted By

Much of the energy of district leaders has traditionally been taken up with issues far from the improvement of teaching and learning. A striking finding in the effective districts in this study is what their leaders don’t talk about: They don’t talk much about labor disputes and strikes. They don’t talk a lot about school construction or school safety. They don’t get bogged down in problems with the school board. These issues have not disappeared in these districts; in fact, they are always present. But they are managed in an ongoing way so that they are background rather than foreground.

In our intensive case studies it was notable that all three district offices maintain good relations with unions. This is not accidental but deliberate. Work on relationship building is evident in many small things, like fewer grievances being filed, and by the involvement of union representatives in key district committees and meetings. Similarly, campus maintenance never goes away as an issue. But in these districts safety, cleanliness, and classroom supplies are taken care of.

Finally, all superintendents see their jobs as maintaining good board relations. The superintendents in these districts are able to be proactive in this role focusing on educating and involving board members rather than controlling them.

How we did the study



This study began with the hypothesis that district central offices and district leaders can play an important role in improving teaching and learning, especially for poor children and English Language Learners. This idea is supported by more and more research, including our own. The right leadership strategies can make a significant difference in student achievement, just as the wrong ones can impede it.

To determine those “right” strategies, Springboard, over the past two years, has conducted several “best practice” studies in which we began with a comprehensive analysis of test scores in California schools. Again and again, we found that high-performing, high poverty schools are NOT randomly distributed across California, but rather are found predominantly in particular school districts. This finding reinforces the idea that Superintendents, school boards, and district central offices shape the contexts within which schools and educators operate and thus have significant impact on student learning.

What we hoped to learn

Rather than try to prove that districts matter, or to focus on how district central offices hinder school reform efforts, the goal of this study was to learn what those districts getting the best results with challenging populations do that differs from practices in average or low-performing districts. We particularly wanted to identify the policies and strategies of district central offices that are having success with two key groups of traditionally underserved students who are: English Language Learners and students living in poverty. With the increased pressure being placed on districts by NCLB legislation, this is a question that is pressing for both district leaders and policymakers.

The two main questions this study asked, then, are “what” and “how.” The “what” question asks; what strategies at the district level lead to academic success for traditionally low-performing students? The “how” question is about implementation—how does the district central office transform a broad strategy into effective support to schools? Through investigating these questions we hoped to shed some light on two key questions facing both district leaders and policymakers: how are the most effective districts translating federal, state, and local policies into actions that directly affect the classroom, and what is the most productive balance of power and flexibility between district and school?

How we chose which districts to study

In selecting which California school districts to study, we wanted to ensure that the districts studied had large proportions of English Language Learners and students living in poverty. Thus, we began by selecting an initial pool of districts that met the following demographic criteria:

- A minimum of 39% of enrolled students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL); and
- A minimum enrollment of 15% English Language Learners.

The criteria for English Language Learners and students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch are in place to ensure that the district has a significant number of children in traditionally low-performing subgroups. These criteria also reduce the chance that district success is due to factors outside of district office practice, i.e. above-average resources in the school community or exceptionally individualized attention for English Language Learners due to low enrollment.

We then eliminated districts serving fewer than 2,000 children. An overall enrollment over 2,000 increases the chances of study findings having application to other school districts. Districts with enrollment under 2,000 students face significant—but different—issues.

After using the above selection criteria to identify a preliminary sample, we sorted the districts based on the average percentage of students rated “proficient” and above on the 2004 Math and English Language Arts California Standards Tests. We categorized high-performing districts as the top 30% of the pool, average performers as spanning 40% to 60% and low-performing districts as the bottom 15% of the possible sample pool. Our study sites were then selected from among these three groups.

How we collected the data

Once we selected the sites, we used two methods to collect data.

The Survey

We surveyed school principals in high-, average- and low-performing California districts. Why principals rather than superintendents, district central office employees or teachers? Operating as they do in the nexus between schools and district central offices, we thought principals would provide the most accurate view of district strategies and their effectiveness. The survey was conducted by Berkeley Policy Associates (BPA). Through BPA, we sent out surveys to 115 principals from a mix of elementary, high school and unified districts distributed among the three performance groups. We sent surveys to principals in 20 high-performing districts, 10 average-performing districts, and 10 low-performing districts. Each district had more than one principal surveyed.

The survey included questions regarding district office’s role in the following five areas:

1. Goals and accountability: These questions addressed issues including incentives, focus, and accountability regarding English Learners and students who are below grade-level;
2. Teacher quality: These questions focused on professional development including school-based coaching and collaboration time, as well as hiring and placement of teachers;
3. Curriculum and instruction: This section of the survey dealt with resources, structure and guidance to support English Learners and students who are below grade-level;
4. Data: Questions in the data section aimed to investigate strategies for identification, diagnosis and effective intervention with English Learners and students who are below grade-level;

5. Funding: This section looked at adequacy and flexibility of resources for English Learners and students who are below grade-level.

To view the survey instrument, visit our website:

www.springboardschools.org/research/other_research.html

Of the 60 principals who completed the survey, 33 were from high-performing districts, 12 from average performing and 15 from low-performing districts. These principals represented 34 districts from across the state (19 high-performing districts, 7 average performing and 8 low-performing districts).

Case studies:

We selected three districts from the pool of high-performers, with additional attention to geographical distribution and representation at both the unified and elementary level. Over the course of seven months, our research team collected data through interviews with district central office staff, school leaders and teachers. We also reviewed district documents and available data on district performance.

How we analyzed the data

For each question on the survey, we looked for differences in the responses of principals from high-performing districts versus those from average and low-performing districts. We sorted for responses that were statistically significant at a 99% confidence level and included these in our analysis.

In developing the case studies, we carefully reviewed all transcripts, notes and documents collected. We also checked for consistency between survey results and case study findings. Case studies were reviewed by key people in the districts we visited to ensure that they presented an accurate picture of the district's work.

Limitations of the Study

This study is suggestive rather than conclusive. The number of surveys administered, the number of case studies conducted, and the time frame of the study all were limited. A larger study would be worthwhile. And while the systematic differences between the two groups of districts suggest that the factors identified may contribute to higher performance, there is no way, from this study, to come to firm conclusions about causal links. The practices identified in a backwards mapping study such as this one should most accurately be called "promising practices" rather than "best practices." Despite these limitations, we believe that this study meets its goal of shedding important light on real questions facing real practitioners.

Findings from the Survey



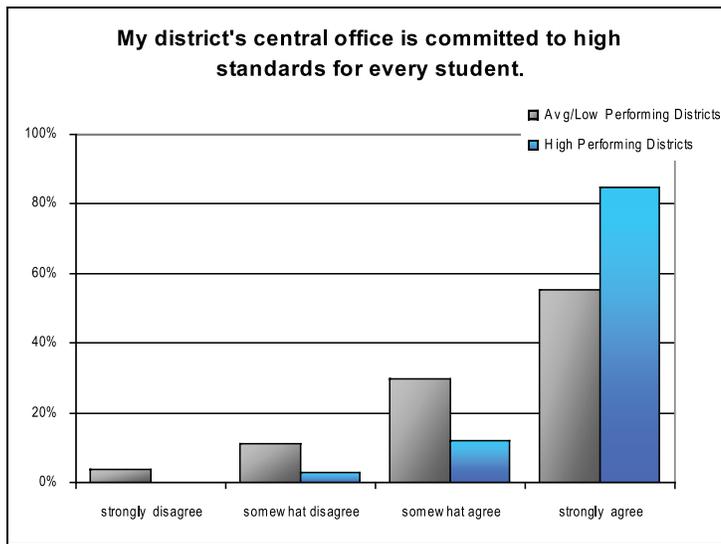
What Everybody Does

Surveys often are useful in what they do not find, and this one was no exception. Standards-based reform; NCLB's focus on the achievement of all students; the dedication of many educational, community, and political leaders to the importance of equity and excellence; and new insights into teaching and learning have changed the face of public education. A number of once-rare approaches and strategies have become the norm across the field. For example, talk about standards, though engaged in by high performers, is no longer *distinctive* of high performers. Everyone does it. Similarly, disaggregating data and paying attention to the performance of the lowest-performing groups of students is no longer rare. Though isolation is probably still the norm in practice for many teachers, today teacher collaboration is generally understood to be a good thing. And interestingly, high performers do *not* appear to use rewards or incentive programs more than average or low performers.

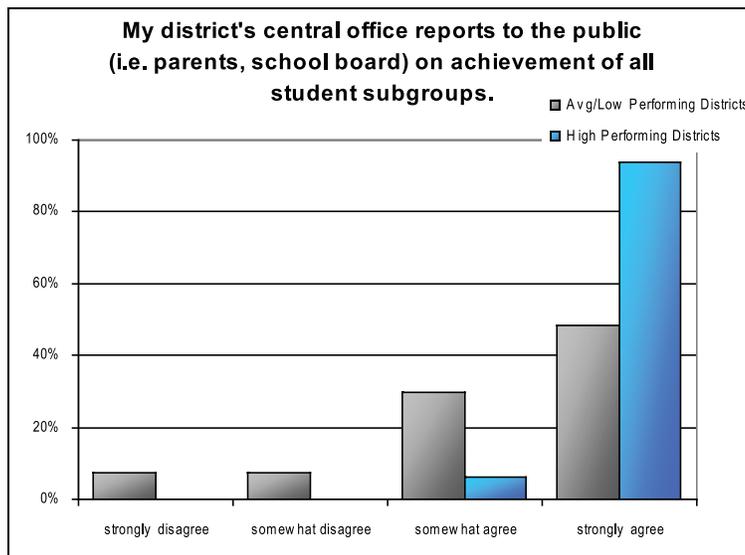
Yet it is notable that the survey points to large areas in which the practices of the highest-performing districts do differ from those of lower-performing ones. These differences are summarized in the pages that follow.

What High-performing Districts Do More Of

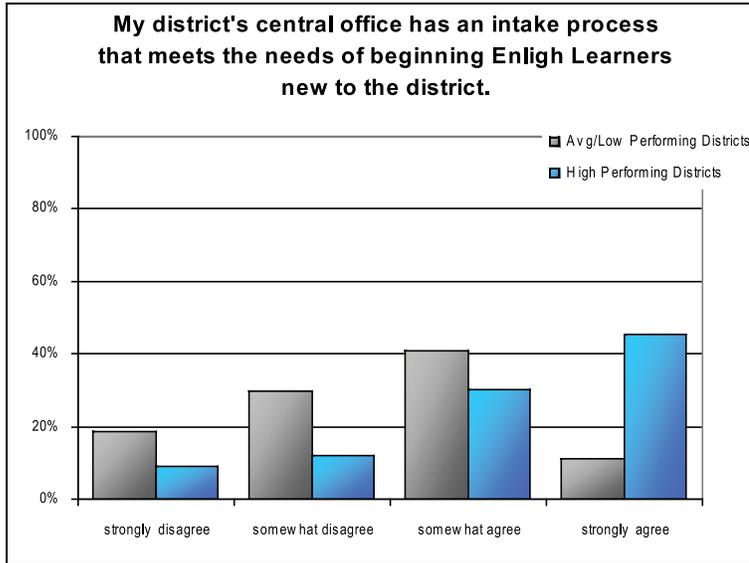
High-performing Districts Set Clear Goals: Though the language of standards is pervasive, principals in high-performing districts are more likely than their peers in lower-performing districts to report that their district “is committed to high standards for every student.” A total of 85% of principals in high-performing districts strongly agreed with this statement in comparison with only 56% in lower-performing districts. In the lower-performing districts, 15% of principals disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, in contrast with only 3% who disagreed in the high-performing districts.



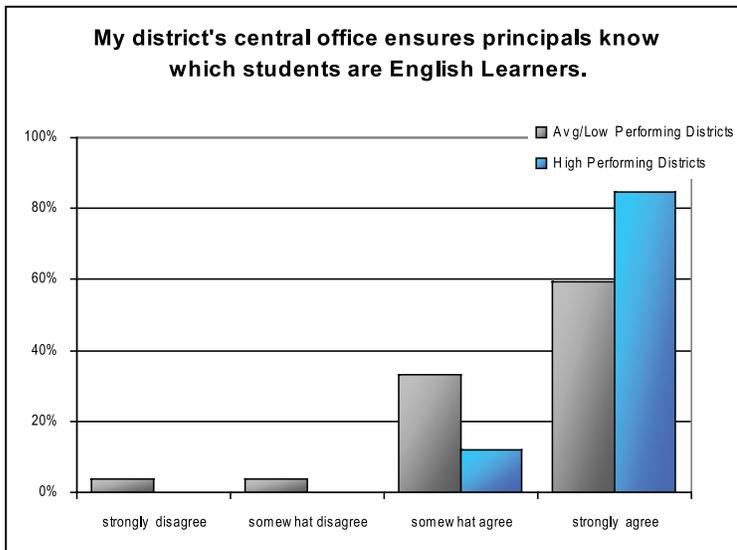
And, goal setting is public. According to their principals, leaders in these high-performing districts are far more likely to report to the public on achievement.



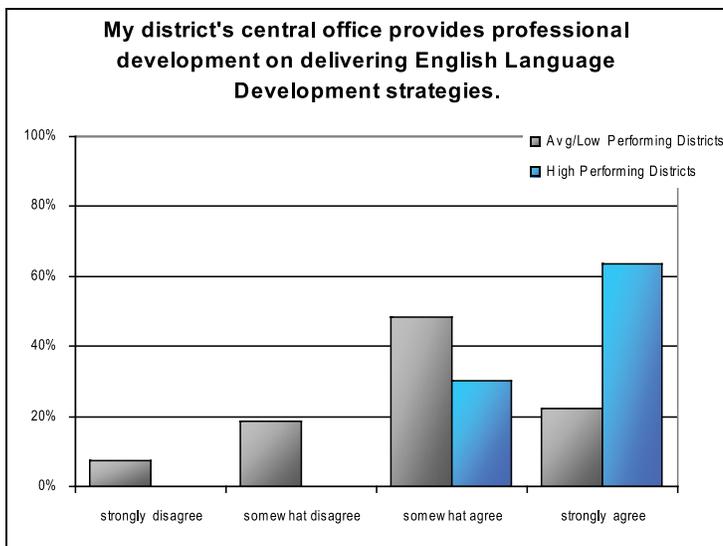
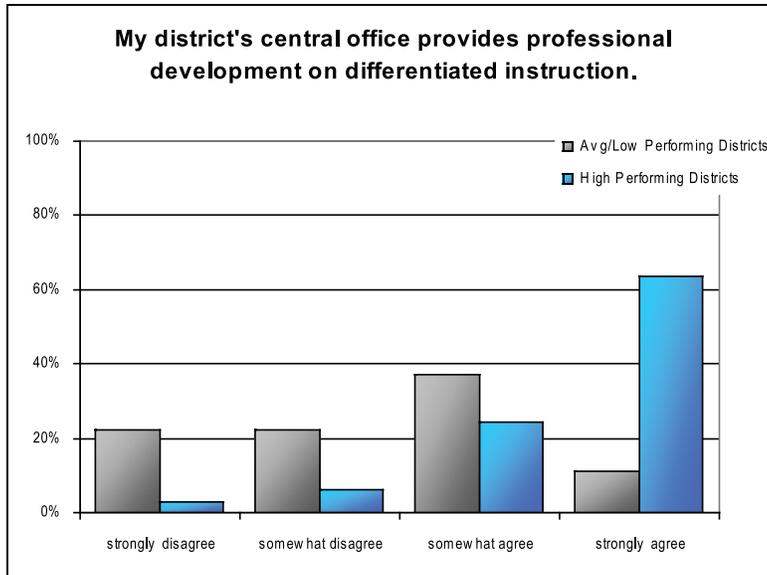
High-performing Districts Focus on ELL Students: The proactive district office focuses in particular on English Language Learners. Principals in these districts are more likely (75% vs. 52%) to say that their district’s central office “has an intake process that meets the needs of beginning English Learners new to the district.”



This picture of a proactive role for the district office is particularly notable with regard to English Language Learners. This group of students in particular seemed to be viewed by the district as a district responsibility. Thus principals in high-performing districts are more likely (97% vs. 70%) to report that their district offices “set clear and measurable goals for English Learners’ progress toward the next CELDT level.” And Principals in high-performing districts are more likely to strongly agree (85% vs. 59%) that their district office “ensures principals know which students are English Learners.” The majority of all districts in the survey report that they provide schools with student achievement data disaggregated by English Learner status, but a striking 97% of high performers strongly agree that they do so.

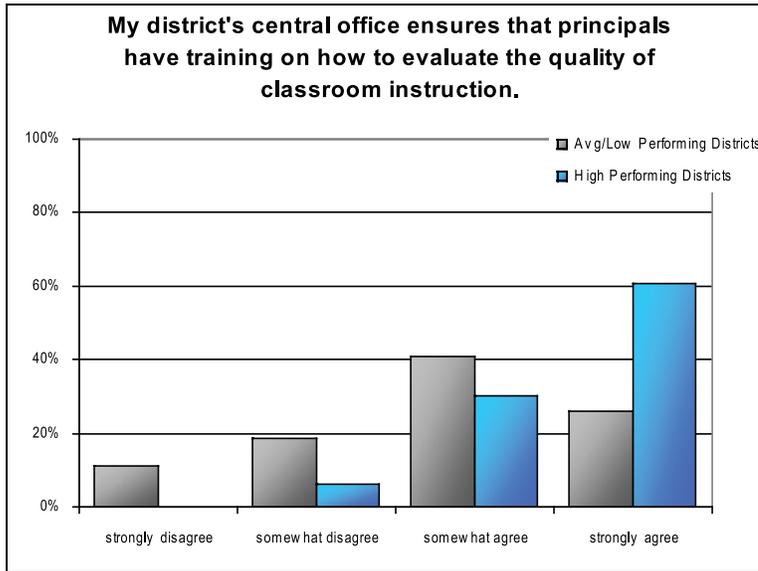


And, these districts are far more likely to provide professional development on differentiated instruction and on instructional strategies for English learners.

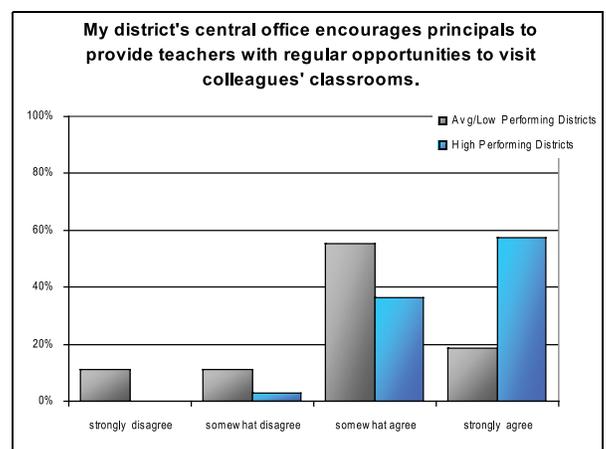
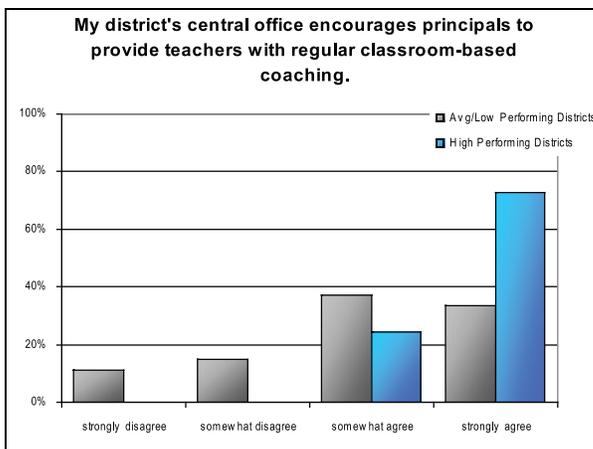


Finally, the proactive role of the district office with regard to English Language Learners does not stop at the classroom door. Sixty-four percent of principals in high-performing districts strongly agreed with the statement that “my district’s central office encourages principals to structure alternative grouping so teachers can target instruction to students’ proficiency levels,” whereas only 30% of principals in lower-performing districts strongly agreed. Case study data shed more light on this finding. For example, in Oak Grove, the district encourages schools to frequently re-group their English Language Learners based on proficiency data and moves students in and out of the English Language Development center as needed.

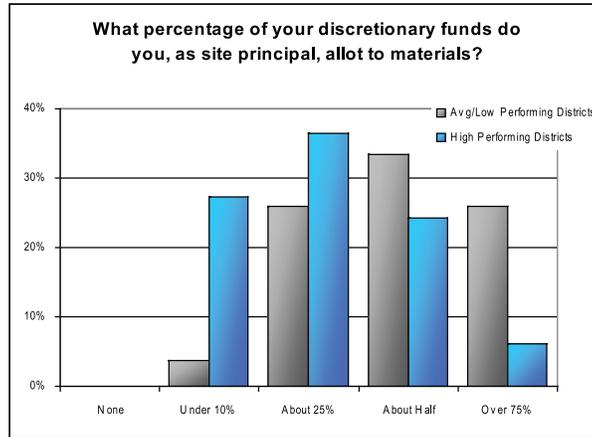
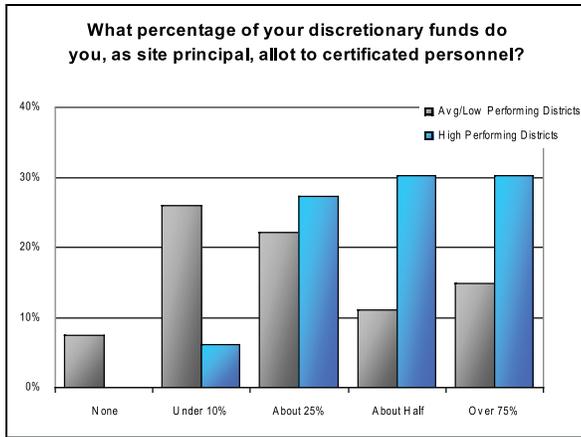
High-performing Districts get involved with instruction: District leaders in high-performing districts are also more likely to get involved in the process of improving instruction for all students. Specifically, principals in these districts are more likely to report that they receive support and training to evaluate classroom instruction, a critical activity for instructional leaders.



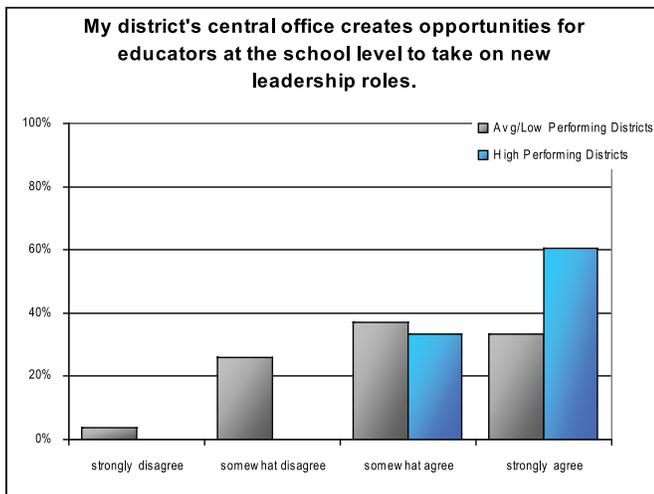
Also, the support does not stop with principal observation. High-performing district central offices are more likely to encourage principals to provide opportunities for teachers to visit colleagues' classrooms and provide regular classroom-based coaching:



Finally, these districts are more likely to spend discretionary funds on certificated personnel than on materials.

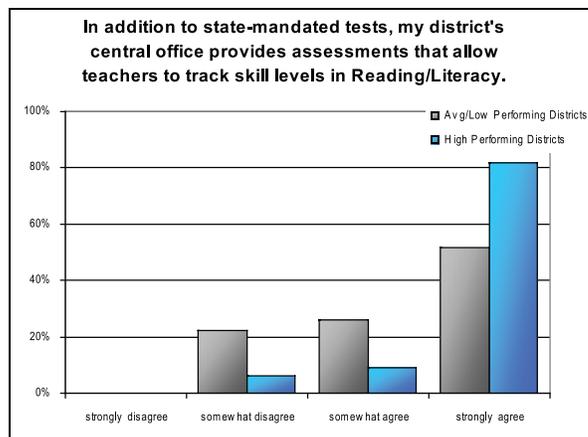
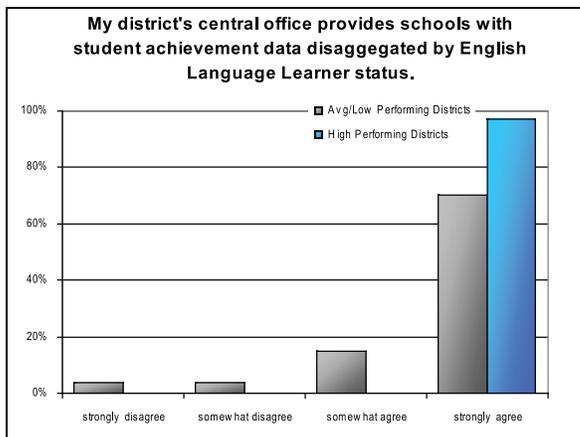
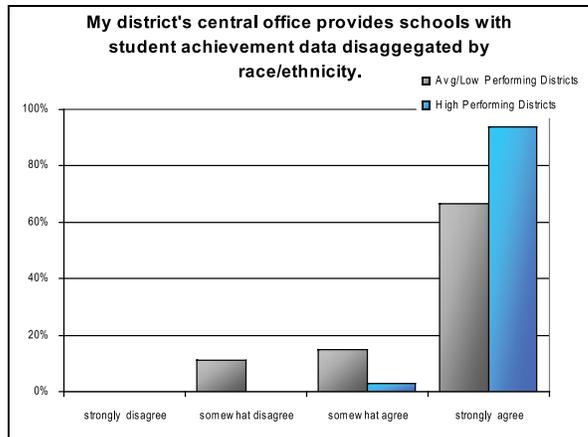
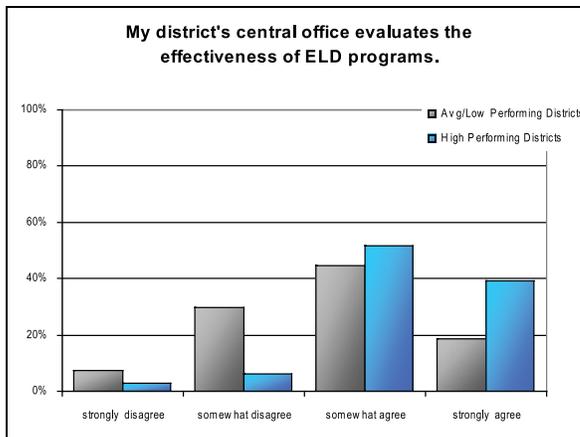
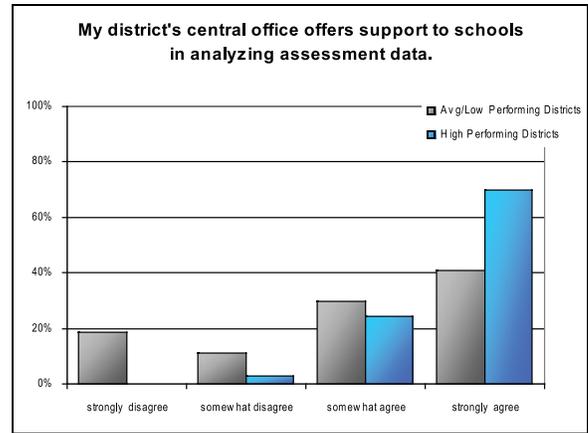
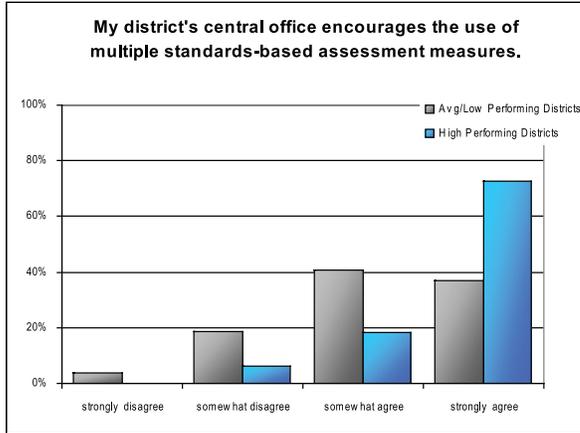


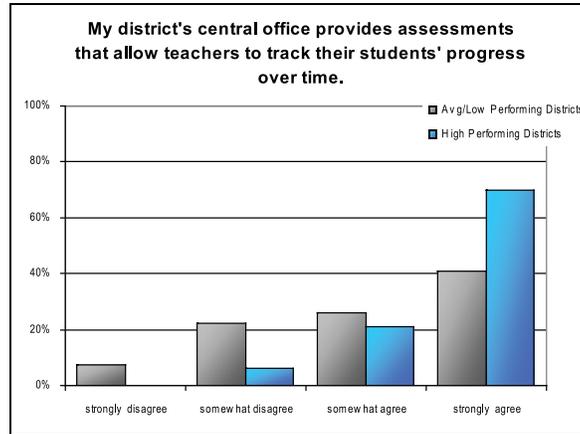
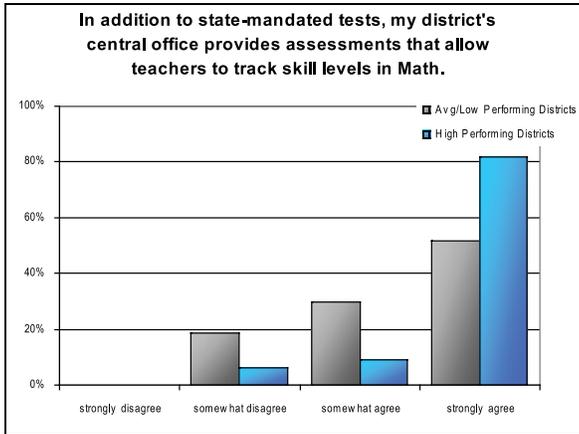
High performers create new leadership roles. Investing in certificated personnel does not stop at money. It extends to providing strong in-district career paths. High performers offer opportunities for educators at the school level to take on new leadership roles.



High Performers use Data for Continuous Improvement: Data-based decision making has been a theme in school improvement for almost a decade. It is notable, though, that there are still marked differences between how principals in high-performing and principals in lower-performing districts describe data use in their districts. Survey data from principals paints a picture of more complex and sophisticated assessment systems in the higher-performing districts. According to their principals, high-achieving districts are more likely (73% strongly agree vs. 37% in lower-performing districts) to use multiple standards-based assessment measures. The high performers are more likely to use locally-adopted assessments in addition to state mandated ones in both reading and math, and they are more likely than the lower performers to allow teachers to track students' progress over time. Not surprisingly, given this level of investment in assessment, high-performing districts are more likely to provide disaggregated data, more likely to provide schools with support in analyzing the assessment data, and more likely to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs—especially for English Language Learners.

High Performers Invest and Use Multiple Assessments Allowing for Quick, Accurate, and User-Friendly Reporting on Student Learning





One principal at a high-performing site summed up the key support they received from the district central office: They provide “high accountability; staff development; ... ongoing training for principals; [and] funds for intervention, intercession and after-school programs. Also, the central office keeps abreast in the latest research-based information and materials for interventions and English learners.”

What does this all look like in practice? Three case studies shed more light on these practices.

Focusing on Explicit Equity Goals: OAK GROVE SCHOOL DISTRICT



District Overview

Located in the southeastern corner of San Jose, California, Oak Grove is tucked between the San Jose foothills to the east and Canoas Creek to the west. In 2004, the district served 11,636 students in 20 schools: 16 elementary schools, 3 middle schools and 1 community day school.¹

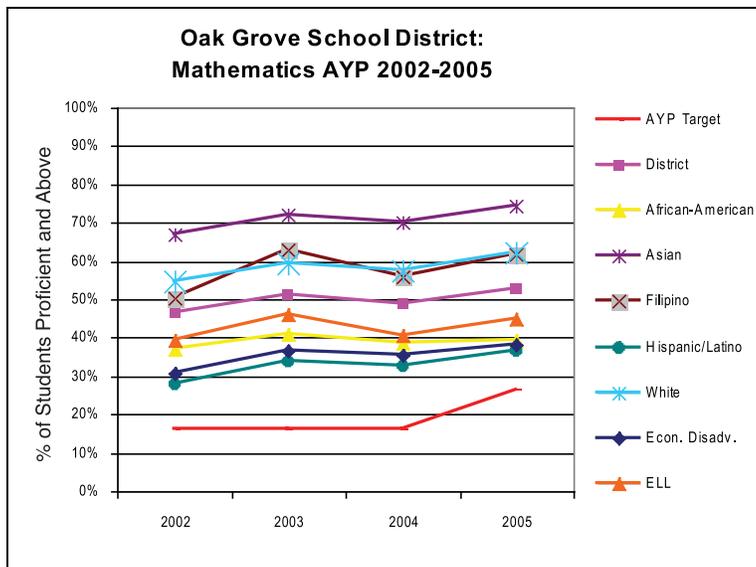
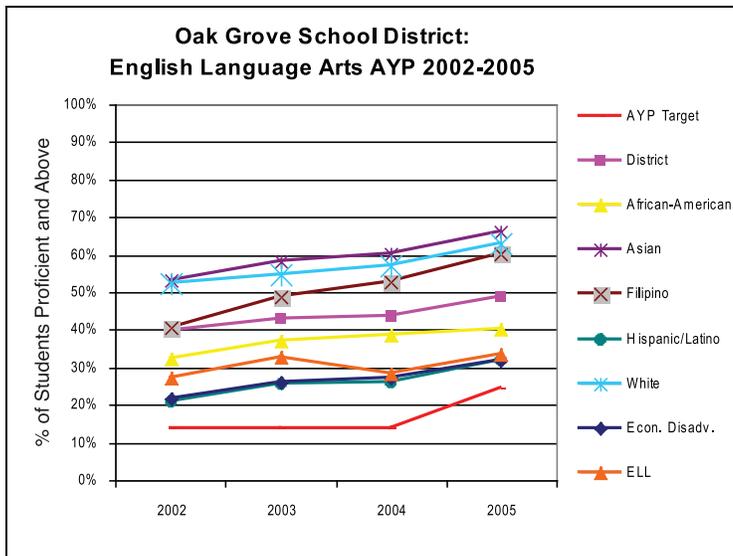
Despite its proximity to Silicon Valley, Oak Grove is not a wealthy district. A flurry of new apartment structures and homes have been recently built within the district's boundaries, and all schools in the district serve student bodies that have some degree of poverty. Most schools have one-third of the student body living in poverty, while four Title I elementary schools have between two-thirds to nearly 90% poverty. Overall, 41% of students in the district are eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRLP).

The percentage of Asian and African-American students in the district has remained relatively constant over the past 10 years, while the percentage of White students has decreased by approximately 20% in that same time frame. The Latino/Hispanic student body is the most rapidly growing population with an increase of nearly 13% percent in the last 7 years. Thirty-nine percent of students in the district are Hispanic/Latino, 28.4% are White, 17.5% are Asian, 5.8% are African-American, and 3.1% are Filipino.

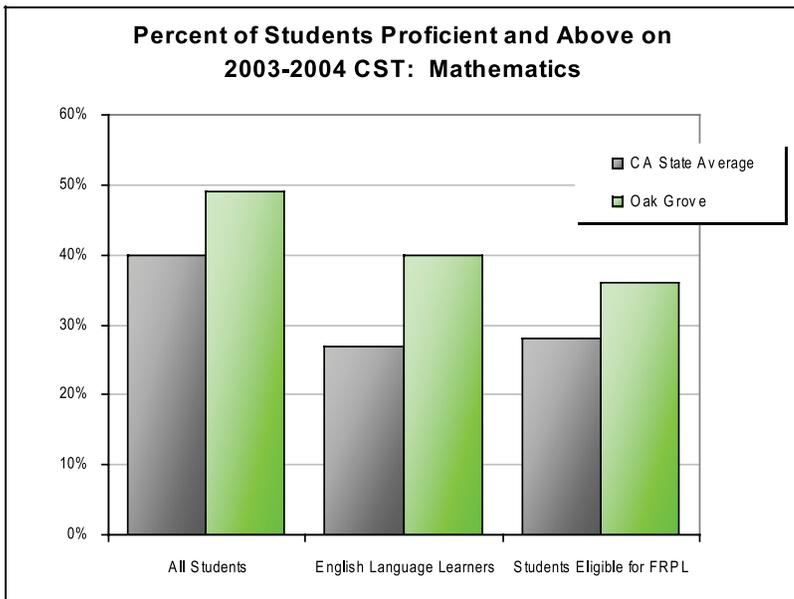
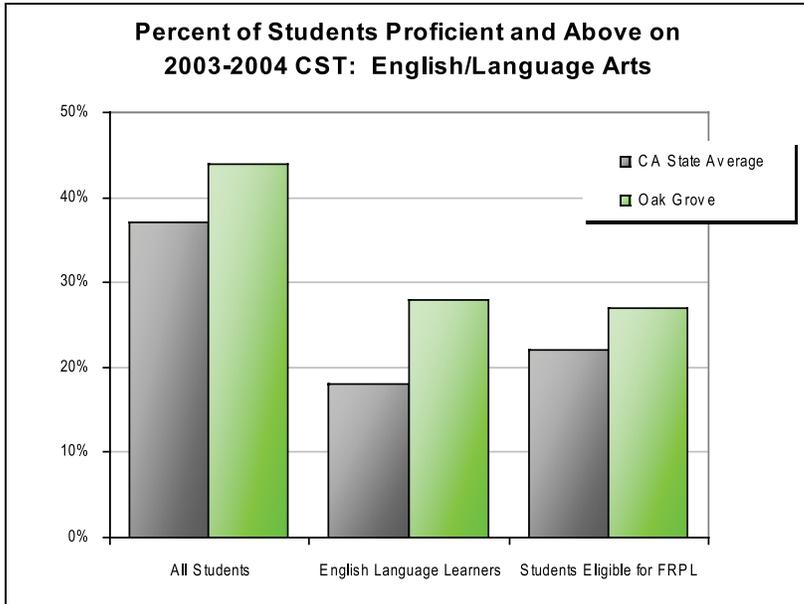
Twenty-seven percent of Oak Grove students are English Language Learners (ELL). Of these students, 63.1% speak Spanish, while 18.5% speak Vietnamese. The population of English Language Learners has increased by nearly 2/3 in the past 10 years.

Student Achievement

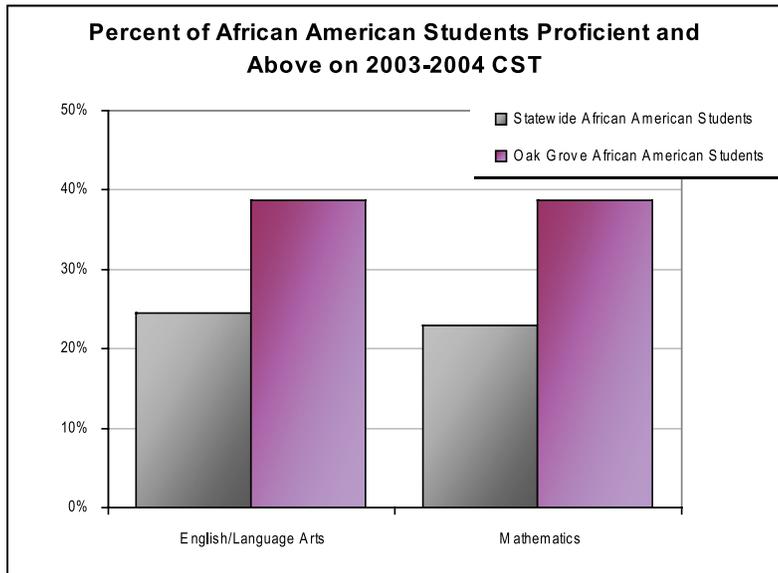
Oak Grove’s priorities and activities are paying off in terms of student performance. The graphs below show the district’s performance over time in terms of the percent of students scoring “proficient” or above on the California Standards Test (CST) in English Language Arts and Mathematics. All student subgroups exceed the state’s Adequate Yearly Progress target and are on an overall upward trend. The performance of some subgroups declined in 2004, but rebounded the following year.



Oak Grove outperforms the state average in overall student performance on the English Language Arts and Mathematics CST. Additionally, as shown in the graphs below, English Language Learners and students eligible for FRPL in the district beat state averages for their peer subgroups.



Also of note is Oak Grove's explicit focus on raising achievement for African American students. As illustrated in the graphs below, African American students in Oak Grove dramatically outperform the state average on the CST. Additionally, Oak Grove performs above the top ten demographically comparable schools in the state in terms of achievement by African American students.



OAK GROVE: A SMALL, FOCUSED, and EFFECTIVE DISTRICT

Often, small or medium-sized districts like Oak Grove are ignored in discussions about district reform. Yet, of California's nearly 1,100 school districts, 945 are 15,000 students or smaller. As a group, these small districts serve nearly 2.5 million students, or about 40% of all students in California. Of course, some of these California districts are much smaller than Oak Grove and have relatively little capacity in the district office. Such very small districts typically rely on County Offices of Education to play many of the roles of a traditional district offices. But for many others, Oak Grove serves as an interesting example of a district that is relatively small but also demonstrably effective.

Oak Grove is also of interest because its student population—one-third students in poverty, 40% Hispanic/Latino, 6% African American—closely mirrors that of the state as a whole. Yet the district's performance beats state averages overall and, in particular, with African American students. "Oak Grove is, I think, the best kept secret in California," said Kristi Porter, former President of the Oak Grove School District (OGSD) Board of Trustees.

This case study examines how the district central office plays key roles in raising achievement for its students. Board members and district administrators in Oak Grove are:

- **Framers of Action.** They have made an explicit and public commitment to raising student achievement overall with a particularly strong and explicit emphasis on closing the achievement gap for African American and Latino students;
- **Providers of Feedback.** The district is providing an undistorted picture of reality using high quality student data. Disaggregated data helps everyone in the district maintain focus on the gaps in student achievement. And, by building systems and structures which help teachers and site administrators look at student data, the district creates feedback loops that fuel a cycle of continuous improvement in teaching and learning;

- **Brokers of Knowledge.** Oak Grove has created a strong professional development culture in the district and developed a series of strategic partnerships to infuse new ideas and learning. Some partners bring expertise to help teachers work more effectively with African American students and English Learners. Others contribute sophisticated data analysis and knowledge of how to bring about systemic change;
- **Engaging Parents as Partners.** Parents—particularly African American and Latino parents—play an important role in the district both as advocates for their children and as partners with the district in supporting student learning.
- **Boundary Spanners.** Oak Grove has developed systems and structures to span the boundaries between classrooms, schools and administrators, thus accelerating system-wide capacity to close the achievement gap.

OAK GROVE FRAMES THE ACTION: A DISTRICT COMMITTED TO EQUITY

Equity—the search for an education system in which race, class and language no longer are predictors of educational outcomes—has become a common theme among education reformers and even policymakers. But at the district level, the picture is more complex, and many district leaders are caught between political pressures to treat all schools and all students equally, and accountability pressures to raise scores for underachieving groups. In Oak Grove, the picture is different. The mantra: “Equity is not equal” is heard throughout Oak Grove, from the superintendent, board members, district staff, principals and teachers. Former Board president Kristi Porter explained what this means for the district: “where the greatest need is, is where the greatest effort needs to be put.” Porter expanded, “My kids would say ‘Did you love us all the same?’ And my answer was, ‘No, I didn’t.’ Now that sounds awful as a parent but I loved more the person who was really down and needed it. I loved more the person with their wisdom teeth out. It’s not that you don’t love them equally but when somebody needs that extra attention then that extra attention goes to them.”

Superintendent Manny Barbara is more direct about where he sees the greatest needs:

“A large percentage of students are mobile, poor, and don’t speak English. You look at the data...I don’t make it up. Kids of color are not doing well. We were not making it with these kids. We had to call it for what it is and state it as a district initiative. It’s important and can’t be hidden.”

While careful to note commitment to raising overall student achievement, Superintendent Barbara, board members, and other district administrators in Oak Grove frequently and consistently frame the work of the district as closing the achievement gap for Black and Latino students. To provide a unifying frame, the district developed and the Board adopted a five-year plan with clearly delineated goals for ethnic sub-groups to close the achievement gap.

The plan is posted on the district website for public review. It outlines long-term and short-term priorities, objectives, and activities intended to meet the desired objectives, including an explicit section on “Closing the Achievement Gap.” This goal has even acquired an acronym, CTAG, that is used throughout the district. The district’s five-year plan is reviewed and revised annually with input from all stakeholders.

With the strong public support of board members like Porter, district administrators have been able to allocate resources where they are most needed. In order to create an environment where teachers and students can focus on teaching and learning, many budget priorities lean toward Title I schools, which serve students from poor families. District administrator Tom Burgei states:

“We have needier kids. When we designate schools as Title 1, we recognize that the playing field isn’t level for kids who come from second language backgrounds or from poorer backgrounds, so we recognize and support schools with Title 1 funds and no one here blinks an eye at that. So as a district, we pretty much have taken the same approach [with other funds as well].”

Kristi Porter agreed and added, “I think where the greatest need is, the greatest effort needs to be put; but that doesn’t mean you disregard other people. The best example is the modernization...the schools that had bigger populations of those low-performing kids—those schools were old. And those schools were terrible. So we wanted those schools to be brought up to all of our other schools. So a very big proportion of those funds went to [our Title I schools] to make those schools places that kids could be proud of and that they would match those schools in areas of a little bit higher socio-economic groups.”

Christopher School’s principal relates that the teachers and students are now proud of their new library and improved school facilities. People who visit the campus are surprised that the school resides in a high poverty area. “It’s a gorgeous library, the best library in the District. It was remodeled...and that was gift. And the first thing people say when they come is ‘oh my goodness I didn’t know that Christopher School was this nice.’” Updated facilities not only breed pride within the school, but also pride within the community it serves. School aesthetics are no longer a hindrance to focusing on instruction. Students in Oak Grove’s Title I schools do not perceive their schools as inferior because almost all facilities have been renovated.

There are other examples of how the frame of “equity is not equal” in Oak Grove guides the work of district staff and resource allocation. Students throughout the District attend all-day kindergarten, but if funding were to diminish this program would most likely persist in the Title I schools. Porter said, “Our Title I kids, we’re going to see that we have all-day kindergarten there as long as we possibly can. Our other schools that aren’t Title I, maybe their kids have had preschool and other things so maybe they don’t need all-day kindergarten.” The district also ensures that teachers in the four Title I schools receive additional support from literacy coaches, who model lessons, observe classrooms, and offer feedback concerning teacher practice. Literacy coaches provide the implementation follow-through from district trainings and help teachers further develop their literacy instruction. The district also offers a higher level of support to principals in Title I schools. It has placed an experienced administrator, Barbara Service, on special assignment in schools on a weekly basis to provide additional coaching to Title I principals. In addition, staff from the nonprofit group Partners in School Innovation, working with Americorps volunteers, are on-site four days a week supporting the implementation of Oak Grove’s continuous improvement process by observing students, collecting and analyzing student data, and helping teachers facilitate grade level meetings. The non-Title I schools do not get the same level of support, but are not completely overlooked. There is a “traveling literacy coach” who circulates throughout the non-Title I schools. Joyce Millner, a thirty-year Oak Grove veteran currently employed at the district level as a teacher on special assignment proudly summarizes the work of her district, “Its leadership is visionary and the actions support the vision.”

OAK GROVE BUILDS FEEDBACK LOOPS FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Through its Educational Services department, the district seeks to provide the board, district and site administrators, and teachers an undistorted picture of reality using high quality student data. The goal is to help everyone in the district maintain the focus on the gaps in student achievement. By building systems and structures which help teachers and site administrators both examine and respond to student data, the district creates feedback loops that fuel a cycle of continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

High-quality information on student achievement helps Oak Grove’s management team pinpoint areas for change and set specific goals for improvement. Over the last five to six years, Oak Grove has become much more specific about both gaps and goals and has focused resources on accelerating the learning of all students, but especially those in targeted racial and language proficiency groups. “[We did this] long before the State and the Feds were requiring it. We’ve probably been doing that for 15 years,” assistant superintendent Tom Burgei recalls. “When NCLB came along, that helped, because it said that success is defined by all kids, not just some kids,” says Superintendent Barbara. In order to ensure that all kids are successful, OGSD “keeps the needs of the students front and center and...disaggregates data to understand programmatically what the students need.”

Feedback loop #1: Using student assessments to focus on sub-groups

In addition to annual state standardized test data, the district uses several finer-grained diagnostic measures throughout the school year. Teachers report Houghton-Mifflin Reading and Language Arts interim assessments scores to the district three times per year and elementary grade teachers also report data from their version of running records. Teachers are also expected to give three writing prompts per year. The district holds regular meetings—called quarterly reviews—in which administrators, principals and some Title I teachers come together to assess student progress toward grade level proficiency and refine district-wide practices. The district takes an intense look at its behaviors and makes adjustments during each cycle. In this way, diagnostic data informs next steps for teachers.

The explicit focus placed on race and language within data analysis pushes administrators and teachers to face the reality of the achievement gap between White and Asian students and Latino and African-American students and those with varying language proficiencies. “The use of data makes these kids visible,” Joyce Millner states.

Feedback loop #2: Building a universal student database

There are also efforts underway to make data more accessible and useful to teachers and site administrators on a daily basis. Teachers can use data to track individual student and whole class achievement in their classrooms, and the district uses a data access system called eScholar to analyze data across the district. In 2001, Stupski Foundation funding allowed Oak Grove to purchase eScholar to analyze California STAR tests, California English Language Development Tests, district interim assessments such as data from running records, and various other program-specific language arts and math tests. This data access system permits the district not only to monitor student performance, but also to organize and disaggregate data by sub-group. Additionally, the district can track yearly increases in their Academic Performance Index (API) scores for all subgroups. Before eScholar, the student data was scattered in different isolated “silos” in the district office. Director of Educational Services Kathy Harris vividly remembers the frustration she felt as a school principal when she could not figure out what was going on with a student having difficulties, “We had all these little pieces but trying to get to the data was real complex.”

The transition to eScholar is still in process. While district staff are finding it a useful tool for handling large stores of data, teachers are still dealing with the change and do not necessarily use the access system. For an untrained user, generating reports is time consuming and intensive. Harris acknowledges that “the printable reports are there. Sometimes it’s just easier for them to call me and say, “Kathy, will you give me [this report].” Recently, the district added a new feature to their data system called eScholar Express, which makes it easier for users to retrieve useful data and view it in graphic form.

Moreover, the slow turn-around rate for receiving disaggregated scores leads to a lag between actual instruction and when the scores are released to the teachers. There is no immediate feedback, and this makes it harder for teachers to use the data reports from eScholar to inform their instruction. This is an issue that the district is working to resolve.

Feedback loop #3: Data managers for Title I schools

In the meanwhile, however, the district has provided teachers with other ways to analyze student data. Partners in School Innovation, an educational reform non-profit, works with Title I schools and helps by serving as data managers. This means, for example, helping teachers locate student achievement trends within the Houghton-Mifflin (HM) quarterly tests. Partners also place the data into reader-friendly charts. They utilize HM item-analysis sheets which break down the results by California content area and standard. Teachers in the district have been taught to use an approach called “focal students,” in which teachers focus attention on a small number of students at the bottom of the achievement gap who are in need of specific skills and instruction. The goal is not to improve instruction only for these students, but rather to ensure that

new approaches are evaluated carefully for impact on the students in most need. Computer-generated reports give the average percent correct for focal students, non-focal students, and whole class on the overall test and content-specific areas like reading comprehension and vocabulary. The item-analysis shows how students perform on standard-specific questions; therefore, teachers can see how their students perform in relationship to the California Content Standards. Additionally, teachers use the item-analysis data to inform instructional decisions and collaborate around student achievement and teacher practices. Administrators and teachers are grateful for the additional support. “The data began to be meaningful,” says Principal Andy Garcia.

Feedback loop #4: The cycle of inquiry and focal student strategy

The focal student strategy originates with Springboard Schools, a San Francisco-based, nonprofit, school-reform organization. Its goal is to sharpen the focus on equity at the classroom level. The District mandated that every teacher must choose focal students—teachers in Title I schools choose 5 focal students; teachers in non-Title I schools choose 3. Focal students are African-American or Latino and are at Basic proficiency level in test scores. Teachers were to study and evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching strategies on focal students within their Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry (ROCOI) teams, with the ultimate goal of moving those focal students to grade level proficiency as assessed by the California Standards Test. Using ROCOI, teachers use data to construct an inquiry question. They identify focal students, focal students’ skill gaps in relationship to California content standards, and effective teaching strategies to instruct focal students. During a period of around eight-weeks, teachers practice the “focal strategy” and reflect on their progress with colleagues by analyzing student work and observing each other in practice. Notes Barbara Service, “The important paradigm shift is that it is the teacher asking for information on how to change their practice to meet the needs of the student. “ Cycles look different depending upon the school, but all schools attempt data-driven inquiry. The expectation is that what teachers learn from adapting their teaching strategies based on input from focal students will transfer into more effective instruction for all students.

How did district administrators choose to focus on African American and Latino students at Basic Proficiency? To determine appropriate focus, Director of Educational Services Kathy Harris explains that she investigated Oak Grove data from K-8 and also tracked Oak Grove students at the high school level. She wanted to determine upward mobility between proficiency levels and also who and how many students resided in each proficiency level as measured on AYP. From her extensive data analysis, she found that there was mobility between Far Below Basic and Below Basic: students do move into the Basic level. However, she explains that “over time we have the data to show they maintain or kind of hang in there—they get stuck in Basic.” Most of the Basic students were Latino and African-American. Harris saw that while there were interventions and resources are available for extremely underperforming students, once those students reached a certain level, the safety nets were removed. Thus the priority for the elementary and intermediate schools became moving students from Basic to Proficient.

This strategy is impacting classroom practice. In many schools, teachers are planning lessons around the needs of their focal students and develop and practice specific teaching strategies to move more students to proficient. Harris emphasizes that this is the goal of the focal student strategy: “it is not about fixing the kids; focal students is about fixing me, as a teacher.”

Choosing focal students has not come without some controversy. All teachers do not agree with the criteria for selecting focal students. Some teachers questioned whether engaging in inquiry about a few students would be detrimental for the rest of the class by taking too much of their attention away from other students. Other teachers did not agree with selecting focal students at Basic proficiency, because they wanted to focus on lower-performing students. Oscar Ortiz, a former literacy coach who moved on to become Assistant Principal at a Title I school says, “It was definitely a change that took some time, because as teachers we try to focus on our lowest students, the kids who need the most help.” Nevertheless, in Ortiz’s school, teachers are beginning to see the value of choosing focal students.

“It has been a change for teachers, but they see the value and see how [focusing on focal students] affects their teaching. They become better teachers in general for every student. When you are able to narrow it down or study something, you are able to tweak your teaching to make it that exact. We look to see how the focal students are doing, but we also study what we call the ripple effect to see how the teaching is affecting the whole class. We don’t just look at the data for these students, we look at the data for the entire class and the entire grade level to see how it is helping everyone else, because if it’s not we need to try something else.”

Despite any potential controversy around focal students, the district office has data that supports the focal student strategy: as focal students move to proficient there is a student performance increase for all students in the class.

In summary, by developing these four feedback loops, Oak Grove has put mechanisms in place to a) evaluate progress towards the goals of raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap and b) fuel a continuous process of improving instruction.

OAK GROVE BROKERS KNOWLEDGE: THE CONTINUAL INFUSION OF NEW IDEAS AND LEARNING

Oak Grove School District seeks to be a “well-informed consumer” when attempting to connect with the outside expertise that teachers need. They contract with various external service providers and try hard to use these strategic partnerships to build their knowledge base and meet the district’s goals. Oak Grove either maintains partnerships or has partnered in the past with local funders, San Jose State University, the two nonprofit organizations mentioned above (Springboard Schools and Partners in School Innovation), and two equity-focused organizations which have provided district and school staff opportunities to explore and take action in response to the role of race and ethnicity in their own and students’ lives.

Continuous Content-Based Learning to Close the Achievement Gap

Oak Grove maintains a tiered professional development model for both teachers and principals that places particular emphasis on the skills that will aid in closing the achievement gap for African-American and Latino students. New teachers within OGSD are supported through the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program. Using BTSA funds, OGSD implements a new teacher induction program which focuses on providing both support and formative assessment for new teachers. Oak Grove takes seriously the BTSA objective to “enable beginning teachers to be effective in teaching students who are culturally, linguistically, and academically diverse.” The second and third tiers of the professional development model focus on training regarding curriculum content and strategies, the four types of reading, Noyce’s Writer’s Workshop, equity specific strategies, data and assessment, and facilitation. The fourth tier focuses on teacher leadership skills and culminates in leadership roles for teachers on Grade Level teams. Fourth tier teachers are also encouraged to pursue a Master’s in Teacher Leadership through Oak Grove’s partnership with San Jose State University. Qualified Oak Grove teachers who choose to pursue graduate work earn a M.A. and a Tier 1 administrative services credential.

Oak Grove has also sought to create a strong support system for teachers by giving them access to a range of high-quality professional development opportunities. For example, the Noyce Foundation offers targeted writing professional development. Eight of the sixteen elementary schools within the District engage in a program entitled *Every Child a Reader and Writer* (ECRW). Requiring a school-wide commitment, the *Every Child a Reader & Writer* initiative brings “intensive early literacy professional development to districts focusing on the teaching of writing, high-level standards and content and ongoing professional development for teachers, coaches, principals, and district administrators.” The district’s commitment to common goals has not led it to mandate a single pathway to that goal, so not all schools within the District engage in this program despite the fact that participants report seeing gains in writing instruction. One administrator on special assignment says, “Some young teachers who have had a lot of Noyce training, I see them really

starting to use their prior knowledge around children’s choice and those behaviors that we talked about specifically in a mini lesson that comes from Noyce. [It] really helps students of color. So that’s a definite hands-on kind of strategy that I see working around equity.”

In addition to these optional supports there are strategies that run throughout the district. The district is working to bring best practice strategies to classrooms in order to accelerate progress for English Learners. In the primary grades, teachers divide students by English proficiency levels (CELDT 1, 2 and 3) for 30 minutes of ELD instruction each day. In order to support teachers in developing English Learners, Oak Grove provided training on vocabulary development for English Learners (frontloading). In the past, OGSD has provided other teaching strategies targeted to English Learners such as *Guided Language Acquisition Design* (GLAD) training and differentiated instruction.

District-wide Coaching Partnerships

Oak Grove has committed itself to creating change at multiple levels of the system. To do this, the district works with a host of outside providers, including two that provide coaching on continuous improvement processes. Partners in School Innovation and Springboard Schools have worked closely together for years. Partners in School Innovation provides on-site implementation support for schools on what they call the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry. Partners—usually Americorps Volunteers—are on site four days a week.

Springboard provides experienced former administrators who can coach superintendents and district office staff as well as principals. A portion of Oak Grove’s five year plan outlines that they will “implement [Springboard School’s] grant contract agreement focusing on improving school performance through District-wide reform.” Springboard brings the idea of “de-privatizing practice” at all levels of the school system, as Oak Grove also uses Springboard’s Quarterly Review process to break down isolation and foster reciprocal accountability. A district administrator states “I think Partners and [Springboard] have been such a perfect partnership. It’s helped us to accelerate *our* learning here in the district office. Its footprints are everywhere—from words like ‘de-privatization’ to quarterly reviews to just the conversations.”

Equity-Focused Learning

Oak Grove is also using outside organizations to lead and foster difficult conversations on race, language and equity and what it all means at the classroom level. The district has worked with Glenn Singleton of the Pacific Educational Group and Edwin Javius with EDEquity.

Many administrators cited the impact of this work on their thinking. Glenn Singleton’s “Beyond Diversity” workshop was initially conducted for principals, but to deepen the impact, a broader group that also includes district staff and teachers now participates. These groups are called Equity Teams. Teachers are charged with bringing explicit conversations about race issues back to the school site. In addition to this workshop, Singleton works with the district leadership and teachers several times each year around issues of diversity.

In the last two years, every school has developed an Equity Team. This team looks different at Title I and non-Title I schools, but essentially they take the learning from the intensive equity training to their schools and engage in “courageous conversations” about patterns in student performance and the impact of race on both students and teachers. Teachers are challenged to consider the “whiteness” of their teaching and the results are both self-examination and changes in the classroom. Title I schools “use the equity lens to make their decisions,” says Barbara Service, a Director in Educational Services. The superintendent asserts that in order to change the culture, teachers should talk about race. “Whether you agree or not, people have it on their radar.” Principal Julie Hing Pacheco from Edenvale elementary school notes how difficult it has been for the staff to keep equity at the center. “We may be frightened. But we’re doing it anyway. On our staff, they’re willing to talk about it. I feel the passion from the staff about why they are here.”

To deepen the impact at the classroom level, Oak Grove brought in Edwin Javius from EDEquity. His charge is to help teachers understand how to translate the personal change work led by Singleton into classroom change. Javius works with intermediate schools and believes Oak Grove is making progress: “the leaders are doing the reflection...the next step is what does it look like in practice.” He acknowledges that some teachers still feel that the equity work is something extra, perhaps because it has not been completely infused into the culture of schools. A few of the elementary schools report that the equity work has been very personal and important, but that it remains a challenge to link that training to the classroom.

For the last three years, the District has offered two courses, called *Digging Deeper I* and *II*, which are designed to help classroom teachers to work on classroom strategies to close the gap, but only around 30-35 teachers attend. Joyce Millner, who has worked at the district level for the past four years focusing on curriculum and issues of diversity, leads these sessions. Teachers read equity-explicit educational publications like *From Rage to Hope* and *The DreamKeepers*, share their personal practices around the work on equity, and take turns modeling these practices for each other. Additionally, the group discusses creating motivating classrooms and student learning styles. *Digging Deeper* serves as an essential component of continued equity-explicit teacher professional development, but Oak Grove’s commitment to choice for teachers means that teachers are encouraged, but not required, to attend.

Challenge #1: Sustaining change

These support providers have aided OGSD in creating a professional teaching culture which is based in teacher inquiry and leadership, and have also offered teachers access to a range of new practices, many of which are connected to the district’s equity goals. However, the scarcity of resources makes it difficult to sustain the work. Barbara Service muses, “I’m not sure that we really could at this point sustain our learning. I worry about that a little bit. Certainly some things would definitely stay in place. And we would move forward around continuous improvement—because we were doing that before [reform organizations] came on the scene. But I definitely know we wouldn’t work as fast or as deep. It is important for our students that we stay focused to accelerate student and teacher learning.”

Challenge #2: Managing the risk of burnout

With so many programs in place, some teachers feel overwhelmed. Manny Barbara explains that “some people love it, but some felt ‘oh my god, we’re barely getting the other stuff. We have GLAD training, language training, reciprocal teaching, differentiating curriculum training. We need some time to learn and implement.’ We only have 3 full professional development days and we used to have 5. When people say they’re overwhelmed it is because they don’t have time to talk about the significant amount of professional development and learn it. Add the accountability overlay, that’s the stress people are feeling. We have release days, and we use them as much as we can.”

Rather than disregarding teacher feedback, district leaders try to listen carefully to the frustrations expressed by teachers who are being asked to master so many new skills so quickly. The Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent Tom Burgei facilitate “Listening Committee” meetings, which include the Literacy and Equity representatives from all the schools in the district. The purpose of the Listening Committee was simple: “you talk, we listen.” At one such meeting, teachers said very clearly that they wanted the district to slow down, that the professional development asked them to learn “too much too fast.” Some teachers particularly did not like the new frontloading content training designed to help English Language Learners. As one teacher put it, “Stop throwing new things on our plates. We have enough to digest.” The superintendent expressed his appreciation for teachers and vowed to support their efforts. “This is really hard work and I want you to know that you are not alone.” Based on teacher input, the district has revised its professional development plan, dividing it into four tiers thus giving teachers more control over the pace at which they cover new material and allowing teachers to choose topics such as frontloading as electives. In addition, middle school leaders, who expressed a desire for greater input, are working with district staff to design the content of their professional development days.

OAK GROVE ENGAGES AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO PARENTS AS PARTNERS

All school districts probably make an effort to reach out and to engage the support of parents and community members. Oak Grove makes a particular effort to engage communities of color. District leaders see this as a critical component of their strategy for accelerating the learning of all students. Joyce Millner explains that she made phone calls to the parents and explained the benefits of participating in what was called the “Koffee Klatch”—informal meetings in the students’ homes, in which District leaders would ask African-American parents “what is working in the District for your children, what’s not working, and what can we do to be better?” In 1999, the first year that the group was established, the superintendent attended every meeting..

Currently, all schools have an African-American Koffee Klatch. Additionally, a similar group exists for Latino parents named HABLA. Following the lead of the superintendent, site administrators like Andy Garcia are willing to listen and engage in dialogue with these race-based groups. These site administrators are embracing the opportunity for dialogue. For example, when Latino parents at Christopher school realized how far student achievement lagged behind other schools, they called a parent meeting and declared an educational crisis. “Our children are failing. This is serious.” As a result of this conversation Latino parents at Christopher now have higher expectations for their children and their school. They are looking at the data to track progress and trying harder to find ways to support their kids. Oak Grove also follows through on parent feedback as evidenced by acknowledging a parent concern relating to curriculum books. Oak Grove reallocated funds to supply classrooms with more books about and written by people of color. “Affinity groups are essentially are all about empowering parents and recognizing that empowering comes at the price of shifting the balance of power.” The superintendent realizes this shift and is willing to challenge the status quo in an attempt to close the achievement gap.

OAK GROVE AS A BOUNDARY SPANNER

Oak Grove understands it takes more than goals to improve. It also takes systems and structures that create supports, and it takes incentives for adults to change their daily practice. Oak Grove acknowledges when it needs help from outside consultants and experts, nevertheless, the District also realizes that they have an abundance of resources within the community. OGSD works to encourage knowledge sharing between teachers and administrators and between the schools and the community. Every school in Oak Grove has time for teachers to collaborate built into the weekly school schedule. Superintendent Barbara explains that the district altered school scheduling to allot for a one hour slot on Tuesdays for teacher collaboration. These adjusted Tuesdays are made possible by adding minutes to the day every other day of the week. The District and the teacher’s union created an agreement on how this time would be utilized, called 1/3, 1/3, 1/3. One of the three adjusted Tuesdays per month is for grade level team planning, one is designed for individual preparation work for the classroom, and one third of the Tuesdays are for staff development and training. Teachers use their individual time to follow up on Houghton-Mifflin questions or concerns, address some equity training, or for lesson planning. Grade-level collaboration typically consists of grade level team members conferencing around a protocol that focuses the conversation on specific questions about student work or grade-level planning. Grade-level collaboration can also take the form of cross-grade level conversation. At one Oak Grove school, second and fourth grade teachers participated in a third grade meeting where third grade teachers received feedback on what students need in the third grade. They also reviewed curriculum and assessment alignment. Control of collaborative time is controversial, especially at the Title I schools, but the time is valued by all.

Team structures are also in place to encourage a professional learning community among teachers. In every school in the district, Continuous Improvement Teams (CIT) work as a distributed leadership body to evaluate student and sometimes teacher data, identify best practices at the school-site, and in some cases to

design staff development. The CIT typically consists of one grade level leader from each grade, the principal, resource specialists, and in the Title I schools, a staff member from Partners in School Innovation. At one Title I school in the District, the CIT meets after school once a week and discusses progress toward results-oriented goals at each grade level. They analyze data and focus their resources down into grade levels of highest need. They use the Houghton-Mifflin quarterly tests, bilingual data, and anecdotal data from the literacy coach's and Partners' observations of the teachers and focal students. Student data drives their conversations. In many Title I schools, the CIT and the Equity teams fold into one, while in non-Title I schools they are typically two separate entities. According to Service, "This is truly a teachers leading teachers model."

Additionally, the Continuous Improvement Teams consist of grade level team members. They come together at least once a week, sometimes more frequently depending on the school and the grade level, to discuss progress. They analyze focal student work and make adjustments to their teaching based on the focal student data and their interactions with the students. Some teachers supplement their independent planning time with Cycle of Inquiry updates in order to ensure that their changes in practice are planned for the next week. Schools personalize all aspects of the team learning structures, but this was a District-led initiative to promote collaborative work. Time is the primary issue with collaborative grouping. "The union does watch the time element really closely so teachers are not feeling that they're over-extended in one area. We consistently feel like we don't have enough time," says Barbara Service.

The district has also created some structures to capture voices that typically can be disenfranchised: teachers and administrators of color. "Manny's up-front vision about helping to support those leaders, giving them a lot of credibility and empowering them as an organization, their own allied group, and that they are our legacy to this district...we need that for our kids," an administrator says. The ALLIED (African American and Latino Leaders in Equity Development) group, which consists of African-American and Latino administrative leaders throughout the District, has a three-fold purpose: to provide support for administrators of color, for members to mentor staff of color who desire to move into administration and to support the district in the recruitment, hiring and retention of people of color. This group was specifically created to develop OGSD leaders of color.

"If we are fighting for equity, it means that inequity exists," concludes Ed Javius.

Conclusion: Equity and Oak Grove

Oak Grove is a district that has embraced the goal of closing the achievement gap not just because of accountability pressure but rather as a moral imperative. District leaders have been willing to go beyond lip service by setting explicit goals, directing scarce resources toward work with outside experts, and providing their teachers with a rich menu of resources for improving their practice. Perhaps as an inevitable result of the district's commitment to personal change as a necessary step toward classroom change, district leaders have made a strategic decision to centralize goals, assessment, data, a commitment to a continuous improvement process, and many decisions about curriculum. However, they allow teachers to make many choices about instructional approaches and about their own learning goals.

Promoting Unity Without Demanding Uniformity: ROWLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



DISTRICT OVERVIEW

Rowland Unified School District is located east of Los Angeles in the San Gabriel Valley region, including the cities of Walnut, La Puente, City of Industry, West Covina and the unincorporated areas of the city of Rowland Heights and Eastern Los Angeles County.

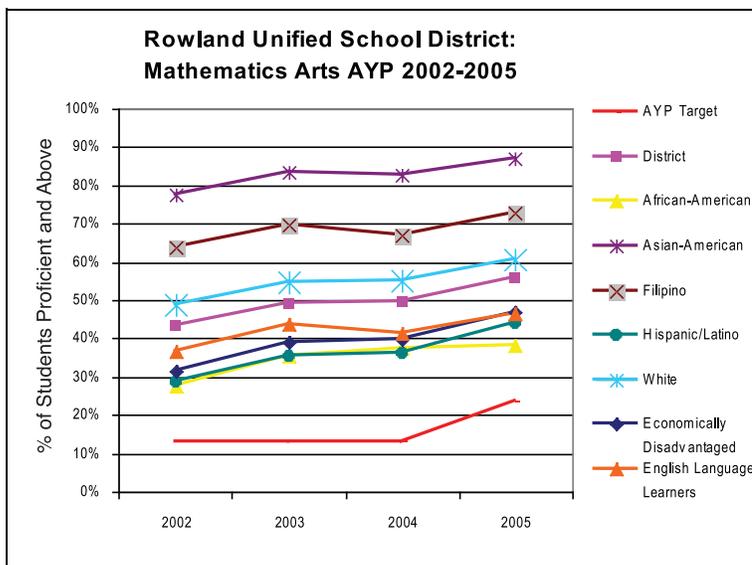
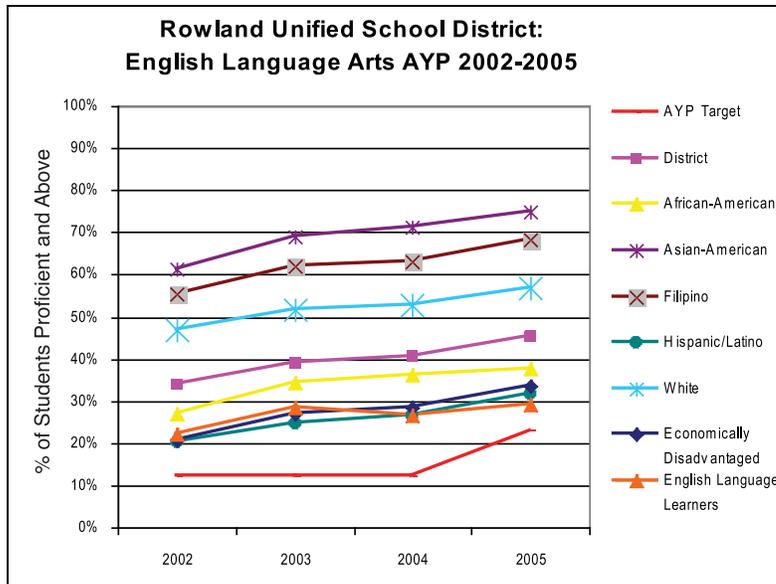
This K-12 district enrolls 18,384 students in 22 schools: 15 elementary, 3 middle, 2 high schools, 1 continuation high school and 1 community day school.² Fifty-five percent of students are eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL). The district is comprised primarily of Hispanic/Latino students (59.3%) with a significant number of Asian students (20.2%). Eight percent of students are Filipino, 5.9% are white, and 3.8% are African-American.

English Language Learners make up 31.5% of total enrollment in the district. Of these students, 76.4% are Spanish-speaking, 8.8% speak Mandarin, 3.8% speak Korean, 3.6% speak Filipino or Tagalog, and 3.1% speak Cantonese.

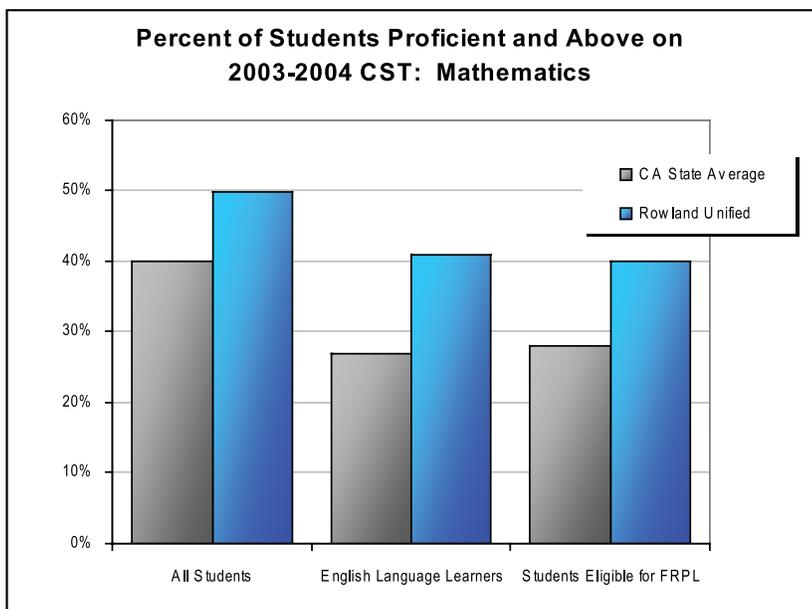
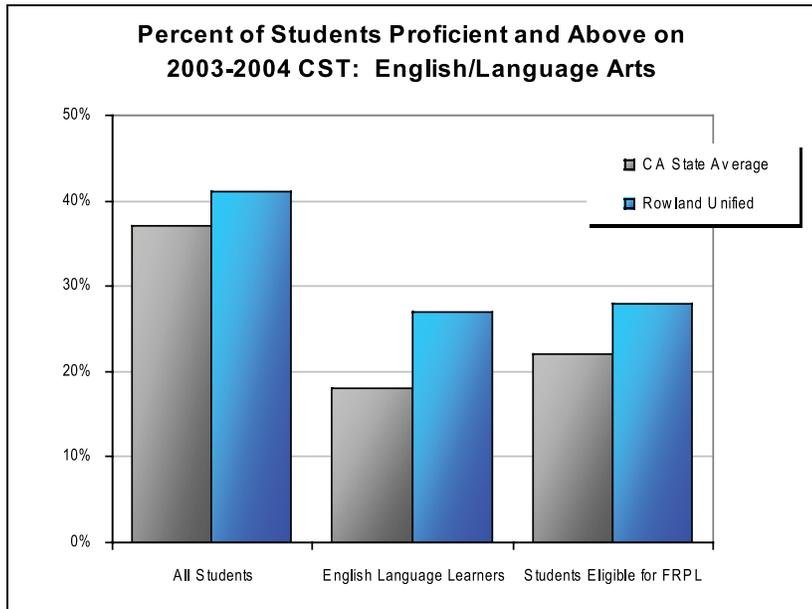
² All data referenced is from <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us> and <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>, 2004, unless otherwise noted.

Student achievement

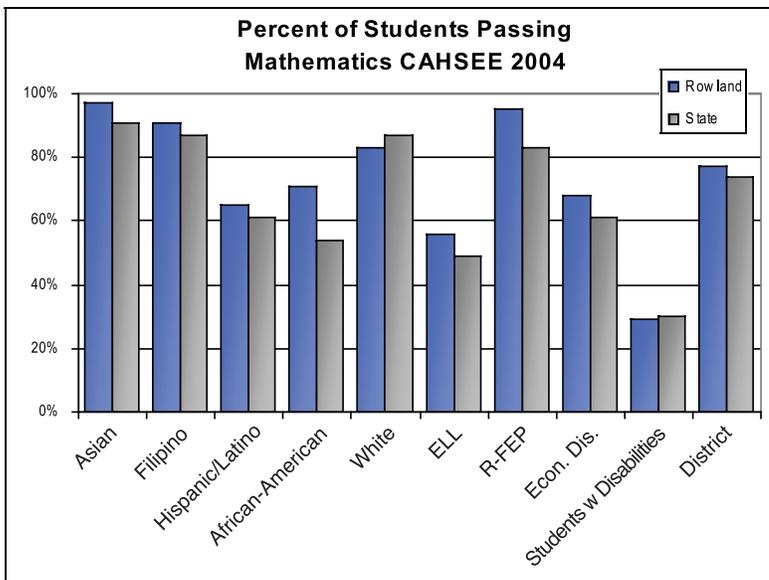
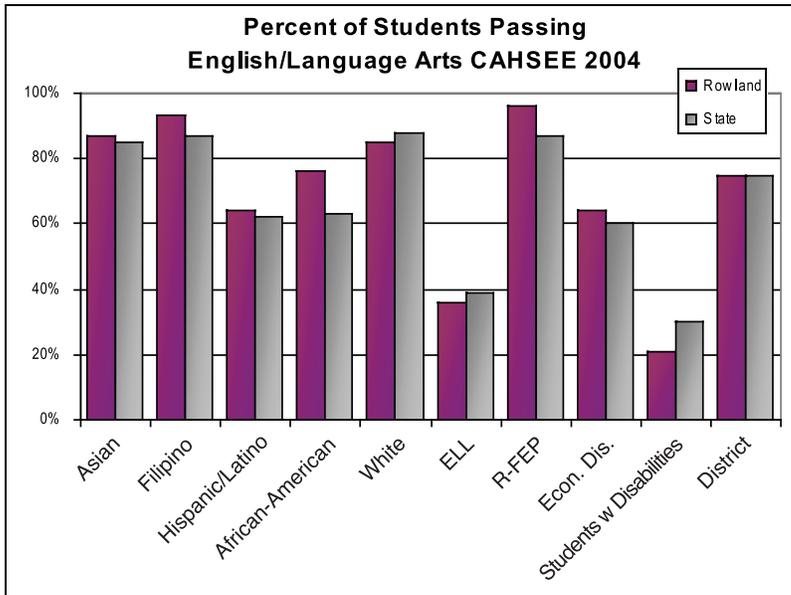
Student performance in the district is on an overall upward trend. As seen in the graphs below, the percent of students in the district scoring “proficient” and above on the English Language Arts and Mathematics California Standards Tests (CST) has generally been on the rise for all student subgroups. Though a sizeable achievement gap still exists between the highest and lowest performing subgroups in Rowland, the strong upward trend in achievement for all groups is notable.



Despite the persistence of the achievement gap in Rowland, the district is still consistently outperforming the state when it comes to English Language Learners and students eligible for FRPL. The graphs below show that English Language Learners, economically disadvantaged students, and all students in general in Rowland are beating the average of their state-wide peers on CST performance, both in English Language Arts and Mathematics.



In terms of High School performance, students district-wide are performing at or above the state average on the English Language Arts and Mathematics California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). Although white students and students with disabilities in Rowland are performing below the state average on CAHSEE, it is notable that traditionally under-performing subgroups such as Hispanic/Latino students, African-American students and economically disadvantaged students are beating the state averages in Rowland.



BALANCING COMMON PRACTICE WITH LOCAL INNOVATION

“It’s not one size fits all. It’s high expectations for all.”

RUSD presents a consistent picture of high academic achievement with a relatively low socio-economic status student group. A large proportion of students in the district are English Language Learners (31.5%), with Spanish speakers comprising three-quarters of this population. An even larger proportion of students are low-income, with 55% of students in the district meeting the eligibility standard for the Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL). Yet, when compared to districts with similar demographics, Rowland’s performance ranks among the top 10 comparable schools in the state.

Do consistently good results reflect a consistent approach? In many ways, Rowland is the opposite of a highly centralized district. It has no one model for success. Nor is the district an example of pure decentralization. In fact, the district seems an example of strategic compromise between these two extremes. Each school is different, some markedly so. One reason is geography and demographics. The district serves an ethnically diverse community living in a divided geographic area, an area literally cut into two by railroad tracks, with no central convening community space. The south side has a large number of Asian families of a higher socio-economic bracket; the north side is majority Hispanic/Latino with many families of a lower socio-economic status. There are exceptions to this trend, however: many residents of Walnut, on the north side, fit the higher socio-economic profile of the south side. The district continues to experience loss of students from this area to neighboring Walnut Valley School District.

Perhaps because of this level of diversity, Rowland Unified has always been a district that gives school sites great independence to innovate. Led by entrepreneurial principals, individual schools are given the authority to hire teachers, make budget decisions, forge partnerships with outside groups, raise additional school funds by renting out school facilities, seek out professional development opportunities and shape instruction. Yet there is also a commitment to some core elements. According to current Superintendent Maria Ott, “The district has great uniformity around core curriculum and programs. Sites work together and utilize a collaborative planning process to arrive at agreement on systemic efforts. For example, both high schools have the International Baccalaureate Program and the Career Certification Program. There are common benchmark tests—and these have been in place since well before NCLB made testing a core strategy for other districts. All elementary schools are implementing thinking maps. There is a unique combination of systemic mixed with site innovation. In fact, many of the systemic innovations originated at individual school sites.”

This case study examines how district administrators manage this vibrant patchwork quilt of schools to produce a picture of student results in which achievement levels, especially for English Language Learners, is well above state averages. These unifying threads include district leaders as:

- **Framers of Action.** The superintendent and other district leaders have made an explicit and public commitment to increased student achievement and gap closure for all sub-groups, including English Language Learners;
- **Alignment coaches.** District leaders work to align instructional efforts across the district so that there is coherent and consistent academic program for students. The structure of the district enhances alignment efforts and there are mechanisms in place to foster conversations between school sites on how to align efforts to raise student achievement.
- **Growers of human resources.** Professional development for teachers is a high priority and emphasizes topics that reflect teachers’ felt needs in teaching English Language Learners and poor children. Teachers and administrators know their skills are valued by district leaders and that there is room for career advancement. This has led to loyalty and longevity of the work force.

- **Brokers of Knowledge.** District administrators and board members act as knowledge brokers, bringing in academics and experts to provide training on best practices with English Language Learners and students in poverty. Administrators themselves are often significant sources of expertise. They facilitate the spread of best practice and innovation from one school site to another within the district through regular site visits and department meetings
- **Providers of Feedback.** The district is administering benchmark assessments district-wide to measure progress toward student achievement goals. By setting clear targets for sub-groups such as English Language Learners, the district central office is able to point each school in the desired direction without issuing mandates such as pacing guides for teaching. While encountering some challenges, district administrators are also working to create mechanisms to help teachers and site administrators look at benchmark data and adapt their teaching strategies based on what they learn from the data. They are also using the data to adapt district policies for re-designating English Language Learners.
- **Partners with Parents.** The district is equipping parents—many of whom are immigrants, non-English speakers, and low-income—to play traditional and key roles in supporting systems and interventions designed to enhance student learning. Through various means, the district has gone out to ensure that parents understand the American school system and have the knowledge and skills to help their children succeed. In addition, in one site where there were many vocal critics, district leaders and school staff engaged in a process to address the parents’ criticisms of the school and gain allies.

By expanding and re-defining traditional district roles, Rowland district administrators are able to offer much more comprehensive and effective supports to English Language Learners and students below grade level. Such supports include clear identification, assessment and tracking of English Language Learners’ academic progress, use of multiple measures to assess mastery of everyday and academic English, continued support for students who are re-designated as fluent and English proficient to ensure that they have not been transitioned out too soon, and short, targeted intervention programs.

ROWLAND FRAMES THE ACTION: FORGING A COMMON PURPOSE

Rowland is a district drawn together by a common purpose—student achievement. Former superintendent Ron Leon, who consistently set the tone for the district, notes the “missionary zeal” in the commitment to being there for all kids. One outside observer who is familiar with the district admires the superintendent’s leadership and cheers the way he “gets into the face of people” who make negative comments about “those kids.” Says Leon, “I’m passionate about opportunities for kids. Some of our students just don’t have the opportunities that other young people have. They don’t all have middle class opportunities. Therefore, we [in the district] need to work extra hard to give them the skills and tools that they need.” Leon believes every student can achieve, regardless of their background or color, and that the district’s and staff’s challenge is to find out how. In addition to the clear mission, there is a set of core values articulated and acted on by district staff: excellence, integrity, respect, responsibility with accountability, safety, and a student-centered focus.

ROWLAND ALIGNS SCHOOLS

The district is divided into elementary and a secondary divisions, with an assistant superintendent for each. This structure is particularly useful in bridging the gap between intermediate and high schools, as the site administrators from these two groups meet on a bi-monthly basis. One of the outcomes of these meetings, which include review of student data, is identification of learning gaps. The district offers a four-week summer course called *Skills for Success* to incoming 7th graders and a six-week course for 9th graders which covers skills and activities in English language arts, math, and writing that relate to the achievement gaps identified in the previous year. As with most intervention programs in Rowland, students take pre- and post-tests so that educators know whether they are hitting the mark.

Also, the two division heads look at the schools in feeder clusters to identify areas that need to be strengthened in order to help students successfully transition from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school. Rowland has articulation days built into the academic calendar, during which faculties from different schools collaborate specifically on articulation between grades. Notes Joan Bissell, the former Dean of the School of Education at Cal Poly, in Rowland “everything is aligned along instructional goals. Everything!”

ROWLAND GROWS (AND KEEPS) HUMAN RESOURCES

RUSD has a historical commitment to investing in new learning for educators and para-professionals. At its high point, Rowland’s professional development center had seven full-time trainers as well as several administrators, bilingual specialists, a translator and a graphic artist. Though the budget for professional development is not what it used to be, fostering teacher learning is still a district priority. Time and time again, the study team heard teachers and administrators throughout the district talk about the great staff development program and their sense of support. As one middle school teacher reflected on the district’s cutting-edge professional development work, she noted “there is a strong feeling like they never want to be left behind. They always want to be first at the gate.”

More Teachers Opt for Data-informed Professional Development

For content of professional development, there is a lot of latitude in Rowland. In the past, it “was more of a lockstep approach,” reflected Leon, but under his direction the district has moved to more variety to meet teacher’s needs, levels of experience and interests. Professional development is delivered through traditional conferences and workshops, as well as by some outside consultants. The district’s instructional services division also employs two full-time staff developers who run a professional resource center, which is stocked like a “candy store” for teachers with videos, materials and other supplies. The staff developers conduct Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) trainings for new teachers and provide support for teachers throughout Rowland on a variety of topics. The district also relies on a trainer-of-trainer’s model focused on helping teachers who gain new learning sharing with other teachers at their school site. The district views this approach as both cost effective and also as impactful, as teacher leaders with a depth of expertise then serve as on-site coaches for their peers. Additionally, principals play a large role in staff development. According to Director of Student Assessment Tony Wold, “The Rowland model is built upon collaboration among teachers and administration. Often, during the trainings, the site administrator is sitting side by side with the teachers. This allows the conversations at the sites to have much greater depth, with the administration able to actively participate in the instructional program.”

In the past, content was typically determined by teacher interest. More recently, however, as teachers have delved into student data, their choices of professional development activities have become more data-informed. Recent topics of professional development have focused on strategies that have proven to be effective with English Language Learners and students from low-income families. Here are a few examples:

- Thinking Maps, a K-12 strategy to organize, process, and communicate thought which is proving especially effective with English Language Learners. As noted above, and despite the local tradition of site autonomy, this approach is being implemented district-wide.
- Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) training, to support English Learners’ acquisition of academic language and literacy.
- Dr. Ruby Payne’s work on understanding poverty has reinforced discourse around the issues of poverty and creating a culture of more rigorous teaching and learning for a largely middle-class teaching force faced with a large proportion of students living in poverty.

Keeping Teachers experienced in working with English Language Learners in the District

Many at the district level talk about the importance of supporting growth in teachers and staff throughout their career path, helping them attain whatever goals they have, whether in the classroom or moving into administration. Veteran teachers and administrators cite the “family feeling” and strong commitment to professional development as key reasons for staying in a district that pays less than surrounding ones. One long-time district administrator told us, “This is a district where you really feel people are behind you and want what’s best for you as well as the organization. I have lifelong friends here.” Another long-time employee agrees wholeheartedly,

“...the thing that made an impact on me was there’s always room for growth in this district. In some places, you get to a point and you’re made to feel like here’s your spot, stay here forever.”

Classroom-based Coaching

Understanding the importance of giving teachers practical support in their daily work, Rowland is investing in coaching. Trainers Wilma Santana and Nancy Laursen help lead teachers gain skills in peer coaching. In addition, district administrators brought in experts such as Lani Sexton (see Spotlight on Nogales below) and partnered with the Cal Poly School of Education to provide coaching to teachers. “Teaching is a clinical profession,” says former Dean Joan Bissell of Cal Poly. And like medical clinicians, teachers need to observe, practice and learn through experience. The district is growing more and more aligned around the idea that professional development in the traditional sense isn’t enough. “If it’s a one shot thing, then nothing happens with it,” explained Assistant Superintendent Brewer. “The most effective professional development is followed up by coaching and giving teachers support.”

ROWLAND BROKERS KNOWLEDGE: BRINGING IN RESOURCES TO HELP ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND STUDENTS IN POVERTY

Rowland’s district administrators and board members act as knowledge brokers, bringing in academics and experts to train teachers on best practices with English Language Learners and students in poverty and to encourage principals to share their knowledge and skills with one another. District administrators are more than brokers, and often serve as significant sources of expertise themselves. In one case, a board member with experience in curriculum development for Spanish speakers brought his own considerable knowledge base and connections to leaders in the field of bilingual education.³ District administrators use regular visits to school site and department meetings to facilitate the spread of promising practices. Additionally, district administrators are committed to sharing their wealth of knowledge and experience beyond the district. Each year the district shares their findings at several statewide education meetings.

District Leaders as Knowledge Managers

The role of assistant superintendents in Rowland is that of connectors—connecting principals and teachers to the resources they need to do their job well. Former superintendent Leon described it as, “supporting the principals, sometimes bringing them resources, helping them solve problems, bringing professional development. They’re really advocates for the principal.” This is a different view of the role than the traditional one which focuses on compliance or accountability, but it’s also different from a 100% “hands-off” approach. It gives schools both the space to have individual identities and solutions to unique challenges, but recognizes that schools don’t have the access or resources to bring all of the knowledge around them into the school site.

Principals meet in their divisions every other week for four- to five-hour sessions. Bi-monthly meetings with principals are not about procedures or compliance; they are about sharing good ideas. “We spend a majority of our principal meetings on new ideas, or sharing ideas, or problem solving and they’re instructional issues,” explained Assistant Superintendent Brewer. “We don’t get into administrative kind of stuff. When you’ve got some really strong people working together it encourages people to do risk-taking, and obviously

I support risk-taking as well.” The idea is district as convener, giving the principals time and a forum to exchange good ideas. District-convened meetings are a formal strategy to combat the common state of school site leaders: isolation. Collaboration develops spontaneously; Assistant Superintendent Brewer explained “[a principal] will say, ‘You know, I’m batting around this idea. Anybody want to come over and explore that with me?’ And he might have three or four principals that will say, ‘Let’s meet and talk about this.’ And then they’ll try something and bring it back to the group.”

One change that has evolved out of principals meetings is the use of teachers’ aides. Influenced by research showing that aides are frequently either under-utilized or not utilized with direct benefit to students, Assistant Superintendent Brewer brought the data to the group, giving them time to discuss alternatives and then the freedom to pursue different solutions. Some have re-trained their aides in areas of need, such as reading intervention with low-performing students; others have done away with aides entirely and now use the funding to improve instruction by employing classroom-based coaches and releasing teachers for collaboration time and professional development. In this way, the district prompted—but did not force—a solution.

School visits by district office personnel are also thought of as knowledge-generating instead of compliance-monitoring. Assistant Superintendent Brewer is out of the district office, visiting schools, every week. “It’s a way to honor what they’re doing” said Brewer, “but it also is a way to spread good ideas.” To help spread knowledge, Brewer frequently travels with a principal, giving him or her a chance to spend time at another school site. Rowland’s district leaders are clear that leadership is not about a having all the answers. Instead, the central office is adept at convening groups and fostering ideas. “I don’t have all the answers,” said Assistant Superintendent Sue Brewer. “I just ask the questions. I get answers from the principals, the teachers.”

ROWLAND BUILDS FEEDBACK LOOPS

Building feedback loops: Setting clear, measurable expectations for English Language Learners through benchmark assessments

Decentralized in its management approach, with budgeting and other related decisions made at the site level, RUSD nevertheless uses a common set of benchmark assessments that help ensure district-wide accountability for student achievement. Benchmark tests, with clear expectations and measurements, enable the district to take a “pilot” approach (rather than an “all at once” method) to its schools, allowing flexibility and freedom at sites to try new ideas and innovations and assess their effectiveness before taking the ideas district-wide. “Our expectations are very clear, and that goes for all students,” explained Assistant Superintendent Sue Brewer.

Several teachers and administrators talked about this model working for two reasons: first, benchmark assessments keep expectations and standards at the same high level regardless of instructional program; and second, it supports community/parental preferences such as bilingual programs, which in-turn develops community ownership and pride in their schools. RUSD does intervene if student outcome data is low, initially with heightened support for school site administrators, but if the poor results continue, the district moves people who are not performing (at times, this is a matter of finding a better “fit” between a particular administrator and school community. Less happily, it may be that the person is not suited for the role of principal and is moved into a different role). Many described the district’s approach as hands off if you’re doing well, but hands on if you’re not.

Teachers administer benchmark assessments twice a year, one before the end of the first semester and one no later than three weeks before the state’s STAR testing. Rowland’s use of data from benchmark assessments to measure progress on standards far pre-dated the state’s or the nation’s involvement; when the first English Language Arts standards came out in the 1980s, Rowland began developing standards-based assessments. The district also created a “Director of Research and Evaluation” position almost 20 years ago. Initially,

the district contracted with an external service provider to assist in ensuring the assessments were high quality; they now rely entirely on internal expertise. The benchmark assessments are not static; instead, the district is constantly re-working them, responding to teacher feedback regarding their usefulness and aligning them with additional assessments and standards. The superintendent prioritizes internal validity, recognizing that if teachers don't find the assessments useful they will simply be perceived as a burden and won't help to focus instruction on student need. "Our district is not afraid to look at data and use data," explained Assistant Superintendent Tony Santorufo. "I think our district is good about identifying needs and tackling those needs."

Building Feedback loops: using technology as a tool

Four years ago, the district invested in a software program, EduSoft⁴, to give teachers easier access to all kinds of student data. Teachers have been trained in the program over the past couple of years and its use is growing, especially now as the district expands the capabilities of the program to include re-teach lesson plans. The system contains references to relevant portions of text books and suggests lesson plans for addressing each standard so teachers who wish to review a standard can do so easily. According to Director of Student Assessment Tony Wold, "The move to EduSoft was critical to really become data-driven in decision making. In the past, the delay between assessment and return of results was significant—to the point that the outdated data was not relevant to teachers. With immediate same-day results and analysis, the focus is now on instructional strategies and not on data delays."

Warns Wold, "EduSoft is just one tool in the tool belt and a lot of times, districts buy it and think it's the solution. It's only a tool. The staff development is the solution." Chris Ericson, Director of Curriculum and Staff Developments agrees, "There's a high accountability for using the data...once you do the analysis, what are you going to do with the information? We have systems in place related to our benchmark testing...teaching from the benchmarks guided discussions around student work..."

Building feedback loops: ways to discuss what the data mean for instruction of English Language Learners

Wold and the two division heads are working with principals and teachers to use student data as a jumping off point for discussions about how to raise student achievement. Wold recalls the long struggle to put the emphasis in the right place:

"everyone focuses on data so much that [when] we get an hour of staff development time, we spend 50 minutes hashing out the numbers. And then the last ten minutes, it's always, "okay! After we've gone through all this, now go back and write up your instructional lessons" and everyone is looking at their watches and it's 2:50 and it's time to go at 3:00, and so nothing ever happens. So now the next step as we go is to move to the 10/50 model where there's 10 minutes talking about the data and the 50 minutes is instructional strategies, practices, etc., and that's the goal that we're working [toward]..."

One form of peer accountability that ensures benchmarks are not only administered but that results are used to inform practice is the bi-monthly principals meetings. Principals report out to each other regarding performance, specifically addressing gaps and showing examples of student work from re-teaching that was designed to address those gaps. (The district requires teachers to submit re-teach plans within 3 weeks after administering assessment using a 4-step process.)

The challenge of Benchmarks

Making good use of benchmark assessments has not always been easy for Rowland. As an initiative that runs counter to the culture of site-based decision making, the benchmark assessments have often been a flashpoint in the district. Some teachers have protested quite publicly and vocally about the time benchmark tests take to administer. Teachers still have various concerns about the benchmarks: the timing of assessments in the school year, inadequate time for re-teaching, how well they actually assess student mastery of subject matter, etc. Perhaps the most negative feeling expressed is that it's the teacher who is being assessed, not the students. Says one teacher, "It looks like they're looking at us and not at the kids."

⁴ Once privately owned, EduSoft was acquired by Houghton Mifflin in 2003.

One administrator strongly objects to this view: “It’s not supposed to be a ‘gotcha’ at all. When you talk to teachers you know they want kids to learn.” District staff are working to get this message out, with good results. For example, Tony Wold says, “Part of my ongoing meetings with staff every year include the continued reminder that we will never evaluate teachers based upon the standardized test scores of their students. We will, and should, however utilize this data to evaluate program and identify areas of strength and weakness. From the strengths, we can possibly connect best practices across sites, and the weaknesses allow the district to focus and combine diminishing resources to best serve all sites.”

Many teachers do see a real value in the benchmark data, but getting there has been a slow process. Behind the scenes, there has been a great deal of work done to try to ensure that these tests actually reflect teachers’ needs. An assessment committee comprised of teachers reviews the benchmarks twice annually to respond to teachers’ feedback on strengths and weaknesses. In time, teachers “start to see the benefit of it” said Assistant Superintendent Brewer, “if we can get the results turned around quickly. Then they say, ‘Oh, now I know these kids need this skill. I don’t have to wait until the STAR test results come back and I can start making those changes along the way.’” Principal Debi Klotz agrees, “It’s a living thing we’re looking at. Teachers gripe and moan with benchmark tests but it’s helped them with pacing. Are we teaching to the test? No, but we are teaching to standards.”

Developing data-based interventions for English Language Learners and students below grade level Data has also led the secondary schools division to invest in a variety of interventions, including double-blocking math classes, “Skills for Success,” before and after-school and weekend classes, and summer courses. Many cited the 4-week summer course for incoming 7th graders and the 6-week course for incoming 9th graders as key elements in making sure kids have necessary support for these difficult transitions. At the elementary level, several schools are piloting the “Music of the Mind” program, using children’s creative side to learn fundamentals of math. The elementary schools are also investing heavily in Reading Recovery. For the better part of the last decade, Reading Recovery-trained teachers have been providing students with individualized diagnosis and tailored instruction to accelerate reading ability. Frequently, after a year of Reading Recovery in an early grade, students go from scoring at the bottom of their class to average and so avoid being directed into special education. The district has also been piloting all-day kindergarten in a few elementary schools; results have been extremely positive, and so the board voted to expand the program to every elementary school in the district.

Looking at student data has also led to changes district-wide for those English Language Learners who have been re-designated as fluent English proficient (RFEP). When district central office staff looked at how re-designated students were doing, they saw a disturbing pattern of low scores on the state standards test. Working with school site staff, the district took several actions: a) the district targets for numbers of students re-designated were eliminated so as not to force out students before they are truly ready to transition, b) the district reworked the criteria for re-designating English Language Learners—instead of relying on one test score they now use multiple measures to map a student’s grasp of written and oral language, c) the district directed schools to provide RFEP students with support to ensure that they not only have a solid grasp of everyday English as measured by the CELDT but have the academic language skills to succeed as measured by the California Standards Test.

ROWLAND BUILDS PARTNERSHIPS: ENGAGING PARENTS AS PARTNERS

The district central office is equipping parents—including recent immigrants, non-English speakers, the less educated and the poor—to play key roles in supporting student learning. Through various means, the district is reaching out to ensure that parents understand the school system and have the knowledge and skills to help their children succeed. For example, when a student is recommended for an intervention program that meets during zero period or on Saturday, his or her parent receives a letter or a call from school staff. While the student may be reluctant to attend, the parent understands what is at stake—completing a course needed for college admission or passing the high school exit exam—and often moves to ensure participation in the intervention program. In addition, in one site where there were many vocal critics, district leaders and

school staff engaged in a process to address the parents' criticisms of the school and gain allies.

Equipping Parents to Support Student Learning

RUSD has a vanguard parent engagement program called Community Based English Tutoring (CBET), with ever-increasing numbers of parents participating. During the 2003-04 school year, over 1,400 parents enrolled in ESL classes and contributed a staggering 42,996 hours tutoring children at home and at school. Mickie Miranda, the Family Literacy Program Specialist who directs CBET says that "Part of the deal for ESL is parents come and tutor."

CBET is funded by a combination of federal EvenStart money and state First 5 dollars. CBET is a non-deficit parent-engagement model, recognizing that language barriers and low-wealth doesn't mean the community isn't still rich with resources and high-quality input for their children's schooling. Parents who attend CBET classes learn tutoring strategies to help their children at home. Classes are offered at 14 elementary schools throughout the district in both English and Spanish. There are also translators who speak Chinese and Korean. RUSD's approach to parents reflects its understanding that it takes an entire community to educate children well. "We don't have all the answers," says Assistant Superintendent Sue Brewer, elaborating on their excitement to work with parents to make sure Rowland's children get the best services and supports possible.

Giving Parents and Students Knowledge of the American School System

RUSD is also educating parents and students about how the American school system works. In all three middle schools and both high schools, students who come from families in which neither parent has attended college benefit from the district-funded AVID program. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) teaches students a variety of skills: time management, organization, note-taking, how to write a resume, research papers, etc. In addition, AVID teachers ensure that those students interested in college complete their A-G requirements, enroll for algebra as 8th graders, understand the financial aid process, and take field trips to local colleges.

Through its parent center, parents of English Language Learners at Nogales High School are also gaining crucial knowledge about how the American school system works and what interventions are available through their district to support English Language Learners and students struggling in particular subject areas. Funded through a Title I grant, the parent center offers monthly workshops in English and Spanish on topics such as: what the high school exit exam is and why it matters for your child, how to read a transcript, how to apply for financial aid, how to navigate the bureaucracy of college. About 20-40 parents attend each month. There is also a more intensive nine-week course offered through the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE). Offered at convenient times for parents (parents can choose to attend at 8:30 a.m. or 6:30 p.m.) and in their primary language (English or Spanish), PIQE addresses many of the same topics as the monthly workshops but also includes topics such as positive communication between parents and teens. Parent Outreach Coordinator Aida Sandoval enlists parents who have attended meetings before to act as friendly "WalMart greeters" so newcomers feel at ease. Staff at the center target parents of newly enrolled English Language Learners and parents of entering 9th graders as key people to contact and get involved with the center.

While 20-40 parents in a high school the size of Nogales doesn't seem like many, their presence represents a significant reversal of a fairly negative relationship between the school and parents. Six years ago, the PTA was virtually non-existent. Contact with a parent usually involved a negative situation such as a student suspension. So when Sandoval, who was widely known in the community as the "go to" person when there were issues with parents, was asked to start the parent institute, she grabbed the bull by the horns. She got word out through the local grape vine, "Bring me the most bitter parents. I want to hear from them." By confronting the issues head-on, listening to what parents had to say and moving to a strengths-based model to build parents' knowledge and competence, she was able to begin enlisting parents as a positive force in the district.

SPOTLIGHT ON NOGALES HIGH SCHOOL

A portrait of work at Nogales High School illustrates how support from the district central office is making a difference. While there are many positive advances in schools across the district, Nogales is the site where many of the strategies have been piloted before going district-wide.

Located on the north side of RUSD, Nogales serves approximately 2,600 students. For years, Nogales was a low-performing school with a poor reputation in the community. Parents who could manage it transferred their children to neighboring schools in Walnut. Relations between the teacher's union and school administration were adversarial, with the union often blocking change. In 2002, the school fell into program improvement.

Today, Nogales High has made dramatic advances. The school is no longer under program improvement. The L.A. County Office of Education has given Nogales its "Best of the West" award for 3 years of stellar achievement in its counseling program. Nogales received a 6-year WASC accreditation. Student achievement is on the rise: grades have improved; the school's 2004 base API of 649 went up 93 points in 5 years; the school achieved a similar schools rank of 9 in 2004; and 70% of 2004 graduates went on to a 2 or 4 year college. And parents, rather than shunning the school, are supporting it.

How did Nogales change? What did the district central office do? And what happened at the school site and with the community to turn the tide? There were several key components that brought about radical change at Nogales: a strong, sustained district-led change process that empowered the community, targeted interventions based on analysis of student needs, and a new, non-traditional management structure that modeled a team approach to education.

When the principal left in 2001, the assistant superintendent actually served as interim principal for a year, leading an administrative team with four vice principals. This type of intervention from the district was completely counter to Rowland's culture of site independence. There was grumbling from teachers about "micromanaging" and the district being too directive. In addition, Nogales became the pilot site for the new district data system, EduSoft, and benchmark testing.

Dr. Tony Santorufo recalls that turbulent period, "I wanted to change the administrative structure and rebuild the school from the community up." To that end, Dr. Santorufo started the School Community Organizational Team (SCOT) inviting faculty, staff, parents, students, administrators and community members. "I taught them teamwork. I taught them a problem-solving model, gave them a template on how we were going to structure our change. We said let's start with student achievement. So they had to define that in terms of what they wanted for kids in achievement...identify the performance indicators. The second part was a definition of those performance indicators. Then the third section was current status, the fourth section was desired status—what kind of growth do you want to see? Then the next part was criteria by which we would judge suggestions."

This four-step process coupled with EduSoft and benchmark data helped the school and community members design programs that addressed specific student needs. Says one intervention coordinator, "Data has really helped us identify weaknesses." For example, using student data, the school questioned how English Language Learners were doing. Where were the students falling through the cracks? Thus, Nogales has focused support at key points for English Language Learners by re-designing the sequence of ELD classes, adding enrichment classes during zero period for students who were recently re-designated as fluent in English and reading classes. Parents play a key role by encouraging their children to attend the intervention and enrichment classes.

Says one CLT member on the district administrator's role at Nogales, "My experience with Dr. Santorufo is he only becomes a micro-manager when he needs to, and then he really is a micro-manager! But that's because you're lost, the agenda isn't moving. If things are going according to plan, he's sitting in his office encouraging you. Then he's a resource, not a micro-manager."

Today, Nogales High School is run by the Collaborative Leadership Team rather than one administrator. The five associate principals have divided the traditional role of one principal into five parts: 1. curriculum and instruction, 2. guidance and counseling, 3. budget and facilities, 4. school safety and discipline, and 5. school environment and special education. The administrative team of five tries to model the type of collaboration and teamwork they want to see throughout the faculty. When the initial CLT concept was approved, the team members went through 12 hours of interviews with members of SCOT, the school board and school staff thus ensuring broad-based support. While the CLT operates under the motto "one voice, one vision," their separate areas of responsibility has allowed the team to increase the pace of change.

Under the CLT, teachers at Nogales have focused on looking at student data—both the CST and the district benchmark exams—in order to identify gaps in achievement. One CLT member acknowledged how difficult it was for the faculty to grow into the gap analysis. It was time-consuming. But "it's institutionalized now." The final step in the gap analysis process is a form for each teacher to fill out detailing how he or she will address the standards in the classroom.

The CLT also helped teachers open their classroom doors with the intent of improving instruction. With the assistance of Dr. Santorufo, the Nogales CLT brought in consultant Lani Sexton who introduced a teacher observation template to the district. Many teachers felt threatened. Recalls one CLT member, "Teachers used to show up for debriefs with the union rep at hand." Undeterred, the CLT encouraged teachers to share through curriculum walks and peer observations. They gave department chairs discretion to hire substitutes to free teachers during class time. They also created time for teachers to talk about solving instructional issues through late starts once a month.

After four years, Nogales feels like a school on a very different trajectory. With satisfaction, one CLT member reports, "We're all on the same page now. Reading, writing and math. There's a lot more discussion about instruction. What does your data say? A real difference in dept meetings. It used to be a staff meeting. Now we talk about things we're doing to improve student achievement."

Conclusion

School reform has often been framed as a struggle between top-down and bottom-up strategies. Standards-based reform and the focus on accountability seemed to reinforce top-down strategies, while other voices continued to call for school autonomy. Trying to provide parents and students with choices but also to leverage the strengths of what came to be called the managed improvement approach, some reformers began to talk about the district's role in managing a "portfolio of schools." Meanwhile, Rowland Unified—driven in large part by the diversity of its own geography and students—developed its own home-grown set of compromises between top-down and bottom-up. One result is an approach that fosters local innovation but also provides individual schools with a customized support system. Another result is student achievement data which shows steady growth for a very diverse student population.

A District Supporting Data-Driven Decision-Making: ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT:



ABOUT THE DISTRICT

Elk Grove Unified School District serves the Cosumnes River area in southern Sacramento county. The district is now the largest in northern California and one of the fastest growing in the nation. The 320 square miles of the district encompasses the city of Elk Grove as well as the southern part of the City of Sacramento and large portions of Sacramento County. District enrollment is increasing by approximately 2,500 students each year.⁵ For the 2003-04 academic year, the district's K-12 enrollment was more than 55,600 students and is expected to reach 80,000 by 2010. This means that Elk Grove is now larger than Oakland and surpassed the size of San Francisco Unified in 2005. The district's expected 27.5% growth rate over the next six years is far greater than California's expected growth rate of 16%. The nation's expected growth rate is 4% over a longer period of time, from 2001 and 2013.⁶

Growth poses many problems, but the first one that must be confronted is school construction. In 2003-2004, enough new families were moving into EGUSD to fill a classroom every three to five days. To keep up with this rapid growth, the district will need to build an average of more than three new schools a year—about 27 new schools by 2010—even after opening four new schools for the 2004-05 school year. Currently, the district includes 35 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, 7 comprehensive high schools, 3 continuation high schools, 1 independent study school, 1 special education school and 1 adult education program.

The district serves a racially and ethnically diverse student body: 33.7% of Elk Grove students are white, 19.8% Hispanic/Latino, 18.9% African American, 18.3% Asian, 5.5% Filipino, 2.4% Pacific Islander and 1.1% of students are American Indian. Of the 18.4% of Elk Grove students who are English Language Learners, 38.4% are Spanish speaking and another third speak one of the languages of Southeast Asia. In total, there are more than 80 languages spoken in the district.⁷

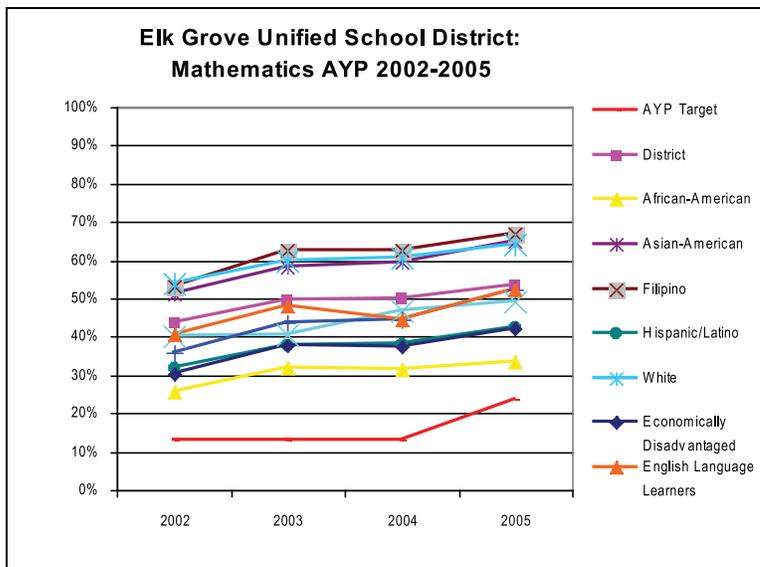
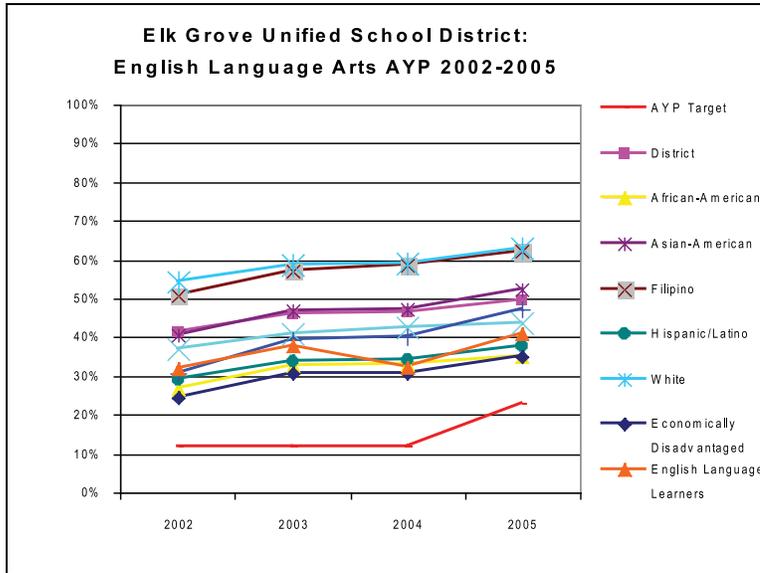
⁵ All data referenced is from <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us> and <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>, 2004, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ "Projections of Education Statistics to 2013", National Center for Education Statistics. October 2003.

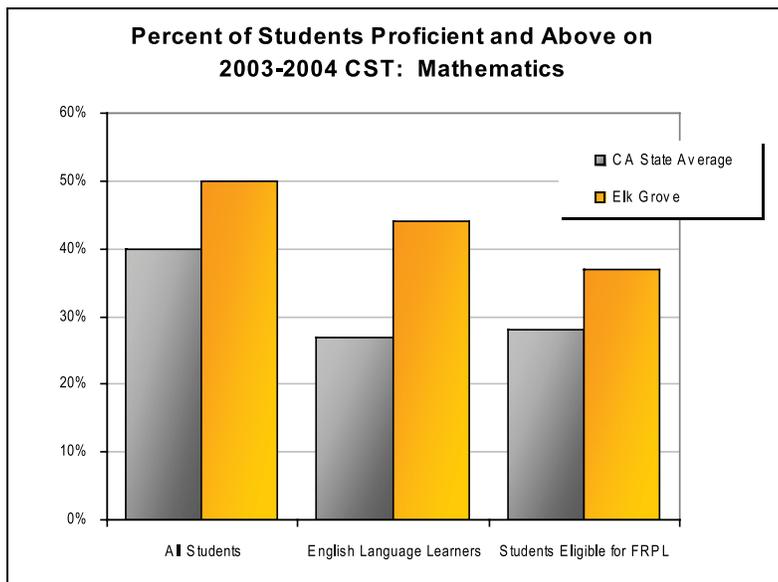
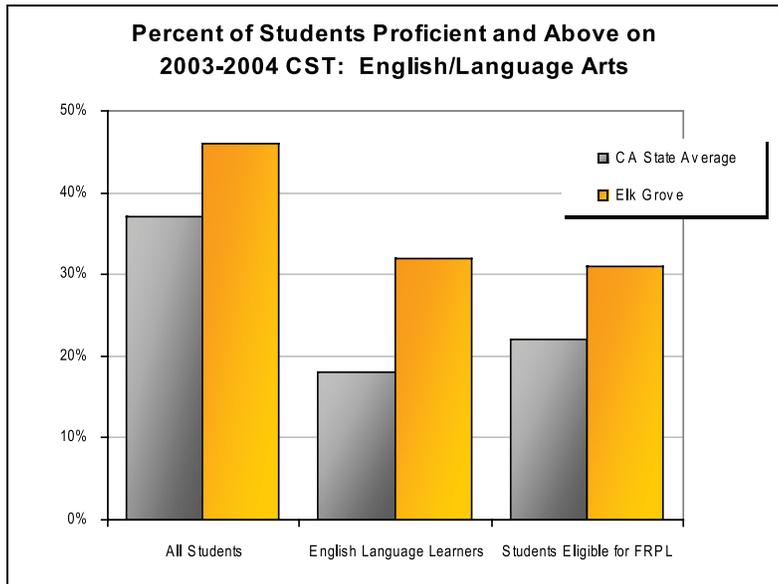
⁷ Source: EGUSD.

Student Achievement

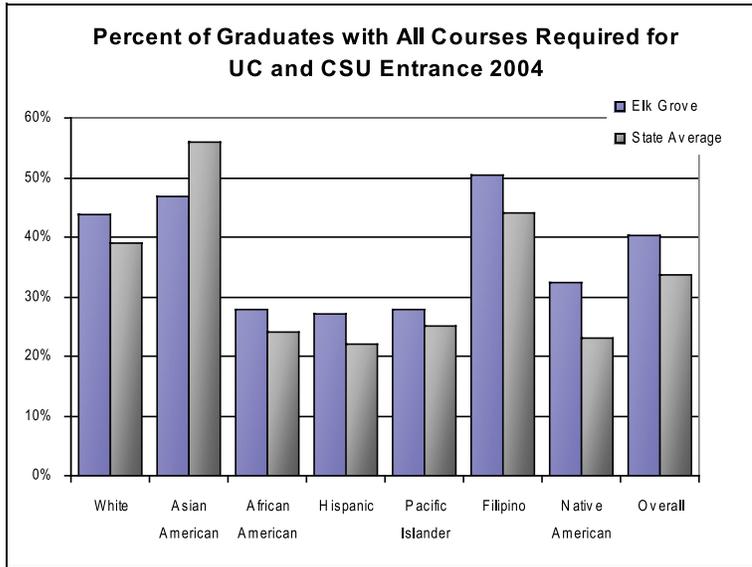
Trends in student achievement in Elk Grove are upwards for all student groups in both English Language Arts and Mathematics. The charts below, which summarize percentages of students scoring at “proficient” or above on the California Standards Test, show that scores for English Language Learners dropped in 2004, but rebounded in 2005. On a district-wide basis, achievement gaps are not closing on this measure.



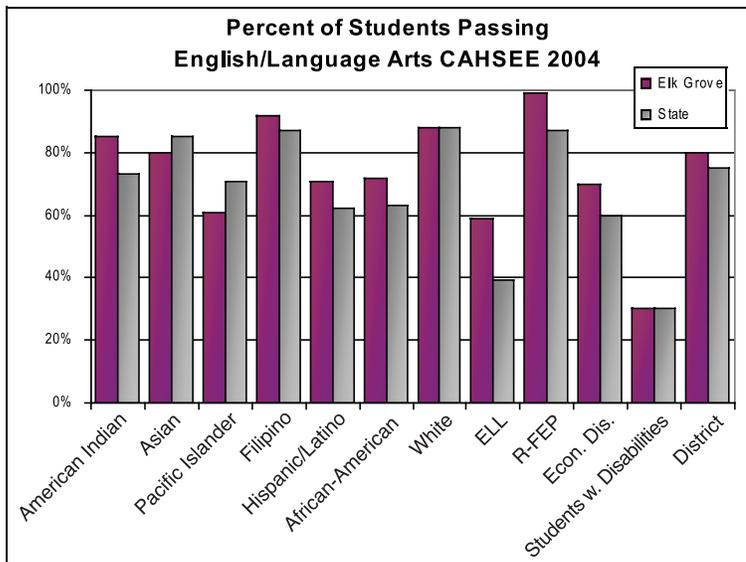
Though achievement gaps may not be closing, the district is beating state averages for percentages of both English Language Learners and students eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch scoring at proficient or above in both Mathematics and English Language Arts.

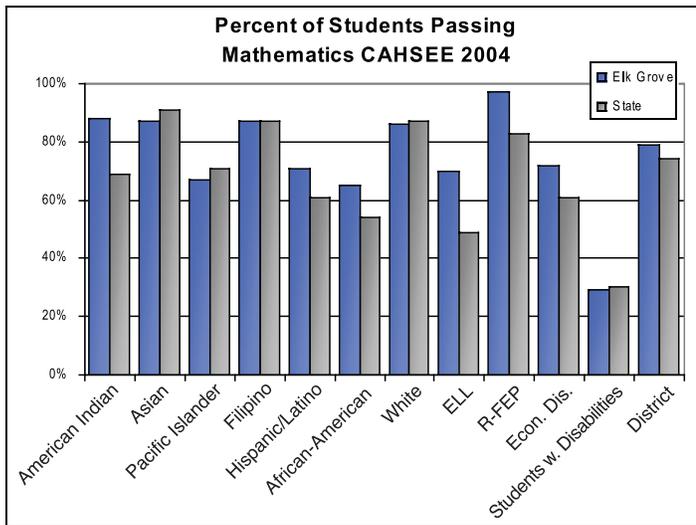


Elk Grove also shows strong performance with regard to measures of success for high school students. The district exceeds state averages for percent of students meeting the University of California entrance requirements for all subgroups except Asian students.



Data from the district on percentages of students passing the CAHSEE, the California High School Exit Exam, is interesting: while white students in the district pass the CAHSEE at the state average rate, all other subgroups except Asian and Pacific Islander students pass at a higher rate than the state average. These rates reflect the focus of the district on success for the most challenging groups of students.





ELK GROVE'S APPROACH: TRANSLATING GROWTH INTO EXCELLENCE

Growth provides districts with opportunities as well as challenges. This case study examines how Elk Grove Unified School District has seized the opportunities inherent in a growth scenario and equipped its teachers and administrators to raise student achievement for the district's highly diverse population. District leaders are playing the following roles:

- **Framers of Action.** Following a strategic planning process, board members and district administrators have adopted and publicly broadcast a number of what they call Bold Goals, which include explicit, measurable goals for student performance,
- **Providers of Feedback.** The district is investing some of the additional resources that result from a growth scenario in building a student data system and using it to assess progress towards goals and to support data-driven decision-making at every level.
- **Growers of Human Resources.** Rapid growth can mean chronic and debilitating teacher shortages, but Elk Grove has made a proactive commitment to transform this potential crisis into an opportunity. Through a partnership with a university, the district trains and credentials its own teachers. This strategy not only solves the teacher shortage problem, it helps ensure a consistent vision of high quality instruction. Experienced teachers also benefit, as the district goes to great lengths to create incentives for teachers to upgrade their skills in order to continue to provide high quality instruction to the district's rapidly changing student population.

In Elk Grove, district administrators see growth as an opportunity to be flexible and to innovate. They also see their jobs as serving and supporting their customers: the principals, teachers and parents. Elva Young, Director of Secondary Education, states with great conviction, "We're here to support the schools."

ELK GROVE FRAMES THE ACTION: SETTING EXPLICIT, MEASURABLE GOALS FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Four years ago, with the help of the Stupski foundation, EGUSD developed and adopted a mission statement and district-wide goals. Their stated mission is to "provide a learning community that challenges **ALL** students to realize their greatest potential." The emphasis on ALL students reflects a determination to narrow the achievement gap for English Language Learners, who comprise 18.4% of the district's students, and

students living in poverty (38.6% of the students in the district are eligible for FRPL). In addition, the district publicly stated what they call three “bold” goals that to reflect their high expectations for all students:

- All students will reach the “proficient” level (or higher) in the key content areas of reading, writing, and math by the end of third, sixth, eighth, and 10th grades—years that represent important transitions to the next level and when students take the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).
- All students will pass the CAHSEE.
- All students will be ready for college and careers upon graduation.

Though Elk Grove has a long history as a district with strong leadership that is consistently on the cutting edge of reform, many in the district still cite this strategic planning process as a turning point in the district’s effort to institutionalize a focus on rapid and continuous improvement.

In the past four years, both individual departments and schools have all developed their own goals to help them benchmark their success. Breaking down the big goals into smaller, shorter-term and measurable objectives that are spelled out in school improvement plans has been crucial for individual schools in the district. “School improvement plans used to be a check—did I do it? Now they are living documents,” says Elva Young, Director of Secondary Education. Cindy Tucker, Director of Curriculum and Professional Learning concurs, “District staff work with each school site to develop the plan which lays out the data and what to do with various student groups and subgroups, such as English Language Learners on ELA and math. The site plans define what actions adults at the site are going to take.” These school site plans have gone from being dust catchers to one of the key mechanisms for capturing agreements about the strategies that the school will use to make progress toward the school’s goals. Site-level teams meet with district staff several times a year to review progress on implementation of these plans. During these sessions, the teams focus on both progress and needs. These meetings conclude by identifying steps for the site-level team to take.

ELK GROVE REFLECTS REALITY: BUILDING FEEDBACK LOOPS

Feedback Loop #1: Investing in Data Systems to Measure Progress

Elk Grove began to develop a district-wide, comprehensive data collection system in 2002. They call this home grown system SISWEB (Student Information System on the WEB). SISWEB was developed in-house by the Technical Services department and is accessible to every classroom teacher and school administrator in the district. Every student has an identification number. Every student’s data—demographic information, attendance, standardized test scores—are in the system. No matter how quickly Elk Grove enrollment numbers go up, the district can keep track of each new student and how he or she is doing.

Another strength of the SISWEB system is the ability to disaggregate data and look for trends in specific subgroups of students. SISWEB users can sort students by grade level, subjects they are taking, race, socio-economic status, gender, age, or English Learner status. They can see how well or poorly groups of students have performed. They can see “disaggregated data, how many kids moved up and how many moved down, where the greatest gains took place, where the weaknesses are,” elaborates Dave Yoshihara, Director of Instructional Support. The ability to track progress in cohorts of students and thus to begin to assess “value added” means this system provides more data than is available in many other districts.

Today, four years after work on the system began, SISWEB has grown and changed but continues to be a cornerstone of the district’s improvement strategy. New Superintendent Steven Ladd notes that the data it provides is, and must be, useful in two ways: “we need data at the instructional level, by child by need... And we need the ability to put the data together to provide feedback on a program or to give us a picture of a gap we need to fill.”

The district has chosen to invest significant resources in the development and maintenance of this customized data system. Director of Technical Services, Greg Lindner, estimates that development of the district's new data system took 10 full-time employees 14 months with 8-12 employees currently devoted to maintaining the system. This does not take into account the need to upgrade older computers at the site level or the growing pains that come with the introduction of new technology and ways of doing things. District leaders admit that most districts choose to buy an "off the shelf" data system, and recognize that the approach they took has its problems. Lindner says with a chuckle, "Building your own [system] is a risky endeavor but it has its payoffs. It's not for the faint of heart." Though the "build your own" approach has its drawbacks, many in the district believe that the work that went into creating SISWEB contributed to the creation of a culture that values data and continuous improvement processes. When Steven Ladd arrived as the new Superintendent in December of 2004, he noted immediately that Elk Grove was a district that was engaged in what he called "a very focused conversation about how our kids are doing... are our interventions inducing the greatest gains? If not, what can we do?"

Feedback Loop #2: Supporting Data-Driven Decision-Making at Every Level

Building the data system is only the first step. The hard part is using it. To date, over 3,500 Elk Grove teachers, principals and support staff have been trained to use SISWEB using a "train the trainer" model. Some teachers were paid to attend a two-day training and then received additional compensation for introducing the system to peers at school sites. Over time, the district's picture of what it means to for teachers to "use data" has shifted and become both more realistic and also more sophisticated. Superintendent Ladd is keenly aware of the risk of creating data overload for teachers: "There is a finite amount of time to invest in data analysis," he notes. The key, in his view, is building the capacity to translate data into information quickly. Says Dave Yoshihara the Director of Instructional Support, "The whole data picture shows them where the gaps are." Adds Christine Hikido, Director of Research and Evaluation, "A lot of effort went into the reports. We try to give information in manageable chunks with options for more." For Ladd, making data useful involves making sure it is connected to the questions people in the system really have: "it's not the answers you get," he comments, "it's the questions you ask."

But even assuming the data is relevant, useful, and focused, it's still just the start. "It's not just looking data, but what are you going to do with it afterwards?" asks Elva Young, Director of Secondary Education. "That's where the real work begins."

Supporting data-driven decision-making at the classroom level

Building a better data system to measure student achievement is just a first step toward changing instructional strategies, evaluating curriculum or tracking the results of interventions. Easy access to data gives Elk Grove teachers many opportunities to alter their instructional strategies based on what they see. This keeps student achievement front and center at grade-level meetings. Says Christina Penna, Associate Superintendent for Secondary Education, "It's having conversations about what is happening, talking about achievement." As a result of such conversations, Penna sees teachers adopting more effective teaching strategies: "With the data our teachers are able to personalize an instructional model."

Elk Grove has focused professional development on training teachers to move from understanding the data to understanding the instructional strategies needed to address the gaps the data reveals. The district has worked to foster teacher cooperation with record keeping and testing by trying to ensure the resulting data is useful. One administrator noted: "If you are going to ask teachers to spend their time keeping records or testing kids, the typical teacher complains. We believe you ought to give them feedback in the form of data that informs them where the kids are at. Give them information on student performance to help them better plan instruction."

This district-wide vision is realized at the individual school level in very tangible ways. Union House Elementary School principal Dan Owens elaborates on how data is used by classroom teachers at his

school, “Half of every staff meeting is dedicated to team meetings at each grade level to talk about collection and analysis and to create a plan around whatever data we can come up with. I try to make sure that meetings are targeted and focused. It’s difficult for teachers to get used to collecting their own data and information. In most schools, I don’t think it happens. At our schools you would see charts in the front of the room with pre-tests and post-tests and what we’re working on. It’s very public, it’s not a secret.”

Supporting data-driven decision-making at the school site level

The advantages of the custom-built data system are evident in multiple ways. For example, in addition to student data, SISWEB holds administrative tools and financial data as well. According to Jeff Markov, the Fiscal Services Administration Director, each school site gets an allocation at the beginning of the year. SISWEB updates each school account nightly so that the administrators know how much they have to work with. The result is that school leaders are able to use data to effectively target resources within the school.

Another feature of the system not always available in other places is that principals can follow cohorts of students from year to year and measure progress. Similarly, principals can disaggregate data by grade level and teachers can examine classroom-level data to watch for patterns. School board member Brian Myers outlines the usefulness of this feature of SISWEB: “With SISWEB and some other testing we can tell if there is a pattern of low test scores.... So by having that kind of assessment we’ve been able to be very specific in looking at where our test scores are and then you can put your resources [where students] appear to need that kind of special assistance.”

Another result of the flexibility of the data system is that school leaders have been able to do the impact analysis required to set policies based on what works, making informed decisions about how to best serve students’ individual needs. One such decision was to create collaborative teaching teams in the secondary schools. Groups of teachers will team teach an 8th grade class and then stay with that same group of kids in 9th grade. Myers uses SISWEB to track the benefits of this approach: “We know that in this structure, teachers get to know their kids better. What we’re also seeing is that they can push individual kids harder... its probably because you can have a lot more individualized instruction than if you have a kid for one semester.”

Supporting data-driven decision-making at the district and board level

SISWEB has helped to create a commitment to data-driven decision-making at the Board level. Elk Grove has long been a district that has looked at student data as part of its focus on increasing student achievement. Karen Hayashi, a 33-year veteran and currently Coordinator for Professional Learning, can recall when data analysis was done manually. Almost ten years ago, long before *No Child Left Behind*, Hayashi remembers the district identifying the achievement gap and principals and teachers sitting down to set growth targets. “What precipitated this was when the reading wars began [the whole language vs. phonics debate]. There was a lot of discussion about the achievement gap, which students did well with whole language, and the need for more explicit instruction for many students in diverse groups.” The district was an early adopter of *Open Court*, and received support from the Packard Foundation for intensive training for teachers in the new program. But data analysis has led to many new programs and approaches.

Another example: when district staff and school site teams identified an area of disparity between White and African American students, Director of Curriculum and Professional Learning Cindy Tucker introduced Ron Ferguson’s research on effective teaching strategies with African American students.

In yet another example of data-based decision-making on behalf of low-performing students, EGUSD established intervention classes during which at-risk middle school students receive a double period of math each day. In the first period, they learn the lesson of the day with the general student body. Then, the lowest performers stay for a second period and have the opportunity to preview the material for the next day. With this support, the lesson for these students is simply a refresher to reinforce the skills from the day before.

“Many of the schools are doing this double blocking... They have the regular class with the intervention class,” explains Kimi Kaneko, Principal on Special Assignment and program administrator for the Teacher Education Institute. “Preferably the same teacher with the intervention class comes first so there’s scaffolding to prepare the students for the regular class.” The district will track data to determine the impact of these classes.

In a finding that contradicts larger studies, the district leadership credits class size reduction as contributing to an increase in elementary test scores.⁸ Teachers agree. “If you talk to most teachers, they would say that class size reduction has a huge impact on reducing the achievement gap”, said Maggie Ellis, the union president. “When they reduced class sizes at Title I schools, test scores went up.” Based on these data, the district plans on reducing class sizes in the remaining elementary schools in 2006, taking 4th to 6th grade classrooms to a 26:1 ratio. Responding in this way to teachers’ priorities helps to maintain teachers’ enthusiasm for data.

GROWERS OF HUMAN RESOURCES: FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE, EXPECTING GREAT RESULTS AND PROVIDING THE SUPPORT NEEDED

Finding the Right People for a culturally and linguistically diverse student population

In response to its explosive growth and to district leaders’ disappointment with the quality of teachers coming to them from traditional credentialing programs, Elk Grove sought out a university partner that was willing to think outside of the box and prepare teachers in a different, more effective way. Then-superintendent Dave Gordon found that ally in Henrietta Schwartz, then dean of San Francisco State University’s school of education, and forged the relationship that resulted in the Teacher Education Institute (TEI).

Gordon notes that “When we were unsatisfied with the quality of teachers we were getting, I asked, ‘Why don’t we run our own credentialing program?’ People said we couldn’t possibly do that—but we did it. It was much more effective than what we got from the traditional system. We’re not going to accept the traditional pathway where [the teachers] don’t get it. We’re always asking, ‘Why do we have to do it that way?’ You do it that way because you’ve always done it that way—but you don’t have to.”

The mission of the TEI program is to prepare effective teachers for the culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms of the district. The Institute identifies the qualities of effective teachers as the ability to:

- a) Teach to increasingly high standards for our students
- b) Understand the developmental and cultural needs of our students
- c) Develop appropriate curriculum
- d) Manage the classroom
- e) Plan, implement and evaluate instruction in all subject areas
- f) Partner with the parents and community

From its inception through 2004, the program served nearly 650 teachers. The district has historically hired approximately 75% of program graduates, and EGUSD views the program as the vehicle through which they will meet their growing demand for highly qualified, diverse educators. Kimi Kaneko, Principal on Special Assignment and program administrator for TEI reports, “Most of our principals say, given a choice they’d like to go to the TEI pool first.” The program serves recent college graduates in addition to individuals in pursuit of career changes. Participants enroll in the 11 month program and are then partnered with mentor teachers at the school sites and enrolled in coursework taught by a combination of university faculty and EGUSD employees. The program leads to better teacher candidates as well as better teacher training. According to Kaneko “A lot of people are attracted to our district program because they see that as a way of learning and of getting a job in our district. And we have a lot of people who would like to work for us.”

⁸ Prior to the California state mandate on class size reduction, the district decreased class sizes in all Title I elementary schools.

There are some key differences between TEI and traditional credentialing programs. The most striking is the additional time that TEI teacher candidates spend in the classroom, both observing and student teaching. The second difference is that many of the teacher coaches are master teachers or principals. District leaders felt strongly that the program had to be taught by people who were active practitioners. Elk Grove offers such teacher coaches \$1,000 as an incentive to teach in addition to their other duties. “You want to have the best people working with the student teachers,” states Gordon. TEI Coordinators Betty Kaneko and Shirley Jacobsen highlight other key differences: “We are teaching our students through our program to be reflective learners and hopefully giving them that base of looking back at their practice...there are strands through all the course work to help teachers address the needs of English Language Learners. All the teachers are SDAIE trained. There are special courses on language development.”

EGUSD designed the Teacher Education Institute to provide ongoing support for new teachers. The leadership identified teacher isolation during the first year as a major barrier to teacher success. In response, TEI created cohorts of 25. As Dave Gordon noted. “We say to the teacher candidates, ‘Here’s your schedule—you take all of your classes together.’ It was like a support group. At their graduation you could see that the cohort had completely bonded. When we hired the people, here was their network of support.”

Gordon sums up the importance of the program by saying, “It’s all about classroom instruction. You can have all the projects, programs and gimmicks, but if the quality of the teaching doesn’t improve, then the performance of the students won’t improve.” What no one says, but is obvious, is that the remarkably consistent approach to teaching that characterizes the district’s teachers owes a lot to the TEI program.

Finding the Right People: District Leadership Development

Just as it trains its own teachers, Elk Grove seeks to grow its own administrators. The district focuses energy and resources on developing leadership capacity within EGUSD staff. Former superintendent Dave Gordon describes the districts’ approach: “Number one: you have to spot talent and recruit people into administration. This can be a difficulty because good teachers don’t want to leave the classroom. You have to talk them into being interested in administration. Our training program is non-traditional, we ended up creating our own with help from the Stupski Foundation because the traditional program did not focus on instruction—they focused on management. Another piece is grooming and coaching. You have someone who is the vice-principal and you have to support them and coach them. Even once someone is in a job, we continue to coach them.”

Expecting Great Results, Providing Needed Support

Once Elk Grove finds the right people, it supports them in doing high-quality work. Former Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, Mike Hanson, describes the district’s philosophy, “we will expect a lot, but we will support a lot. If there were no support or the expectations were so far out of reach that there was no hope of achieving them, there wouldn’t be a spirit in the district.” The support systems exist at many levels: for teachers through Saturday seminars, coaching and trainer of trainers, for principals and vice principals through regular meetings and retreats and for school sites through site-team meetings and site support teams for schools needing extra help.

Support for Teachers: Professional Development through Saturday Seminars. In an effort to build more professional development into the school year, the district’s professional learning department created Saturday Seminar opportunities ten years ago. Offered five Saturdays a year, these optional weekend trainings provide teachers with an additional opportunity to learn; generally, over 500 teachers attend. Teachers are attracted by the chance to gain professional development credits and learn from noteworthy scholars who present the keynote addresses. “We’ve had big-name speakers such as Ruby Payne, Pat Davenport, Harry Wong, Katy Haycock” says Cindy Tucker, Director of Curriculum and Professional Learning. District staff identify areas of focus for the seminars by reviewing school site

plans. Thus, for example, if the teachers at the site identify difficulty teaching kids in poverty, district staff can bring in experts like Dr. Ruby Payne who bring insights and strategies for working effectively with kids in poverty. “Elk Grove focuses staff development on meeting the needs of teachers that are continuing their education,” explained Dan Owens, Union Elementary School Principal. “There isn’t any reason why someone wouldn’t have mastery—there are ample opportunities.”

Spreading New Knowledge through Trainer of Trainers. To provide opportunities for all staff during the tight budget years, the district turned to the Trainer of Trainers Model. This program provides the opportunity for key staff from a site to be trained in a particular program, and to return to share this program with the rest of their site’s staff. This method is not only cost effective; it serves as an opportunity for developing leadership capacity within schools as well. Dave Yoshihara, Director of Instructional Support, elaborates on this program: “Professional development is key. At one point professional development was all district based. It was costly. This reduces costs, and builds capacity by moving the training to the site level.”

Additionally, the Training of Trainers model places responsibility on trainers to discern the most usable aspects, truly master them and subsequently present them meaningfully to the site staff. Elva Young, Director of Secondary Education, spoke to this point, saying “There’s a focus on how well their presentation will be received, because they have to live with the teachers they’re training when they’re done. It’s a lot of pressure.” Elk Grove Educational Association President, Maggie Ellis adds, “It’s not different than teaching kids, it’s about finding the hook for teachers- it’s really in trainings that engage us and don’t just talk to us.”

“Our approach to professional learning aligns to the process of continuous improvement,” explained Cindy Tucker, Director of Curriculum and Professional Learning. “Whatever the skills and practices are that teachers need to help students close the gap—that is the focus of professional learning.” Such learning is never done. William Tollestrup, Director of Special Education Administration, talks about “maintaining that constant diligence around continual learning because we always have new people coming into the system.” Dan Owens, Principal of Union House Elementary, agrees: “Some people make the assumption that if you’ve been successful then you don’t need it. I don’t think that’s true. We were successful last year, but that was last year. If we’re successful this year, it’s because we’re paying attention this year.”

Support for Administrators: Bi-monthly principal meetings provide a forum for collaboration between principals and they also constitute an opportunity for the district office staff to better understand the specific needs of each school. District administrators regularly follow up with principals between meetings: they can monitor each school’s budget, test scores, expulsions, attendance, and more through the automated SISWEB system. Elva Young describes her role as using all of this data to provide differentiated support to her schools: “I think the challenge is that everybody is at a different place so that you keep trying and you make some headway. I think that truly it’s got to be differentiated for everyone. You can’t just take one tactic.” Dave Yoshihara, Director of Instructional Support, commented as well on the principal retreats, “We also have retreats with the administration. All K-12 principals will come together as a group.... It gives us a chance to share what’s on the plate. We can talk about how to address the needs. We can talk about the successes.”

Support for Schools. Every low-performing school has a site support team. The concept of the site support teams was developed four years ago. The site support teams consist of the school leadership, principals, assistant principals, curriculum leaders, and district staff who are best able to support the school. The composition of the support staff reflects the needs of the school. For example, if a school has a large EL population, Nancy Lucia, Associate Superintendent of Education Services, is on the site support team. This system facilitates and increases communication between district and school staff, brings the support to the school level, furthers collaboration, and, importantly, raises accountability. At support team meetings, test scores are analyzed and the team asks the hard questions. Why are the scores low and how can we improve them? Who are we leaving behind, why and how can we support

them?” In these settings, district staff report that they, too, come to feel accountable for the academic struggles of the school. Site support teams form personal relationships; the district staff knows the leadership team in a school and is personally invested in their success. Kimi Kaneko, Principal on Special Assignment and program administrator for TEI, observed, “In a big district it’s hard to keep communication and contact and I think that by telling all the directors to get out in the field, leave your desk, go into classroom, work with principals and teachers—it’s the only way for us to really know what kids today are doing.”

Structures like these, along with the rich data on each school, work to ensure that no site gets a cookie-cutter response from the district. The district office practices a differentiated management style that responds to school demographics as well as the principal and teachers’ personalities and needs. Similarly, principals model their differentiated support for teachers who in turn ultimately differentiate instruction for their students. Mike Hanson, former Assistant Superintendent of High Schools, elaborates, “When they [principals] see me differentiate support then it’s much easier for me to put out that expectation: I want you to size up your departments on campus to move toward the bold goals. Where do you need more training? Where is your curriculum the strongest or the weakest? What are your best uses of the SISWEB data? Where do you have teamwork happening most effectively?”

Providing Incentives for Professional Growth: Adapting to a Changing Student Population

Change in Elk Grove means not just growth, but also a constantly shifting student population. Elk Grove gives incentives for teachers to continually develop their skills in order to provide high quality instruction to this rapidly changing student population. In 1998, EGUSD demonstrated its commitment to improving instruction through the development and implementation of the H-Step (teachers progress through various salary levels A-G), a salary scale linked solely to the pursuit of professional development. H-step is a temporary salary credit that expires every five years. It’s an incentive for teachers to continue to invest in their skills and knowledge base; embedded within this is the idea that professional development is not a one-time pursuit, but rather an ongoing process. As Dave Yoshihara, Director of Instructional Support, explained, “This system forces this continual development.” The H-step is aligned with the goals of the district. Says Elva Young, Director of Secondary Education, “Anything that we felt was important, we build into the H-step program. That list of H step courses and categories would be generated from our district goals.”

Linking professional development directly to salary scales has ensured teacher buy-in to the program. Teachers in Elk Grove have embraced the H-Step with a growing number of teachers applying for the H-Step each year. Currently, 694 out of Elk Grove’s 2,041 teachers (34%) have received an H-Step. Elk Grove Educational Association President Maggie Ellis expressed the union’s support of the program: “H step—I think it’s great. Anything that can get you further on your salary schedule is wonderful. Teachers have embraced it.”

Elk Grove Supports Boundary Spanners: Teachers as Coaches

EGUSD utilizes teacher coaches within the district to assist teachers in mastering their craft, provide a resource for teachers and to ensure that teaching within the district is top notch. Initially, coaches were funded by a grant from the Packard Foundation. When the grant money ran out, the district continued to fund coaches in the higher-need Title I schools. Board member Chet Madison verbalized the board’s opinion on the coaching program, “I think that if a teacher wants to teach they can and will come up to par if they’re given the right coaching and the right support.” The board’s philosophy is that it is the responsibility of the district to provide support to ensure individual teacher success. Individual teachers are not isolated and expected to achieve results without help.

Although the tightened budget resulted in a scaling back of the coaching program, this form of support is still available. “Our goal in our department is as the district grows and infrastructure shrinks, that we’re building [teachers’] capacity to do the work,” said Cindy Tucker, Director of Curriculum and Professional Learning.

“Coaching is all about capacity building. Coaching done well does not create dependency from the teacher on the coach. Done well, it builds the teacher’s efficacy and knowledge and ability to apply new learning to their practice. That’s our philosophy to build capacity so that we can go away. Even Olympic stars need coaches.”

Principal on Special Assignment Kimi Kaneko recalls the first year the coaches began working in the district:

“Knowing that this was something new, there was some resistance to it. The resistance came because most teachers were in their classrooms, isolated. They rarely discussed practices. It was not a general practice to discuss best practice. When they started to really have to look at what they did, not only at assessment but what do you do when you find out a kid’s not learning something—what do you do? Before they had their own private conversations with themselves and with grade levels and with their administrators. Now they had another forum for sharing these ideas and receiving feedback.”

Slowly but surely, the coaches won the respect and trust of teachers. They dealt with attitudes of mistrust and questions of “why are you here?” by being supportive and demonstrating their competence in the classroom. They gained credibility by “doing the work that teachers do” and doing it well. “New teachers were more amenable to using coaching for content and instruction,” reflected Kaneko, “A lot of veterans, particularly really good teachers, looked at it with suspicion, until they were able to see that this made sense. The evidence itself showed them that this made sense—that it was effective and efficient.”

Kaneko elaborated on the process of implementing this program, saying “we were there to be content experts and we only really would do what people wanted us to.”

The strength of the program lies in the fact that coaches spend time on the school site, connecting with teachers and administrators. The coaches have the opportunity to understand the school culture, and provide support that works in that school culture. Coaches can individualize their support for a specific class, teacher or school. “We developed a successful model—you are there for teachers on the school site when they need you—instead of district office specialists, teachers were more likely to talk about instruction and more immediately implement instructional practices. Just staff development of special learning, because what you do with that training is more important. How you specialize it, individualize it, to your own style. So, we have good success with test scores improving that year.”

Conclusion: Making Crisis into Opportunity

Many districts in a rapid growth mode seem to spend most of their time building new schools and hoping for growth rates to slow down so they can focus on instruction. Elk Grove is a good model of a different approach, one in which the demands of school construction have not consumed all the energy of district leaders. In this model, the advantages of growth become clear. Not only does Elk Grove have the additional resources that come with increasing the Average Daily Attendance rate (ADA) in the district, by which the State of California calculates their level of support, it also benefits from a constant infusion of new people and ideas. Thus district leaders have been savvy in investing extra resources in high-leverage strategies such as developing the district’s data system. They have also transformed what could have been an ongoing hiring crisis into an opportunity to create an in-house credentialing program that has become a powerful tool for maintaining focus and coherence. It guarantees that teachers enter the district with both strong skills and an orientation to teaching that is consistent with the culture the district is trying to create. Finally, in Elk Grove even the rapidly-changing student population has become an opportunity—in this case, to build a community-wide consensus about goals that include high standards for all students. In a district with this kind of strong culture and well-established strategies, leadership changes do not seem to bring disruption. New Superintendent Steven Ladd noted that “I came into a district that has a passion for making a difference.” Elk Grove is a district that can serve as an example to California’s many fast-growing school districts—and in fact to any district seeking to transform ideas into action.

Conclusions and Recommendations



The goal of Springboard Schools' research program is first to seek answers to the questions that are compelling to practitioners. Second, we aim to provide those answers in a form that allows both practitioners and policymakers to take action based on them. Accordingly, we are concluding this report with recommendations to both district leaders and policymakers.

Recommendations for District Leaders:

- **Be explicit about both goals and strategies for reaching those goals**

Innovative leaders in every sector often operate from intuition—they know *what* to do, but not *why*. District leaders, even in the most successful districts, rarely have a ready answer to questions about strategy. But a central recommendation that emerges from this study is that districts develop and implement deliberate strategies to maintain focus and build organizational capacity. The raw materials for such strategies are common enough: goal setting, data systems, professional development, community outreach, etc. Every school district undertakes activities in each of these categories. What seems to set the most successful districts apart is that they weave these elements into a coherent strategy which incorporates these elements. Strategy requires not only a coherent and interconnected set of steps, it also requires that these be carried out over the long term. As one Superintendent put it, “it’s not a sprint, it’s a marathon.”

- **Invest in both managing human resources and on building organizational capacity**

Investing in people means spending scarce resources on the Human Resources department and on strategies for recruiting and retaining new teachers, but it also means investing in professional development and coaching for experienced teachers and for administrators. Finding the resources to do this can be challenging, but most district leaders understand the importance of this goal. The second half of this recommendation—to build organizational capacity—can be more challenging. This can be a difficult goal even to understand. How does organizational capacity differ from individual capacity? Where does organizational capacity even reside, if not in people? The case studies in this report suggest that organizational capacity resides in people, but also in systems, structures and processes, and in the

culture that underlies them. When asked about the process of entering Elk Grove as the new Superintendent, Steven Ladd commented not on structures or programs but on “a culture that embraces its failures” and takes action on them. This “learning organization” culture is the essence of organizational capacity—but it cannot be either created or maintained without systems, structures, and processes. Thus Elk Grove’s SISWEB data system reflects and works to perpetuate the culture of the district. Capacity includes culture: building the data system internally built far more capacity in Elk Grove than if they had bought the same system from an external provider.

- **Create a constituency for focus**

It is a cliché to bemoan the many forces that tend toward fragmentation in school districts: changing policy perspectives at the federal, state, or local level; overly prescribed requirements for a blizzard of categorical programs; a plethora of interest groups and service providers; the need of new leaders to carve out new territory; a culture that translates urgency into an effort to do everything at once—the list could continue. What is new from this study are concrete examples of the ways that leaders in several districts have created counterbalancing forces.

What these case studies offer is examples of strategies leaders have used to create external pressure groups that will lobby for both goals and a coherent and focused strategy for change. Oak Grove’s work is notable for its proactive effort to create a constituency for the district’s equity goals among parents and community groups and among educators. District leaders understand that taking this approach means losing control and often they shy away from an effort that goes beyond a “community input” approach to this issue. Oak Grove’s approach may be possible because of its relatively small size; large districts are more volatile. Nevertheless, the example is instructive. A different approach to creating a constituency for focus and coherence is found in Elk Grove. This district is notable for leveraging its rapid growth and chronic hiring crisis to create an in-house credentialing program that works to create a constituency among teachers for a coherent approach to instruction. This is yet another example of a strategy for creating a constituency for focus.

- **Find a clear and workable balance between centralized and decentralized strategies**

Leaders in the most successful districts appear to understand that the choice between top-down vs. bottom-up strategies is not a problem that can be solved but rather a dilemma that will always recur. There is no one right answer. Districts that adopt an “in principle” response to this choice paint themselves into a corner. In the worst cases, the static solution to what needs to be a dynamic challenge is enshrined in Board policy or collective bargaining contracts as well as in local culture. The leaders in the effective districts that we studied evolved local responses to the top-down or bottom-up dilemma that involved centralizing some decisions and decentralizing others. In a district like Rowland that is quite socio-economically and ethnically diverse, site autonomy seems a core principle. But strong leaders in this district have understood that the principle is a dynamic one and can be trumped by factors like poor performance that require a dramatic re-centralization of authority. Of course, this solution is also temporary. As the situation changes, the dilemma of top-down vs. bottom-up will recur in another form that requires a different response. What will remain critical is that leaders develop conscious strategies that are very clear as to what will be centralized (expected of all) and where it is important to maintain and support autonomy and flexibility.

- **Invest in and use multiple assessments allowing for quick, accurate, and user-friendly reporting on student learning**

Education leaders are under continual pressure to invest scarce resources in providing direct services to students rather than in building infrastructure. But it is becoming more and more clear that the most successful district offices invest in the systems to provide timely feedback to teachers and school sites. Human feedback is provided by teacher-coaches and/or administrators who arrange their days to include time in classrooms. But feedback about professional practice from these sources is combined with feedback from multiple assessments and user-friendly data systems that together provide teachers

with useful data about student performance. Three-quarters of principals agreed that their high-performing district “encourages the use of multiple assessments,” while only about a third of principals in lower performers agreed with this statement. Seventy percent of principals in high-performing districts agreed that their district’s data system “allows teachers to track their students’ progress over time.” Only 40% of principals in lower-performing districts agreed with this statement.

- **“Mind the Gap” by owning the challenge of English Language Learners**

One of the most striking findings from the survey of principals was the picture it painted of a proactive role for districts with regard to English Language Learners. Principals in the districts getting the best results with these students reported that their district offices were active in supporting training for teachers with ELL students, in ensuring principals know which students are English learners, in developing an intake system that meets the needs of ELL students, and in using assessment data to track these students. This proactive role of the district office with regard to English language learners does not stop at the classroom door. Sixty-four percent of principals in high-performing districts strongly agreed with the statement that “my district’s central office encourages principals to structure alternative grouping so teachers can target instruction to students’ proficiency levels,” whereas only 30% of principals in lower-performing districts strongly agreed. Leaders in the highest-performing districts clearly treat the education of English Language Learners as a system-wide responsibility, not just a function of the categorical programs office.

Recommendations for Policymakers

The *No Child Left Behind Act* has brought dramatic changes in the role of the federal government in education. Although the federal government provides a small percentage of the funding for schools, NCLB requires as a condition of that funding that states adopt standards and annual assessments, and that they hold schools accountable for making “annual yearly progress” toward the goal of all students scoring at a “proficient” level by the year 2014. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the law is that it requires that schools make progress with every subgroup of students—English Language Learners, students from poor families, special education students, children of color. Each group must show annual yearly progress toward the goal of proficiency for all. Schools and even whole school districts that fail to meet these targets are subject to sanctions that increase in severity over time. This new age of accountability suggests important new roles for school districts.

Yet current policy—by which we mean both state and federal policy, with the latter shaping the former in important ways—is profoundly ambiguous about school districts. On one hand, the “blame the district” perspective has a huge constituency among parents and teachers, and therefore among policymakers. Large, publicly-funded bureaucracies are hard things to love. The charter school movement and the substantial funding stream for supplemental educational services—tutoring—have together spawned a group of education entrepreneurs who argue for a market-driven, entrepreneurial response to almost every problem in public education. On the other hand, the growing numbers of schools failing to meet NCLB goals has caused many to wonder who is to be responsible for them. There is no community sentiment to create myriads of charter schools, nor are there enough charter operators to manage them. The idea that the state will take over schools begs the question of what will be the state’s action arm. Many are turning, again, to districts. Can school districts—which many finger as the cause of the problem of poor school performance—become part of the solution? This report argues for a qualified “yes.”

The argument for a policy of investing in re-inventing school districts rests on three legs: 1) districts can be effective; 2) in many communities, there is no viable alternative; and 3) even when a robust set of entrepreneurial providers exists and can provide high-quality service, there is still an important role for the school district. In this case, someone must be responsible for the creation of a complete system of education options. Even a “portfolio of schools” option requires someone to manage the portfolio. But building capacity in school districts will require active support from policymakers for this option.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Make a major new investment—on the scale of the parallel investment in understanding best practices in teaching reading—in understanding and supporting implementation of district-level best practices.**

The federal investment in investigating the teaching of reading has been controversial—and it has transformed, mostly for the better, how reading is taught. Many children, especially poor children, have benefited. It is time to make a similar investment in studying school districts. Education is a huge industry, yet the paucity of information about management practices in districts is striking. Both district and school leaders frequently express frustration at the fact that they are mostly flying blind when trying to transform schools and districts into high-performing organizations.

The research that is needed must come from new sources: schools of business are one; management consulting firms are another; and yet another is support provider organizations whose mission involves working with districts. Investing in building a research arm in such organizations or perhaps in consortia of such organizations will help ensure that the results are truly useful to practitioners. Currently, such organizations survive on a combination of foundation grants and fee-for-service relationships with districts. Neither strategy allows them to scale-up a research program in the way that is needed.

Finally, research on districts cannot be done using the methodology which has proven useful in investigating reading. Organizations, especially politically-driven ones like school districts, cannot be randomly assigned to treatment groups any more than private sector corporations can. But the field of business has developed a rich set of insights into business practices by using the kind of “backwards mapping” research methodology that informs this report.

- **Sustain the policy focus on accountability including on district-level accountability.**

Change requires both pressure and support, good cops and bad cops. In the current round of reform, federal agencies, and state agencies acting as their proxies, are playing the bad cop role. Though the goal of improvement is popular, many of the decisions necessary to implement this goal are not. School districts, if they are to be effective at leading the charge at the local level, need political cover. Providing it is job of state and, in particular, federal agencies. These agencies should take seriously the many justified critiques of the details of NCLB and should use the opportunity presented by the reauthorization process to strengthen it. But policymakers should not throw out the baby with the bathwater by abandoning the goals of NCLB or the role of state and federal agencies in providing the pressure to improve.

- **Invest in capacity-building in school districts.**

Districts may be unpopular, but they are potentially effective and there is no alternative. If the federal government is serious about improvement, it should be willing to bear the brunt of the grumbling that results whenever resources are directed away from the costs of operating the current system and instead redirected toward investments in building the organizational capacity in school districts. Given the persistent finding that high performers use sophisticated data systems and diagnostic assessments, it is unconscionable that, at least in California, districts fund the purchase or creation of such systems through grant-writing or general funds. This approach all but guarantees that many needy districts will go without the necessary tools. Too much of the focus of NCLB has been on testing for accountability, rather than testing for improvement. The result is that too many teachers still lack any good information from diagnostic assessments. Yet it is diagnostic assessment that has the most power to improve teaching and learning.

- **Create a support system.**

Every struggling school and district should have access to both a rich set of research based ideas, tools, and materials and also access to expert *on-site* support for the improvement process. To date, NCLB has created a demand for such support—but supply is lagging, especially in high poverty and rural areas. Market-based forces will not create a supply of support providers fast enough to meet the NCLB timeline, and they will never create an equitable system of support for the highest need areas of the nation. The federal government needs to jump-start the creation of a supply of high-quality coaching, consulting, professional development, and technical assistance.

Appendices

Appendix I: Tools and Artifacts

A. Oak Grove Elementary School District

B. Rowland Unified School District

C. Elk Grove Unified School District

Appendix II: Performance Data

Appendix III: Evidence of Sustained Growth 2004–2005

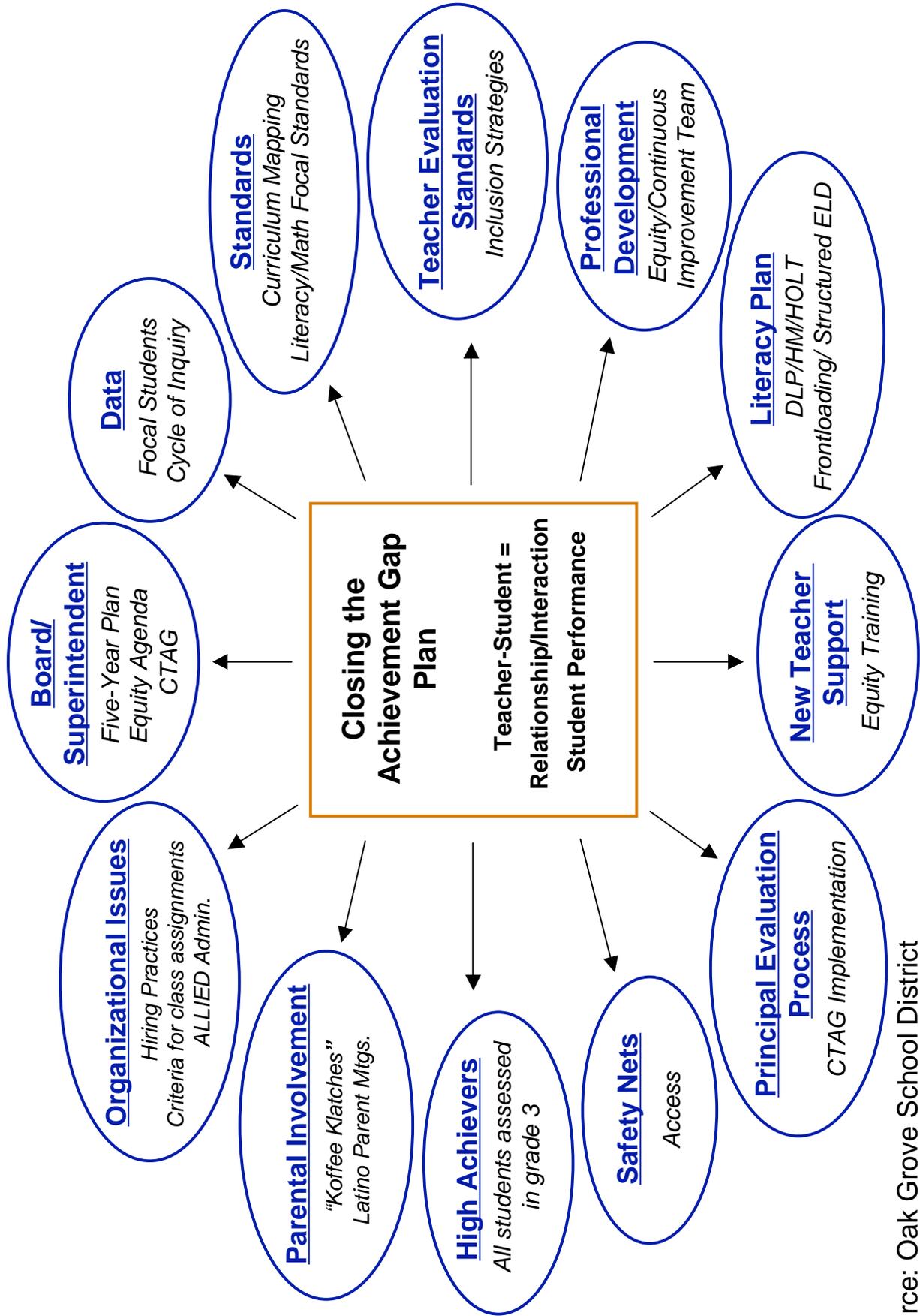
Appendix IV: Glossary

Appendix V: Further Reading

Appendix VI: Springboard Board of Trustees

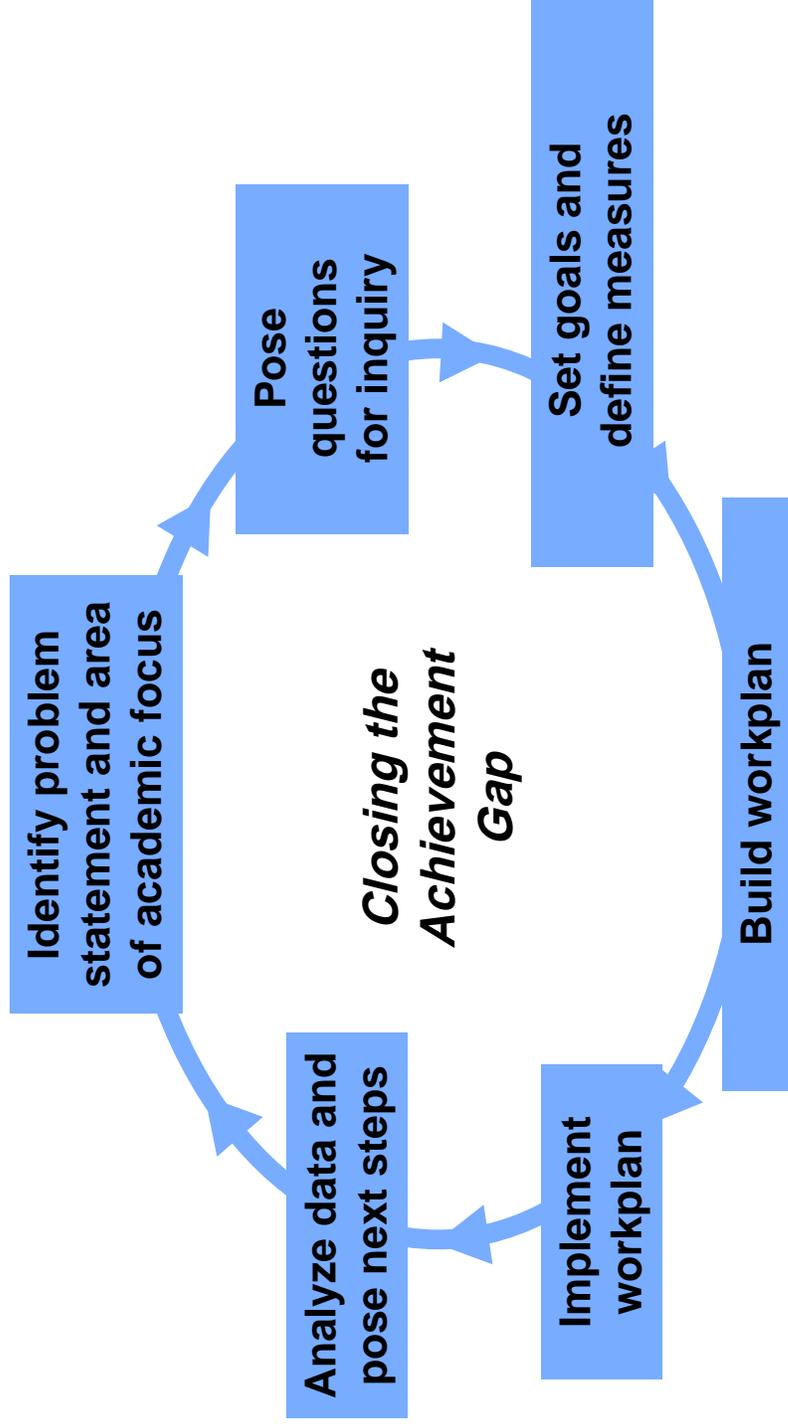
Appendix I:
Tools and Artifacts
A. Oak Grove Elementary School District

System Theory of Action



Source: Oak Grove School District

District Best Practices in Action: Oak Grove



An Equity Agenda is set and the implementation of the Cycle of Inquiry

Source: Oak Grove School District

Twenty Minute Equity Classroom Observation

Date: _____

Time entered: _____

First five minutes record classroom information

The classroom schedule is:

The standard, skill, strategy being taught is _____

The instructional materials being used are _____

The inclusion strategy being used is/are:	The instructional strategy being used is/are:
<input type="checkbox"/> Books available and visible that have Latino and African American characters or people <input type="checkbox"/> Specific verbal praise by teacher <input type="checkbox"/> Walls reflect students in the classroom <input type="checkbox"/> Walls are student generated <input type="checkbox"/> Student/teacher proximity <input type="checkbox"/> Use of graphic organizers <input type="checkbox"/> Student set goals <input type="checkbox"/> Kinesthetic learning activities <input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Direct instruction (whole group) <input type="checkbox"/> Read Aloud <input type="checkbox"/> Shared reading <input type="checkbox"/> Guided Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Readers Workshop <input type="checkbox"/> Independent Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Mini lesson <input type="checkbox"/> Writers Workshop <input type="checkbox"/> Other

15 minute observation of a focal student ___ Male ___ Female ___ Latino ___ African American

The student is sitting (draw classroom map)

Every two minutes record/tally the focal student's behavior

Time									Total
At/On Task									
Off Task Grooming									
Off Task Talking									
Off Task Out of Seat									
Off Task Reading something else									
Other off task									

Teacher Student Verbal/Oral Flow Tally during the 15 minutes

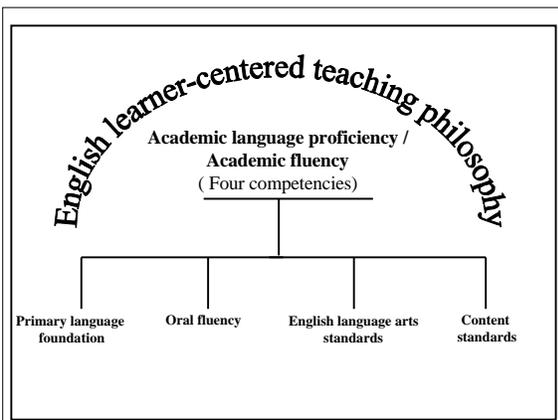
Teacher to Student -

Student to Teacher -

Left class at _____

Appendix I:
Tools and Artifacts
B. Rowland Unified School District

Source:
 Dr. Tony Wold and Dr. Gilbert Garcia
 Rowland Unified School District
 April 2006



- ### Top Ten Strategies for English Learner-centered Instructional Practice
- 📄 Assessment
 - 🗣️ Oral language development
 - 🎭 Drama & Reader's theatre
 - 📖 Read alouds
 - 🏠 Background building
 - 📖 Academic vocabulary
 - 🗺️ Graphic organizers
 - ✍️ Writing instruction
 - 📚 Classroom libraries
 - 📊 Data analysis

- ### Top Ten Strategies
- 📄 Assessment
 - ✓ Bring to the front of the instructional cycle, and utilize in lesson planning (backward mapping)
 - ✓ We need to assess primary language
 - ✓ Authentic assessment
 - ✓ Oral retell / (ELDRA)
 - ✓ Multiple measures
 - ✓ Analyze student products
 - ✓ Strengths / Weaknesses / What next?
 - ✓ Assess what we're doing / look in the mirror

- ### Top Ten Strategies
- 🗣️ Oral language development
 - ✓ ELD – 30 to 40 minutes a day – 5th Block
 - ✓ Believe that it is necessary – CREDE principles
 - ✓ Biliteracy initiatives
 - ✓ Relevant books (*Grandfather's Journey*)
 - ✓ Retelling / Storytelling
 - ✓ Songs - Poetry - Chants
 - ✓ Multimedia
 - ✓ Provide a time to talk (District 6 experience)
 - ✓ Think / pair / share, collaborative rehearsals for oral fluency – including academic oral fluency
 - ✓ Oral language in published programs
Let's Talk About It

- ### Top Ten Strategies
- 🎭 Drama & Reader's Theatre
 - ✓ Drama is motivating
 - ✓ Reading performance
 - ✓ Reading rehearsal / "round robin" alternative
 - ✓ Repeated readings
 - ✓ Reading fluency practice
 - ✓ Expression "stress/pitch/juncture"
 - ✓ Drama paraphernalia

- ### Top Ten Strategies
- 📖 Read Alouds
 - ✓ Lap method
 - ✓ Jim Trelease / *The Read Aloud Handbook*
 - ✓ Modeling – Reading commercial
 - ✓ Vocabulary – less frequent / academic
 - ✓ Comprehension at a listening level
 - ✓ Comprehension strategies – background building
 - ✓ *Making Meaning* – read aloud pedagogy
Developmental Studies Center

Source:
 Dr. Tony Wold and Dr. Gilbert Garcia
 Rowland Unified School District
 April 2006

Top Ten Strategies

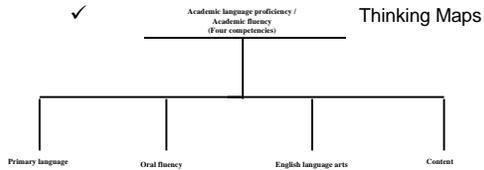
- 📖 Background building
 - ✓ #1 influence on comprehension
 - ✓ Background matters
 - ✓ Strategies to build background
 - ✓ UDL – Universal Design for Learning
 - ✓ Vocabulary / Marzano
 - ✓ Multimedia
 - ✓ Frontloading language forms/ Dutro & Moran (2003)
 - ✓ Thematic background building- Whittier City School District / Montebello USD

Top Ten Strategies

- 📖 Vocabulary
 - ✓ Academic language / content
 - ✓ Marzano (2004), *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*
 - ✓ Direct vocabulary instruction
 - ✓ Academic language
 - ✓ Brick words & mortar words / Dutro & Moran (2003)
 - ✓ Glad strategies / charts-pictures

Top Ten Strategies

- 📖 Graphic Organizers
 - ✓ Visual thinking / lines represent language
 - ✓ Way to visualize a thought process
 - ✓ Common visual language
 - ✓ Thinking Maps



Top Ten Strategies

- 📖 Writing
 - ✓ Weakest literacy area
 - ✓ Student products /analysis / “next steps”
 - ✓ Forms / functions of language
 - ✓ Functional grammar / verbs & prepositional phrases
 - ✓ Spelling / four developmental stages
 - ✓ Words Their Way
 - ✓ Write from the Beginning

Top Ten Strategies

- 📖 Classroom libraries
 - ✓ Good readers
 - ✓ Read alouds
 - ✓ Self selected reading
 - ✓ Shared reading
 - ✓ Guided reading / leveled readers
 - ✓ Home reading connection
 - ✓ Expository text

Top Ten Strategies

📊 Data analysis

English Learners Who Met Standard of Advancing One (1) ELD Level Each School Year

English Grade	Beginning ELD Level	ELD Target	2002-2003		Met Target	Advanced	Total
			Far Below	Below			
K	1	0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0
	2	0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0
	3	0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0
	TOTAL	0	0%	0%	0%	0%	0
1	1	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	2	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	3	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	TOTAL	4	0%	0%	0%	0%	4
2	1	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	2	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	3	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	TOTAL	4	0%	0%	0%	0%	4
3	1	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	2	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	3	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	TOTAL	4	0%	0%	0%	0%	4
4	1	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	2	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	3	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	TOTAL	4	0%	0%	0%	0%	4
5	1	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	2	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	3	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	TOTAL	4	0%	0%	0%	0%	4
TOTAL	1	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	2	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	3	2	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
	TOTAL	4	0%	0%	0%	0%	4

Alvarado Intermediate

First Quarter 2005-2006

Rowland Unified District

COURSE: *Pre-Alg*

HONORS: Yes/No GRADE: 7

TEACHER:

Time Frame/ Approx. Date(s)	State Standard to be met	Unit Topic	Student Outcomes: Student Will Be Able to:	Building Block Strategy (School Plan Level I) to be taught / reinforced Cornell Notes Thinking Map	Assessment / Criterion	Activity / Text Used / Type of Assignment
9/5-9/8	1.2		Review basic concepts/number sense		Diagnostic test	Algebra Readiness exam
9/12	AF 1.2 AF 1.3	Ch. 1	Students will learn problem-solving and reasoning skills	Tree map ↓ Cornell Notes	Quiz	McDougal litled
9/19	AF 1.4 AF 1.3	Ch. 1			Chapter test	
9/26	MR 1.1 MR.	Ch. 2	Student will learn to translate	Cornell Notes	Quiz	McDougal litled
10/3	AF 1.4 NS 2.5	Ch. 2	sentences into equations and solve linear eq.	Powerpoint ↓	Group work Chapter test	
10/10	MR. 3.2 AF 1.1	Ch. 3	Student will add, subtract, multiply and divide integers	Cornell notes.	Quiz	Hands-On Eq.
10/17	MR. 2.5 S.P.P 1.1	Ch. 3		Powerpoint	Chapter test	McDougal litled

Appendix I:
Tools and Artifacts
C. Elk Grove Unified School District

ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
SCHOOL SITE AND DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP FOR
CURRICULUM/PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:
Promoting the Recruitment and Retention of Highly Qualified Educators

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING MODULES

ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
SCHOOL SITE AND DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP FOR
CURRICULUM/PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:
Promoting the Recruitment and Retention of Highly Qualified Educators

What Are They?

Partnership Training-of-Trainers Professional Learning modules consist of a combination of components:

- Professional Learning Leadership Skills and Strategies: This component focuses primarily on developing a set of practices designed to strengthen participants' facilitation, presentation, and leadership skills.
- Classroom Practices Aligned to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession: This component directly addresses the development of a set of skills designed to strengthen educators' understanding of subject matter and instructional strategies.
- Training-of-Trainers Team Planning Time: This component provides participants with time to engage in guided planning utilizing common templates and protocols.
- Peer Coaching Maps and Skills: This component provides opportunities to learn and practice peer coaching strategies that enhance the effectiveness of newly implemented instructional practices.

Target Audiences

Target audiences include Site Partnership Training-of-Trainers team members, Pre-K-12 Instructional Coaches, Curriculum Specialists, classroom teachers, grade-level teams, department and cross-department teams, beginning teachers, and administrators.

ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
SCHOOL SITE AND DISTRICT PARTNERSHIP FOR
CURRICULUM/PROFESSIONAL LEARNING:
Promoting the Recruitment and Retention of Highly Qualified Educators

Development of Modules

Under the direction of the Curriculum and Professional Learning Director and with input from the Partnership Advisory Team, the Curriculum/Professional Learning Department convenes design teams who conceptualize, design, and deliver modules. The composition of these teams changes depending on the focus of the modules. Members may include:

- Director, Curriculum/Professional Learning
- Director, Instructional Support
- Professional Learning Coordinator
- Technology Integration Specialist
- Curriculum Specialists
- Pre-K-12 Instructional Coaches
- Learning Support Services Representatives
- Student Support Services Representatives
- Others with expertise (ad hoc)

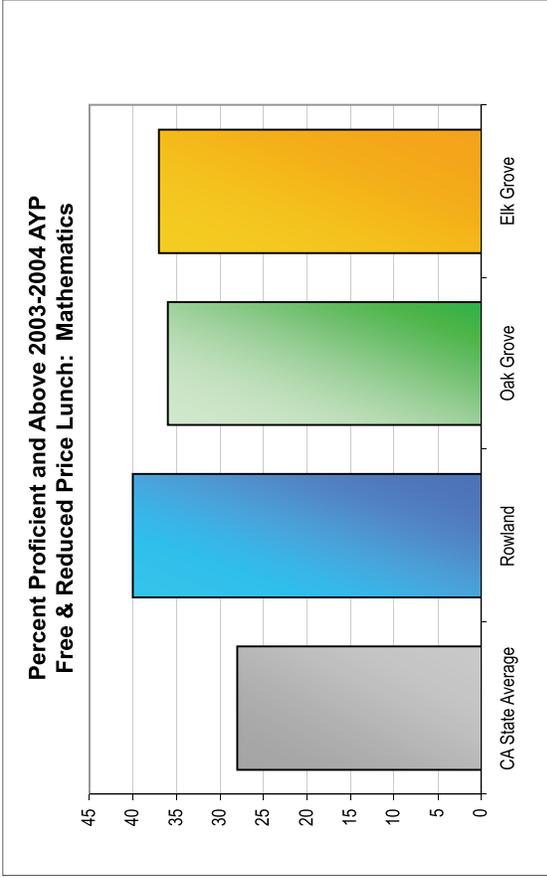
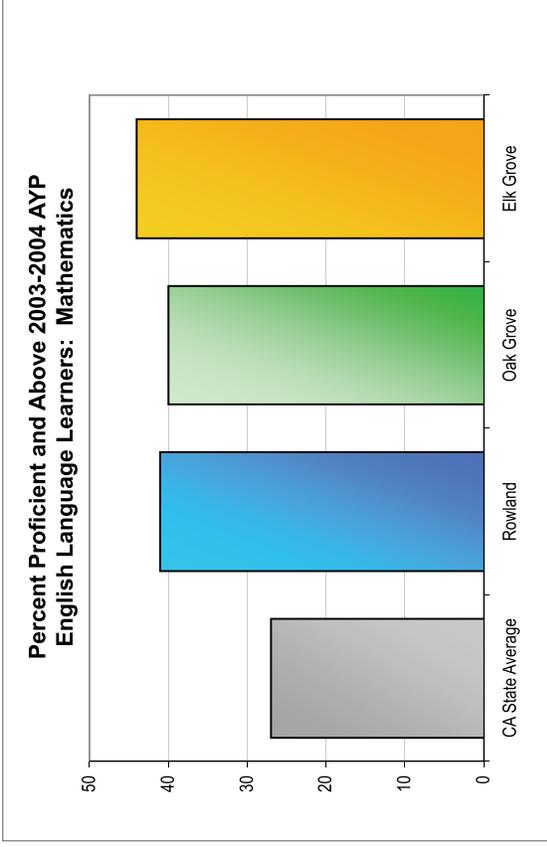
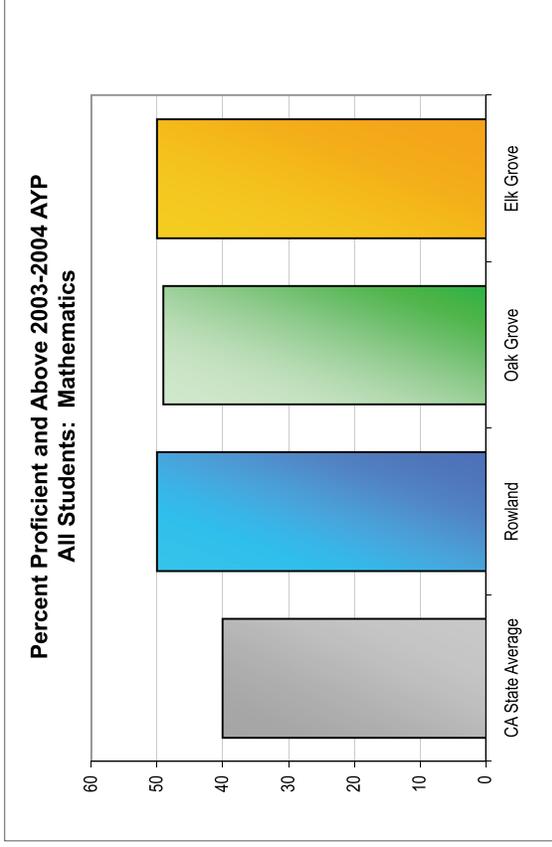
Warehousing

Warehousing of modules takes two forms. Hard copies are kept in a central location in the Curriculum/Professional Learning Office. Electronic copies are repositied in the District intranet's shared folders. All modules are available electronically to all district employees.

Appendix II: Performance Data

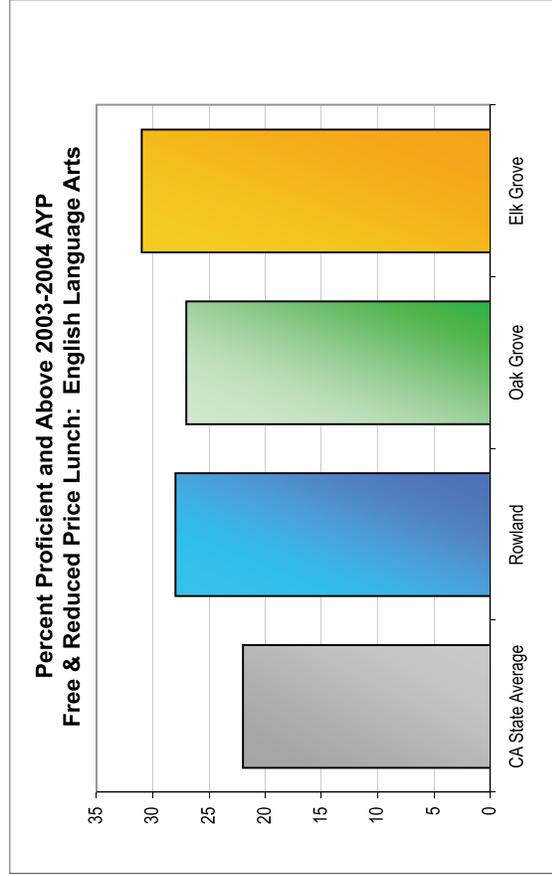
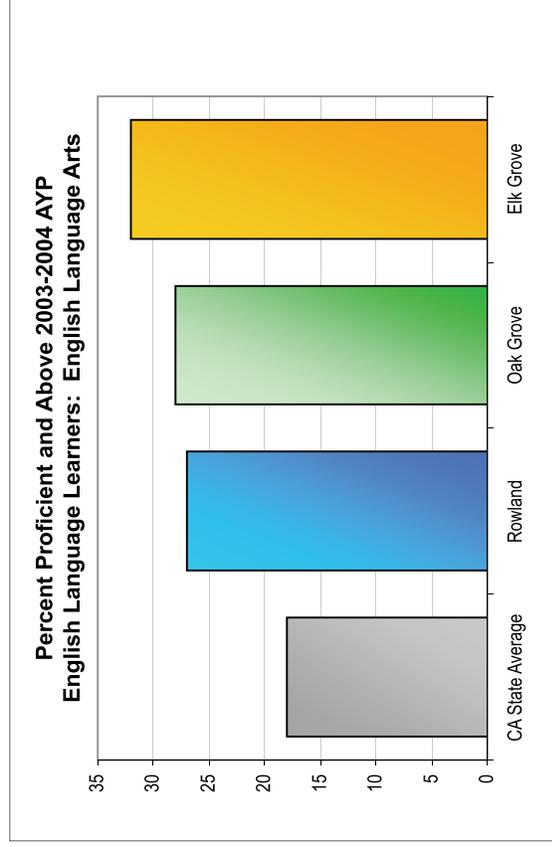
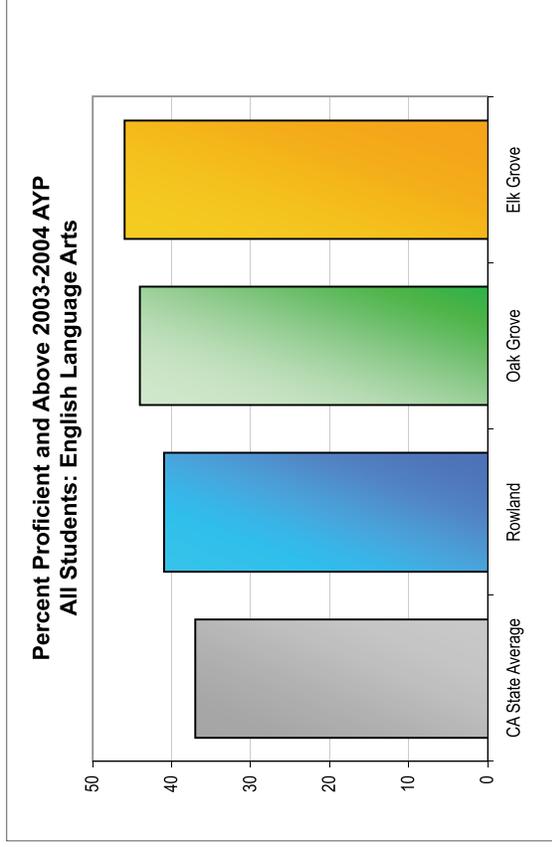
High Performing Districts Beat State Averages on the 2003-2004 Mathematics CST for:

- All Students**
- Students Eligible for FRPL**
- English Language Learners**



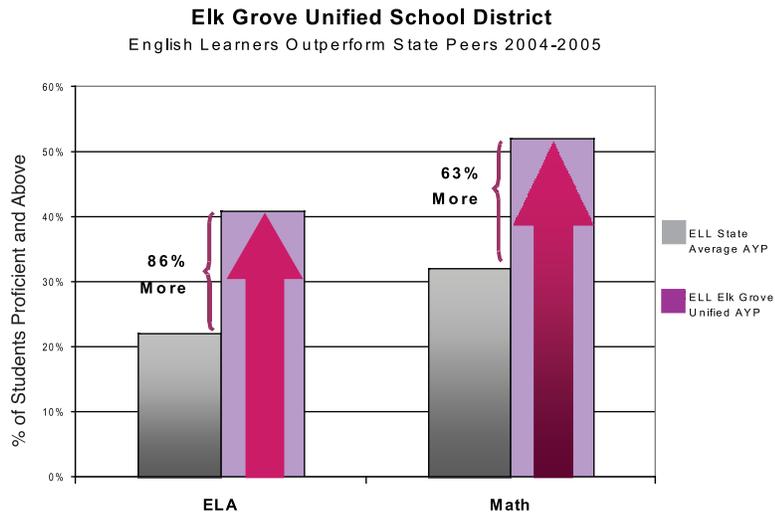
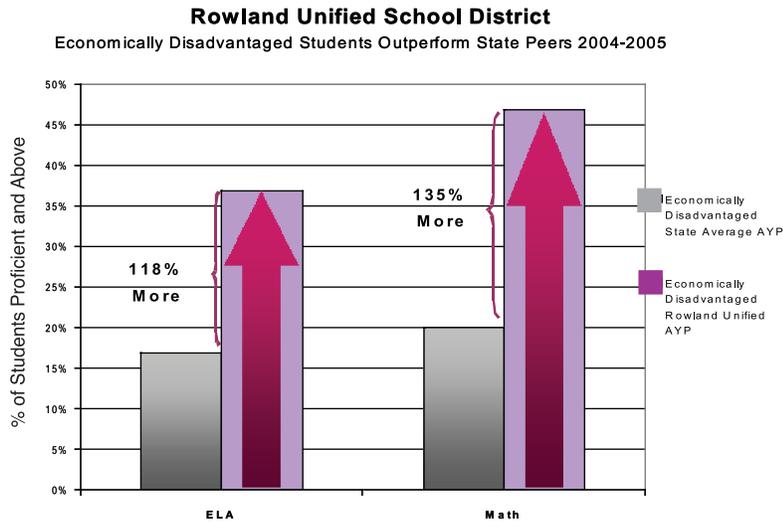
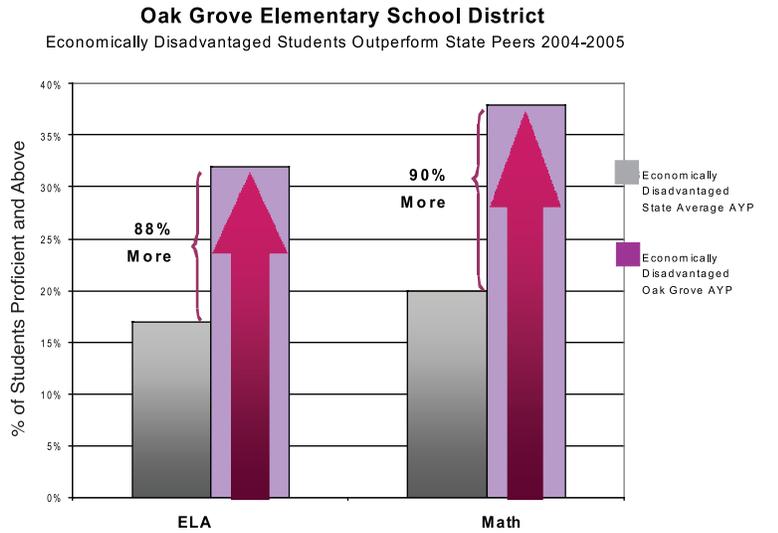
High Performing Districts Beat State Averages on the 2003-2004 English Language Arts CST for:

- All Students**
- Students Eligible for FRPL**
- English Language Learners**



Appendix III:

Evidence of Sustained Growth 2004-2005



Appendix IV:

Glossary

Accountability

The notion that people (e.g., students or teachers) or an organization (e.g., a school, school district, or state department of education) should be held responsible for improving student achievement and should be rewarded or sanctioned for their success or lack of success in doing so.

Achievement Gap

A consistent difference in scores on student achievement tests between certain groups of children and children in other groups. The data documents a strong association between poverty, language status, race and in some cases gender and students' academic success as measured by achievement tests. Recent legislation, including the Federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, hold schools and school districts accountable for narrowing the achievement gap.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

An individual state's measure of yearly progress toward achieving the federally-mandated goal of all students being "proficient" in English and math by 2014. Adequate yearly progress is the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year, according to the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

A-G Courses

The set of 15 one-year college prep courses high school students must take to be eligible to enter either the California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) systems.

Alignment

The degree to which assessments, curriculum, instruction, textbooks and other instructional materials, teacher preparation and professional development, and systems of accountability all reflect and reinforce the educational program's objectives and standards.

Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program (BTSA)

A program established with the enactment of Senate Bill 1422 in 1992. The purpose of BTSA is to implement cost-effective models for new teacher development in order to "transform academic preparation into practical success in the classroom, [and] to retain greater numbers of capable beginning teachers." The BTSA local programs are all consortia that include a college or university, a county office of education, one or more school districts, and at least one local teacher organization. Each BTSA program offers beginning teachers ongoing, consistent support from experienced colleagues at the school site. It also includes formative assessments (such as classroom observations, reflective journals, and portfolios) to help beginning teachers assess and improve their own teaching.

Benchmark

A detailed description of a specific level of student achievement expected of students at particular ages, grades, or developmental levels. A set of benchmarks can be used as checkpoints to monitor progress in meeting performance goals within and across grade levels.

Bilingual Education

An in-school program for students whose first language is not English or who have limited English skills. Bilingual education provides English language development plus subject area instruction in the student's native language. The goal is for the child to gain knowledge and be literate in two languages. In 1998 Proposition 227 was approved by California voters. It limited non-English instruction. However, parents may petition a school for instruction in a student's native language.

California English Language Development Test (CELDT)

A test for students whose primary language—as reported by their parents—is not English. These students take the CELDT upon initial enrollment and annually thereafter until it is determined that they

California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)

A state exam that California public high school students, beginning with the class of 2006, must pass in order to graduate. It is a pass-fail exam divided into two sections: English language arts (reading and writing) and mathematics.

California Standards Tests (CSTs)

Tests that are part of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program and are based on the state's academic content standards—what teachers are expected to teach and what students are expected to learn. They are primarily multiple choice and cover four subject areas: English language arts (grades 2–11); mathematics (grades 2–11); history/social science (grades 8, 10, and 11); and science (for high school students who are taking specific subjects like biology, chemistry, or integrated science). CSTs are criterion-referenced tests, and students are scored as "far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced."

English Learner (EL) or English Language Learner (ELL)

Students whose home language is not English and who qualify for extra help. EL students were formerly known as "Limited English Proficient" (LEP). (See CELDT and FEP.)

Fluent English Proficient (FEP)

A designation that means a student is no longer considered as part of a school's English learner (EL) population.

Free- or Reduced-Price Lunch program (FRPL)

A federal program to provide lunch and/or breakfast for students from low-income families. The number of students participating in the National School Lunch Program is used as a way to measure the poverty level of a school or district population.

High School Exit Exam (HSEE)

See California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).

Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP)

A component of California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) designed to provide assistance and intervention for schools identified as underperforming. Schools that meet improvement goals will be eligible for financial and non-monetary rewards; schools that fail to meet growth targets over time may be subject to district or state interventions.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

See English learner.

Local Education Agency (LEA)

A public board of education or other public authority within a state that maintains administrative control of public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a state. School districts and county offices of education are both LEAs. Sometimes charter schools function as LEAs.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

The 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Originally passed in 1965, ESEA programs provide much of the federal funding for K–12 schools. NCLB's provisions represent a significant change in the federal government's influence in public schools and districts throughout the United States, particularly in terms of assessment, accountability, and teacher quality. It increases the federal focus on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including English learners and student who live in poverty, provides funding for innovative programs, and supports the right of parents to transfer their children to a different school if their school is low-performing or unsafe.

Professional Development

Programs that allow teachers or administrators to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to perform their jobs successfully. Often these programs are aimed at veteran teachers to help them update their skills and knowledge. Researchers have found that effective professional development focuses on academic content and requires adequate time, resources, and working conditions.

Proficiency

Mastery or ability to do something at grade-level. In California, students take California Standards Tests (CSTs) and receive scores that range from "far below basic" to "advanced." The state goal is for all students to score at "proficient" or "advanced."

Program Improvement

An intervention under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Schools and districts that receive federal Title I funds enter Program Improvement when—for two years in a row—they do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward the goal of having all students become proficient in English language

arts and mathematics by 2013–14. Each state, with federal approval, sets measurements of what is considered AYP each year. Once a school makes AYP for two years in a row, it can leave Program Improvement. NCLB lists a series of increasingly serious interventions for schools that remain in Program Improvement. Schools that do not receive Title I funds are not subject to Program Improvement even if they do not make AYP.

Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA)

A law that outlines a comprehensive process for measuring schools' academic performance and ranking schools based on that performance. When schools fall short of the expectations, the state may intervene—first with assistance and later with sanctions. Successful schools are expected to be recognized and rewarded. The PSAA, which was approved by California lawmakers in April 1999, has three main components: the Academic Performance Index (API), the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP), and the Governor's Performance Award program (GPA).

Significant subgroup

A group of students based on ethnicity, poverty, English learner status, and Special Education designation. Under both California and federal accountability rules, various data must be reported for significant subgroups of students. To be considered "significant," a subgroup must include either 100 students or a smaller number if they represent at least 15% of the overall school population. For the state's Academic Performance Index (API), the smaller number is 30. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the smaller number is 50.

Special Education

Programs to identify and meet the educational needs of children with emotional, learning, or physical disabilities. Federal law requires that all children with disabilities be provided a free and appropriate education according to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) from infancy until 21 years of age.

Standards

Degrees or levels of achievement. The "standards movement" began as an informal effort grown out of a concern that American students were not learning enough and that American schools did not have a rigorous curriculum. The U.S. Congress adopted this concept more formally with its 1994 reauthorization of the federal Title I program.

Standards-Based Reform

A recent shift in education policy and school reform toward reaching consensus on and establishing standards for what students need to know and be able to do at each grade or developmental level. While the momentum for standards-based education is well on its way, tension still exists over how much influence national, state, or local policy makers should have over setting the standards. Although a strong backlash to national control continues, a growing number of states are taking on this responsibility, including California.

Appendix V:

Further Reading

- Burch, P. & J. P. Spillane. (2004). *Leading for the Middle: Mid-level District Staff and Instructional Improvement*. Chicago, IL: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.
- Brewster, C., & Railsback, J. (2003). *Building Trusting Relationships for School Improvement: Implications for Principals and Teachers*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Ascher, C. (1991). *Creating accountability in big city school systems* (Urban Diversity Series No. 102). New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.
- David, J. L., & Shields, P. M. (2001). *When theory hits reality: Standards-based reform in urban districts. Final narrative report*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Elmore, R. F. (2002). *Bridging the gap between standards and achievement: The imperative for professional development in education*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute.
- Elmore, R.F., & Burney, D. (1997). *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City*. New York, NY: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.
- Fullan, M. (2000). The return of large-scale reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1, 5-28.
- Gallucci, C. with Boatright, B., Lysne, D., & Swinnerton, J., (2006). *District reform as teaching and learning: How the system "learns" to improve instruction*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Hightower, A. M. (2002). San Diego's big boom: Systemic instructional change in the central office and schools. In A. M. Hightower, M. S. Knapp, J. A. Marsh, & M. W. McLaughlin (Eds.), *School districts and instructional renewal*, pp. 76-93. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Honig, M.I. & Coburn, C. (Winter 2005). *When districts use evidence to improve instruction: What do we know and where do we go from here?* Voices in Urban Education, Number 6.
- Honig, M.I. & G.S. Ikemoto. (2005). *When districts scale up best practices*. A report to Springboard Schools. College Park, MD: Center for Education Policy and Leadership (CEPAL).
- Massell, D. (2000). *The district role in building capacity: Four strategies* (RB-32). Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE).
- March, J.G. (1994). *A primer on decision-making: How decisions happen*. New York: Free Press.
- McLaughlin, M., & Talbert, J. (2003). *Reforming districts: How districts support school Reform* (R-03-6). Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.
- Neufeld, B, A. Levy & S. Schwartz Chrismer, (2005). *High School Renewal in the Boston Public Schools: Focus on Organization and Leadership*. Education Matters.
- Newmann, F. M., Smith, B., Allensworth, E., & Bryk, A. S. (2001). *School Instructional Program Coherence: Benefits and Challenges*. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- O'Day, J. (2002). *Complexity, Accountability, and School Improvement*. Harvard Educational Review, 72(3).
- Oberman, I with Arbeit, C & Goldstein, S. (2005). *Challenged schools, remarkable results: Three lessons from California's highest achieving high schools*. San Francisco, CA: Springboard Schools.
- Petrides, L. & T. Nodine. (2005). *Anatomy of School System Improvement: Performance Driven Practices in Urban School Districts*. NewSchools Venture Fund.
- Shulman, L. (2005). *Seek Simplicity...And Distrust It*. Education Week, Vol.24, Issue 39, p. 36(48).
- Snipes, J., Doolittle, F. & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement*. Washington D.C.: Council of Great City Schools.
- Tyack, D. (1974). *The One Best System*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walsh Symons, K. (2004). *After the Test: Closing the Achievement Gap with Data*. San Francisco, CA. Springboard Schools

Appendix VI:

Springboard Board of Trustees

GOVERNING BOARD

Paul Beare

Dean, Kremen School of Ed and Human Dev
CSU Fresno

Carolyn Getridge - Board Chairperson

Senior Vice President of Development
Voyager Expanded Learning Inc.

Ted Lobman

Consultant

Mary Poland

Community Leader

ADVISORY BOARD

Manny Barbara

Superintendent
Oak Grove School District

Kent McGuire

Dean, College of Education
Temple University

Teresa Bonaccorsi

Teacher Leader
Fremont Unified School District

Derek Mitchell

Program Manager
Stupski Family Foundation

Michael Eddings

Principal
San Francisco Unified School District

Julien Phillips

Executive Director-Emeritus
Partners In School Innovation

Raymond Isola

Principal
Sanchez Elementary School

John Sugiyama

Superintendent
Dublin Unified School District

Marilyn Loushin-Miller

Superintendent
Hillsborough City Schools District

Jocelyn Zona

Manager, Corporate Comm Relations, Western States
IBM



About Springboard Schools

Springboard Schools is a California-based nonprofit and non-partisan network of educators committed to raising student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. Springboard Schools was founded in 1995 as the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC). Since that time, Springboard Schools has worked with 325 schools in 74 districts in the San Francisco Bay Area, Central Valley, and Southern California.

Springboard's "research to action" approach to improving schools consists of three parts: 1) we study schools and districts getting good results with challenging populations to understand what they're doing right; 2) we provide professional development to educators and administrators; and 3) we partner with school districts to provide intensive, on-site coaching so new ideas are transformed into real improvements for students and teachers. The Springboard Schools research team has developed a national reputation as a reliable source of information that is useful to both practitioners and policy-makers.

At the center of the Springboard program is our Cycle of Inquiry process. We created this unique data-based decision-making process for improving schools because we believe the best results start with asking the right questions. We also believe that examining student achievement data alone is not enough; we must also closely examine how teachers teach and how schools and districts are organized. All of this has a huge influence on student learning. The Cycle of Inquiry process can be used at multiple levels of a school system, from the classroom to the boardroom.

Springboard's clients are school districts across California. They range from large districts to small ones and include urban, suburban and rural districts. Springboard's program for improving schools was rigorously evaluated over a five-year period by an independent research team at Stanford University's Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC).⁹ CRC's intensive study documented that test scores in Springboard schools rose more rapidly than those in a carefully matched group of schools that did not take part in our program. Those schools that implemented the Springboard model most faithfully made the biggest gains.

Springboard Schools' mission is to provide education organizations and their leaders at every level of the system with the knowledge, skills and tools to create school systems in which good teaching is the norm in every classroom for every student and in which students' race, class, language, gender or culture are never barriers to high achievement.

⁹ Bay Area School Reform Collaborative: Phase One (1996-2001) Evaluation; Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, Stanford University.

