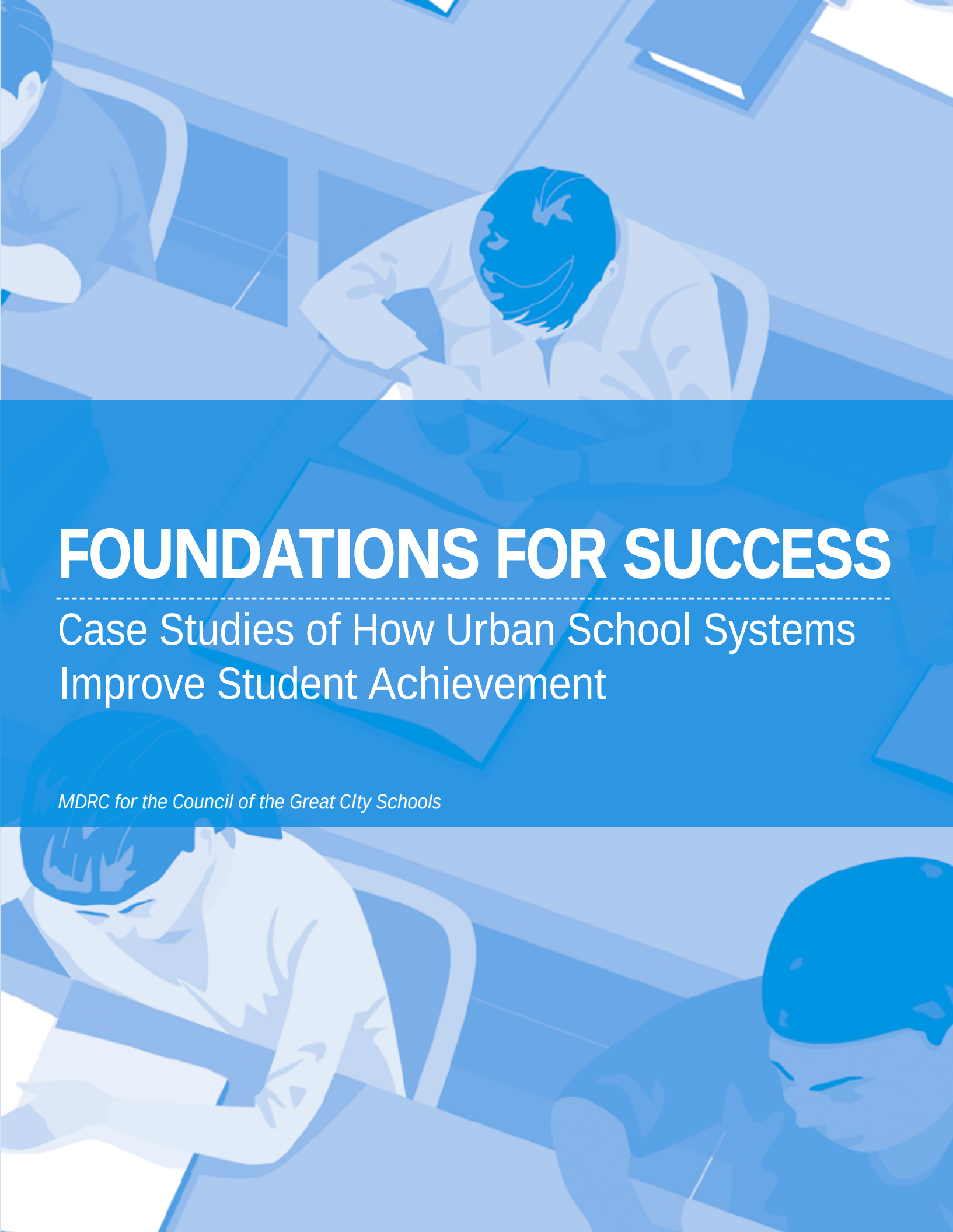

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement

MDRC for the Council of the Great CIty Schools

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

CASE STUDIES OF HOW URBAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

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PREFACE

This study, *Foundations for Success*, began almost four years ago as the Council of the Great City Schools began thinking about whether all the reforms that urban schools were pursuing actually improved their performance. A great deal of effort, expertise, and resources were being devoted to boosting urban school achievement, but almost no one was asking the question about whether the reforms were working.

The primary question, of course, involved whether or not urban schools were improving. To begin answering the question, the Council commissioned a study of central-city National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data. The bottom line suggested that urban education had improved significantly in math but not in reading. We supplemented this analysis with new state assessment results, which we eventually began publishing as part of our *Beating the Odds* series, and with data from local tests, ACT, Harcourt Educational Measurement, and the College Board. The results indicated that our initial NAEP analysis was correct. Urban schools were seeing gains.

We followed these analyses with a second question: Who was making the most progress? This has been difficult to answer with any certainty because so few cities use the same tests. The Council proposed allowing cities to take the NAEP in order to answer this question with greater confidence in the future. In the meantime, we were forced to rely on an inexact process. We asked some of the nation's leading educational researchers and statisticians to sort through the disparate data and distinguish the faster moving urban school districts from the slower ones. We looked for cities, which had improved in both reading and math in over half of their grades through spring 2001, had done so at rates faster than their respective states, and had simultaneously narrowed their racially-identifiable achievement gaps. From this pool of cities, we picked districts that reflected a range of sizes, demographic characteristics, and geographical locations.

The research team ultimately selected Charlotte-Mecklenberg (CMS), Houston (HISD), and Sacramento (SCUSD). The Chancellor's District in New York City was eventually added for limited study. A number of other cities could have been chosen. They included Norfolk, Fort Worth, Long Beach, and others. Progress in these communities has been impressive.

The third question we asked involved what the faster-moving city school systems were doing that others weren't. The answer is what this study, which we commissioned MDRC to conduct, is all about. Unfortunately, there was not much research to guide us when we started the process. We decided, therefore, on an exploratory study using the case study method described in this report. The reader will find that the results presented here are not definitive, but they are provocative.

There is—to be sure—a great deal of research on what it takes to turn around individual schools. Much of this work is rooted in noted educator Ron Edmonds' pioneering studies many years ago. This work continues to be promising and important. But, it nearly always ends with the conclusion that individual school gains were needed at scale.

This report is different in that it starts "at scale" and then worked backwards. We wanted to look at whole systems—large ones—that improved and ask the question, "How did they do it?" Our analysis of state assessment data told us there were such places.

We were met with a fair amount of skepticism when we started. We were told that there were school "effects" and teacher "effects" and state "effects"—but there were no district effects. We were also mindful of the popular sentiment that districts—particularly urban districts—were the problem, not the solution. Ironically, we came to agree with some of the skepticism about whether districts had an effect. In too many cases, we probably did not. This study, however, indicates that such an effect is possible and can add significant value to the efforts of others—value that will be critical as we work to implement *No Child Left Behind*.

We also faced skepticism about whether we would find any commonalities across the faster improving cities. Many observers indicated that citywide gains were probably unique to each city and could not be generalized. We also heard that district gains were little more than the sum of individual school improvements. The data in this report, however preliminary, suggest that there are common themes and that the citywide gains are more than could be created by individual schools.

It was important, moreover, for the Council of the Great City Schools to look at districtwide levers for change—not just school levers—because the leadership of these systems are being held accountable for the results in ways that others are not. We needed to identify what districts could do to boost performance citywide rather than waiting for the turn-around of individual schools.

Though exploratory, this study is one of the first to identify and discuss what real systemic reform is. Former Philadelphia Public Schools Superintendent David Hornbeck's pioneering work in Kentucky and the ten-point platform that emerged from it was an excellent start, but few researchers have attempted to put that platform to an empirical test. This report, which David helped conceive, attempts to fill the void by looking at the commonalities of cities across state lines that are improving, then compares them to other communities that have not improved as rapidly.

Our final question involves one's ability to translate the results of this exploratory study into new research into why and how systems improve and into technical assistance that will boost student performance in city school systems across the country. We still need to know, for instance, whether districts can improve scores by using strategies that are different from the ones articulated in these case studies. We also need to know where the research on "system reform" and the research on "school reform" converge. The study implicitly raises important questions about the conditions under which approaches like the "comprehensive school reform demonstration models" work and don't work. Lastly, the study suggests opening a new line of research on systems in addition to work on schools, states, and programs.

The implications for technical assistance are especially critical. The preliminary results of this study suggest that there may be a path for urban schools to follow that will get results on a citywide level. The data also point to where support and expertise are most needed and on what issues.

Clearly, urban education has a lot of work to do. Our schools are not as good as they need to be. We are trying, however, to create a path—paved with good research, coordinated across our cities—along which we can move. We think this strategy is preferable to waiting passively for the latest fad in reform, which may or may not have anything to do with how city schools work—or could work. The creation of a broad strategy for improving urban education nationally gives our work direction and hope.

This report, of course, could not have been possible without the efforts of a great many people. First, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and the Ford Foundation for their support. Cyrus Driver, our program officer at the foundation, was particularly helpful in taking the first step with us. We hope that the results prove useful to the foundation's work. We also thank the Board of Directors of the Council of the Great City Schools, which enthusiastically backed this effort. I am very proud to have a board that is so committed to improving our schools.

Second, I thank Cliff Janey and Jesse Martinez for their leadership. Cliff, the outgoing superintendent of the Rochester Public Schools, has served as Chair of the Council and its Task Force on Achievement Gaps for several years and has provided much of the intellectual firepower behind this effort. Jesse, a school board member with the Fort Worth Independent School District, has served as the Co-Chair of the Task Force and has contributed immensely to the project.

Third, I thank Sharon Lewis and Janice Ceperich. Sharon, the Council's Research Director, went on all the site visits and helped coordinate the effort from start to finish. Her contributions, large and small, are everywhere one looks on this project. Janice served as a research specialist on the project and also handled the layout of the final report.

Fourth, I thank the team at MDRC. Jason Snipes, Fred Doolittle, and Corinne Herlihy did a masterful job in conducting the research for the Council and articulating an important set of themes for urban school reform. Their work at MDRC was supported by Joel Gordon and Julianne O'Brien who acquired the achievement data from each district and prepared the data files for analysis. Vivian Mateo-Golden provided indispensable support for the research and the production of this report. Kent McGuire, James Kemple, Robert Ivry, Glee Holton, and Louis Richman reviewed drafts of the report and provided valuable feedback. Thank you.

Fifth, I thank the superintendents, board members, and staff from the case study districts and the comparison districts. Eric Smith, Jim Sweeney, Kaye Stripling, and Sandra Kase opened their doors, their books, their reports, and their files to ensure that we understood what made their districts tick. We hope we have translated your reforms faithfully. We also thank the staff of these districts for arranging interviews, site visits, and collecting data. Rosalind Young at HISD, Gayle McKnight at SCUSD, Betsy Williamson at CMS, and Marjorie Elliot at the Chancellor's District in New York deserve special recognition. Thank you.

Sixth, I thank our Research Advisory Group, which advised the Council on this effort. They included Ron Ferguson (Harvard University), Sam Stringfield (Johns Hopkins University), Pedro

Garcia (University of California at Berkeley), David Grissmer (Rand Corporation), Glee Holton (MDRC), John Simpson (Norfolk Public Schools Superintendent), David Hornbeck (former Philadelphia Public Schools Superintendent), Andrew Porter (University of Wisconsin), Katherine Blasik (Broward County Public Schools Assistant Superintendent), Linda Powell (City University of New York), Vinetta Jones (Howard University), Pedro Noguera (Harvard University), Cliff Janey (Rochester Public Schools Superintendent) and Jesse Martinez (Fort Worth Independent School District Board Member).

Pedro Noguera and Linda Powell warrant additional thanks for accompanying the research team on several site visits and for reviewing and commenting on various drafts of the case studies. I also thank the Education Studies Committee at MDRC for their thoughtful and hard-nosed review and commentary on this project.

Finally, I thank the team at GMMB who worked so hard on the production of the report: cover design, editing, report summaries, and advice. Frank Greer and Chrissy Russillo, thank you.

Michael Casserly
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. GOALS OF THE STUDY

The movement to reform education in the U.S. is fundamentally about improving urban public schools. Every debate about standards, testing, governance, busing, vouchers, charter schools, social promotions, class size, and accountability are discussions—at their core—about public education in the cities.

These discussions are worth having, for nowhere does the national resolve to strengthen its educational system face a tougher test than in our inner cities. There, every problem is more pronounced; every solution harder to implement. The burden of not solving these problems or implementing successful improvement strategies has fallen disproportionately on the African American and Latino children, children with disabilities and those learning English who live in the poverty-stricken cores of America's major cities.

The nation cannot afford to ignore these communities, for urban schools enroll a large share of America's children. While there are 16,850 public school districts in the United States, one hundred of those districts serve approximately 23 percent of the nation's students. These districts, many of which are located in urban areas, also serve 40 percent of the country's minority students and 30 percent of the economically disadvantaged students.

This report and the longer-term project of which it is a part focus on the potential role of the school district as an initiator and sustainer of academic improvement. While there has been much research on what makes an effective school, there is relatively little on what makes an effective district. In fact, many see large urban school districts as a source of problems rather than solutions. But for school improvement to be widespread and sustained, and for our nation to reduce racial differences in academic achievement, large urban districts must play a key role.

Over the past several years, the Council of the Great City Schools has embarked on an effort to understand student achievement patterns in large urban school districts and to develop ideas for how more districts can raise achievement. Previous Council research has shown that academic achievement is improving in urban schools and has identified a set of urban school districts that are making the fastest improvements, both overall and in narrowing differences among racial groups.

This report extends the existing research by examining the experiences of three large urban school districts (and a portion of a fourth) that have raised academic performance for their district as a whole, while also reducing racial differences in achievement. It attempts to use the experiences of these school districts to address the following questions:

1. What was the historical, administrative, and programmatic context within which student achievement improved in these districts?

2. How can we characterize the nature of the changes in student achievement, and what were the sources of these changes (specific schools, subgroups of student, etc.)?

3. What district-level strategies were used to improve student achievement and reduce racial disparities?

4. What was the connection between policies, practices, and strategies at the district level and actual changes in teaching and learning in the classroom?

The Council and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) intend to use the answers to these questions to identify hypotheses for further study of promising practices at the district level and to develop recommendations for technical assistance in support of reform efforts in large urban school districts. Further, the Council and MDRC hope to encourage a line of discourse and research regarding the role of large urban districts in school reform.

How Were the Case Study Districts Selected?

The Council's Achievement Gap Task Force, together with its Research Advisory Group (which is made up of nationally-known researchers and practitioners), identified three case study districts. These districts: Houston Independent School District; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools; Sacramento City Unified School District; and a portion of a fourth (the Chancellor's District in New York City) were selected because they met the following criteria:

- They demonstrated a trend of improved overall student achievement over at least three years.
- They demonstrated a trend of narrowing differences between white and minority students.
- They were improving more rapidly than their respective states.
- They were a set of geographically representative urban school districts.

What was the Methodology for the Study?

This research is based on (1) retrospective case studies of these districts and (2) comparisons of their experiences with other districts that have not yet seen similar improvements. The case study districts are used to develop hypotheses about the reasons for improvements in achievement. The comparison districts provide a partial test of the hypotheses emerging from the analysis of the case study districts. While the comparison districts cannot provide definitive support for the hypotheses developed in the case study districts, they were used to discard possible hypotheses and to better understand what is unusual about the case study districts.

II. THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FACING URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The large urban school districts examined in this report face a common set of challenges that exist above the level of individual schools. The primary challenges include:

Unsatisfactory Academic Achievement

The reform efforts were driven by the concern that schools were failing their students — especially low-income and minority students — and that improving this pattern was the district's most important priority. In both the case study districts and the comparison districts, achievement for minority and disadvantaged students was noticeably below that for white and more affluent students. And the differences by race and economic status increased as students grew older.

Political Conflict

In each of the three case study districts, there had been a period when the school board was divided into factions, and much of its activity revolved around disputes over resources and influence. The school board's "zero sum" arguments often dealt with salaries, hiring and firing decisions, student assignment procedures, and school construction and closings. Factional disputes between department heads, the board versus the superintendent, superintendents versus principals, or principals versus teachers were common and often became serious and personal. At times, infighting was intense because the district was a major employer (especially for groups that historically faced discrimination in the labor market) and because participation in educational politics was a stepping-stone for higher political office. As a result, the leadership in these districts was often not focused primarily on improving student achievement.

Inexperienced Teaching Staff

Each of the case study districts acknowledged that they needed to deal with the fact that much of their teaching staff was relatively inexperienced and suffered from high teacher turnover, especially once teachers gained some initial experience. In part this was due to the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers when school districts in the surrounding areas could offer teachers higher salaries, better facilities, a less challenged student body, and were seen as less stressful working environments. These difficulties were compounded by the limited training that the districts offered new teachers before they entered the classroom.

Low Expectations and a Lack of Demanding Curriculum

In each of the districts, staff felt overwhelmed at times by the great challenges that many of their lower-income and minority students faced. This led some staff to reduce expectations for achievement in the lower grades and justify the students' lack of progress. In the higher grades, where instruction and expectations can differ starkly across groups of students, low-income and minority students were under-represented in college preparatory and advanced placement classes. In some schools that served primarily low-income and minority students, the more demanding classes were offered infrequently or not at all.

Lack of Instructional Coherence

The study found that all districts suffered from having different educational initiatives and curricula in individual schools. Likewise, the districts discovered a lack of alignment between instruction and the state standards. Each of the districts had recently experimented with site-based management, which had produced a variety of different educational strategies within each district. This often proved confusing to school-level staff and difficult for the district to support. Additionally, the professional development strategy was fragmented; professional development was not focused on a consistent educational strategy (either of instruction or curricula) and often consisted of one-shot workshops on a series of topics.

High Student Mobility

Previous research suggests that moves between schools can undermine student learning. This problem may be exacerbated by variations in instructional approach. District leaders believed that the high rate at which students moved from one school to another within the districts disturbed the continuity of instruction students received in subjects such as reading and math. Some staff also noticed higher rates of mobility in the low-income student population and considered that another strike against their ability to achieve.

Unsatisfactory Business Operations

One of the most frustrating aspects of daily life for teachers and principals in ailing urban schools is the difficulty they face in getting the basic necessities to operate a school. All too often, school facilities were poorly maintained or dangerous, students were taught by substitutes for part or even all of the school year, and teachers lacked an adequate supply of books and materials. At times district business operations were managed by staff who had been promoted because of tenure in the district, rather than their particular qualifications. Administrative systems were outdated and cumbersome, and new expertise was needed to bring them up to speed. In some of the districts there was the perception — and too often the reality — that direct political influence by school board members and other elected officials affected decisions such as hiring, promotions and assignments, and contracts for supplies or services. Finally, school level staff viewed the central office as unresponsive, bureaucratic, and micromanaging, rather than working to find real solutions.

Three Key Contextual Factors That Affect Change

1. The Uncertainty of Funding

None of the case study districts were in desperate financial circumstances, but each of the districts faced budget pressures, in some years had to cut back spending, and had lost bond elections to raise funds for capital improvements.

2. *State Focus on Accountability*

Evolving state accountability systems with strong academic achievement goals helped focus local attention on student achievement. Thus, each of the three case study districts operated within a broader policy context that emphasized student academic achievement, concrete goals for improvement, and incentives and consequences for performance.

3. Local Politics and Power Relations

The process of decision-making in the case study districts was complex and had to accommodate many different interests. However, there were important differences from older, central city districts where interest group politics are more volatile and where the vast majority of residents and the student body are from a single racial group.

III. KEY FINDINGS

The Need to Establish Preconditions for Reform

The individual histories of these faster-improving urban school districts suggest that political and organizational stability over a prolonged period and consensus on educational reform strategies are necessary prerequisites to meaningful change. Such a foundation includes:

- A new role for the school board whereby a new board majority (or other governing unit) focuses on policy level decisions that support improved student achievement rather than on the day-to-day operations of the district.

- A shared vision between the chief executive of the school district and the school board regarding the goals and strategies for reform.

- A capacity to diagnose instructional problems that the school system could solve.

- An ability to flesh out the leadership's vision for reform and sell it to city and district stakeholders.

- A focus on revamping district operations to serve and support the schools.

- A matching of new resources to support the vision for reform.

What Were the Districts' Strategies for Success?

The case study districts' approaches to reform shared the following elements in common:

- They focused on student achievement and specific achievement goals, on a set schedule with defined consequences; aligned curricula with state standards; and helped translate these standards into instructional practice.

- They created concrete accountability systems that went beyond what the states had established in order to hold district leadership and building-level staff personally responsible for producing results.

- They focused on the lowest-performing schools. Some districts provided additional resources and attempted to improve the stock of teachers and administrators at their lowest-performing schools.

- They adopted or developed districtwide curricula and instructional approaches rather than allowing each school to devise their own strategies.

- They supported these districtwide strategies at the central office through professional development and support for consistent implementation throughout the district.

- They drove reforms into the classroom by defining a role for the central office that entailed guiding, supporting, and improving instruction at the building level.

- They committed themselves to data-driven decision-making and instruction. They gave early and ongoing assessment data to teachers and principals as well as trained and supported them as the data were used to diagnose teacher and student weaknesses and make improvements.

- They started their reforms at the elementary grade levels instead of trying to fix everything at once.

- They provided intensive instruction in reading and math to middle and high school students, even if it came at the expense of other subjects.

How Did the Comparison Districts Fare in Their Efforts?

While the comparison districts claimed to be doing similar things, there were several important differences that prevented them from achieving similar gains:

- They lacked a clear consensus among key stakeholders about district priorities or an overall strategy for reform.

- They lacked specific, clear standards, achievement goals, timelines and consequences.

- The district's central office took little or no responsibility for improving instruction or creating a cohesive instructional strategy throughout the district.

- The policies and practices of the central office were not strongly connected to intended changes in teaching and learning in the classrooms.

- The districts gave schools multiple and conflicting curricula and instructional expectations, which they were left to decipher on their own.

What Were the Trends in Academic Achievement?

- The academic achievement data collected as part of this study suggest that the districts in this study had indeed made progress in academic achievement and that this progress had begun to reduce racial disparities in student performance on standardized tests. Progress in each of the case study districts, moreover, generally outpaced statewide gains.

- This was particularly the case for the low end of the achievement distribution. The patterns of change and the magnitude of changes do not suggest that they were driven by small numbers of schools or students or were the sole result of state "effects."

- Progress was greatest at the elementary school level, and there was evidence of some improvement in achievement trends at the middle school level. However, these school districts are not yet generally making progress on overall achievement and racial differences in high schools.

IV. Implications for Next Steps

In many ways, these findings represent good practices for any type of organization: set priorities and specific goals; identify appropriate roles for parts of the organization; select or develop the techniques needed to move toward the goals given the local context, staff, and student body; collect and use information to track progress, identify needed refinements and areas of special needs; and stay on course long enough for the effort to pay off. There are few surprises here, just hard work.

But taking these common-sensical steps in the complex world of urban school districts with many diverse stakeholders, frequent leadership changes, competing priorities, limited resources, and difficult-to-manage bureaucracies is not a straightforward process. A key contribution of this study, therefore, is to suggest some priorities for urban school districts and to provide concrete examples of how several urban school districts successfully focused on student achievement and what they saw as necessary steps toward improvement.

This study is exploratory in nature and is not designed to yield definitive conclusions regarding the factors that drove achievement in these particular districts. However, the evidence gathered in these districts does support a few tentative conclusions that further technical assistance and research efforts should endeavor to test. These hypotheses are interrelated but can be loosely categorized into several topic areas: the foundations for reform; instructional coherence; and data-driven decision-making. In particular, the evidence in this report suggests the following hypotheses regarding the role of the district in urban school reform.

Building the Foundations for Reform

- The nature of the local political and public discourse about schools is important and can be changed. But first, school board, community leaders, and superintendents must agree that improved student achievement is their top priority.

- A sustained focus on enacting effective reforms is possible when a common vision is developed that is supported by a stable majority of the board, and when the school community and general public are engaged in providing feedback and support.

Developing Instructional Coherence

- The central school district office can play a key role in setting district-wide goals, standards for learning, and instructional objectives; creating a consistency of instruction in every school; and supporting the improvement of instruction and the effective delivery of curricula throughout the district.

- Urban school districts face specific challenges. Providing a systematic, uniform, and clearly defined approach to elementary instruction may improve student learning and have an even larger positive effect on the disadvantaged and minority children served by these districts.

- Giving teachers extensive professional development to ensure the delivery of a specific curriculum may be more effective at improving instruction and raising student achievement than distributing professional development resources widely across schools or educational initiatives.

- Requiring, encouraging, or providing incentives for highly skilled administrators and teachers to transfer to low-performing schools may improve the stock of staff at those schools and help disadvantaged and minority children succeed.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

- Teachers may be able to use achievement data as a tool to help them improve instructional practice, diagnose students' specific instructional needs, and increase student learning/achievement. However, teachers and principals need such data given to them at regular intervals from the start of the academic year, along with training in the use of these data to diagnose areas of weakness.

- Students may be assigned to classroom situations that are more beneficial to them if administrators carefully use assessment data in placement decisions to identify students with the potential to do more demanding work. This practice may also increase the odds that disadvantaged and minority students will be able to qualify for high-level classes.

The experiences of these districts, and the perspectives of the leaders in these districts, suggest one final hypothesis: doing all of these things together can have a much larger impact on the performance of a district than doing any one of them alone. Indeed, unless a district tries to reform their system as a whole, trying any one of these approaches may be a wasted effort.

In the end, the findings in this study underscore the importance of the district as a unit of analysis for research and as a level of intervention for reform. It is important next to refine the hypotheses regarding promising practices at the district level and establish a strong empirical basis for understanding the relationship between these educational improvement strategies and changes in teaching, learning, and student achievement in large urban school systems. The findings also underscore the importance in testing these strategies in diverse settings as possible, so as to establish their applicability to the systems where reform is most needed.

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

I. INTRODUCTION

The movement to reform education in the U.S. is fundamentally about improving urban public schools. Every debate about standards, testing, governance, busing, vouchers, charter schools, social promotions, class sizes, and accountability are discussions—at their core—about public education in the cities.

These discussions are worth having, for nowhere does the national resolve to strengthen its educational system face a tougher test than in our inner cities. There, every problem is more pronounced; every solution harder to implement.

The burden of not solving these problems or implementing successful improvement strategies has fallen disproportionately on the African American and Latino children, children with disabilities and those learning English who live in the poverty-stricken cores of America's major cities.

The nation cannot afford to ignore these communities, for urban schools enroll a large share of America's children. Of the approximately 47 million students attending the nation's 94,000 schools in 16,850 school districts, approximately 23 percent are served by the 100 largest school districts. These districts, many of which are located in urban areas, serve 40 percent of the 18.5 million minority students and 30 percent of the approximately 20 million economically disadvantaged students in the United States.[1]

Meeting the needs of these students demands both systemic and targeted solutions, developed in the context of enormous diversity and scarce resources, and focused relentlessly on student achievement.

Many observers of American public education, however, have come to the conclusion over the last decade or more that big city school systems and their leaders were incapable of addressing these challenges or were unwilling to do so. The critics may have been right: too many urban school districts stood in the way of reform and triggered the very things—charter schools, vouchers, political indifference, middle-class flight, and racial isolation—that they came to lament.

This report explores the role of the school district as an initiator and sustainer of academic improvement rather than as a barrier to reform or passive observer of state or school-site reforms. The potential role of large urban school districts in improving student achievement keeps coming back to the fore—among educators, policymakers, and the general public—despite the skepticism about the historic role of these systems.

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[1] *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary Districts in the United States: 1999-2000,* National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), October 2001.

As Larry Cuban, a noted professor of education, recently observed:

> *The notion of an urban school district helping individual schools turn themselves around sounds laughable when the primary critique of big city schools is how educational bureaucracies prevent rather than help reform. So for me to argue about the importance of the district in creating and sustaining whole school reform across an entire district certainly runs counter to prevailing wisdom. So be it. …Can hard-core low-performing schools be transformed without transforming the district? Of course they can. But can they stay transformed? The answer to this is no.*[2]

This report stems from an assumption that large urban school districts are an important part of the reform process and a potential lever for boosting student achievement. Research by the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) shows that large urban districts that make up the organization's membership are coming to grips with their historic problems and refocusing their energies on student academic achievement. Every poll of the nation's urban school leaders since 1995 shows that improving student academic achievement is their highest priority.

Progress on academic achievement in these urban districts depends greatly on the educational outcomes of minority students because of their concentration in these systems. In 1998, researchers Jencks and Phillips characterized racial differences in the academic achievement of students as one of the foremost challenges to achieving social equality in this country. In particular, their research showed that racial gaps in elementary and secondary academic achievement in today's students surfaced as racial gaps in college attendance, educational attainment, and employment and earnings in the future. They reasoned, therefore, that eliminating racial disparities in academic skills might do more than any other strategy to enable members of different racial groups to participate fully in our economy and society.[3]

A great deal of research has focused on identifying school-level policies and practices that improve overall student achievement and close the racial performance gaps.[4] Recent work, for example, by the Heritage Foundation and the Education Trust attempts to identify practices that make schools effective at serving disadvantaged and minority students. Other research has focused on specific practices, such as lowering class-sizes, which might have a disproportionately positive effect on minority student achievement (Krueger and Whitmore, 2001). Beyond this, much research has focused on comprehensive school reform models aimed at restructuring schools and improving instruction in schools that serve high proportions of disadvantaged and minority students.

In attempting to improve minority student achievement and eliminate racial achievement gaps, researchers have generally paid little attention to the role of the school district, particularly the large urban school district. In short, while much research has focused on how to create an effective school, there has been little research focused on how to create an effective school district. Filling this

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[2] Cuban, Larry, *Improving Urban Schools in the 21st Century: Do's and Don'ts or Advice to True Believers and Skeptics of Whole School Reforms*, address delivered at the OERI Conference on Comprehensive School Reform, Denver, Colorado, July 2001.

[3] Jencks, Christopher and Meredith Phillips, Eds. 1998. *The Black-White Test Score Gap. Washington, DC:* The Brookings Institution.

[4] Perhaps among the most important findings of this body of work is that there is no *single* policy likely to reduce the differences in academic achievement between the different ethnic groups in our country.

void is important if the nation—not just the cities—expect to narrow gaps between white students and their African American and Hispanic counterparts.

Over the past several years, the Council of the Great City Schools has made an effort to understand student achievement patterns in large urban school districts and has identified districts that have begun to raise overall student achievement while also reducing racial disparities in academic performance. Specifically, this research program has been guided by four key questions:

1. Is academic achievement (as measured by test scores) improving in urban schools?

2. Which urban school districts are making the fastest improvement, both overall and in narrowing differences among racial groups?

3. What are these districts doing to improve academic achievement that others are not?

4. What are the implications for future research and technical assistance to help all urban districts improve student achievement?

As part of this effort, the Council has conducted several studies that explore the first two questions listed above.[5] These reports assessed the patterns in achievement and racial achievement gaps in large urban school districts; identified districts that have improved achievement and reduced racial achievement gaps; and began to identify promising practices for improving student performance in these districts. The evidence presented in these reports suggests that there is meaningful variation in the extent to which large urban school districts are successfully improving achievement and altering racial achievement gaps.

A. Goals of This Study

This study—a collaboration between the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) and Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)—extends the previous research by attempting to explore the third and fourth questions listed above. It chronicles the experiences of three large urban school districts (and a portion of a fourth) that have made improvements in overall academic performance and have reduced racial disparities in academic attainment. In particular, the study attempts to use the experiences of these districts to:

- Understand how districts that make progress in improving achievement describe and analyze their major challenges.

- Characterize the process of reform and describe the primary approaches taken to address student performance problems.

- Identify promising practices to improve minority student achievement in large urban school districts.

[5] *Closing Achievement Gaps in Urban Schools*, *Striving for Excellence*, *Beating the Odds*, CGCS, 1999, 2001a, 2001b.

- Develop hypotheses for further study and structured experimentation.

- Develop recommendations for technical assistance in support of large urban school districts' reform efforts.

- Open a line of discourse and research focused on the role that large urban school districts play in improving student achievement levels and reducing racial disparities in academic achievement across the country.

- Suggest ways for urban school leaders to think about systemic reform and how to get citywide academic gains.

This study is exploratory in nature, as discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Based solely on the evidence gathered in this study, we cannot establish definitive causal links between specific actions taken by the school districts and improvements in student achievement. The study design—utilizing field research in four sites that have made the fastest improvements and in two sites that have not yet made significant gains—does not enable us to identify with certainty the factors that drove improved student performance in these districts, or the policies, practices and programs that could improve student achievement in other school systems. Nevertheless, what we learn from the districts in this study can help further our understanding of the reform process in large urban districts and enable us to develop hypotheses regarding policies and practices that may improve student achievement in other urban systems.

B. Key Findings and Emerging Themes

In the fall of 2000, three case study districts (Houston Independent School District, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and Sacramento City Unified School District) were selected for this study based on summary test scores. (See below for information on the selection process.) The Chancellor's district in New York City was added later. These districts were chosen because they were seen as having made progress in raising overall student achievement while reducing differences across racial groups on standardized measures of achievement. Subsequent analysis of test scores in the three full school districts[6] revealed the following nuances to the story:

- Student performance at the elementary school level has been improving in recent years, both for all students and for individual racial groups. Gains appear, moreover, to exceed the pace of statewide improvements.

[6] We did not conduct a similar analysis of academic achievement in the Chancellor's District in New York City in part because the schools included within this administrative subunit of the New York City school system change yearly. Schools become part of the Chancellor's District because of unacceptable academic performance and leave the district when they make sufficient progress on academic as well as other criteria outlined by the Chancellor's District. Therefore, year-to-year comparisons of test scores in schools in the district do not mean the same thing as annual comparisons for a typical district with a stable list of schools.

- For most elementary school grades, the case study districts have seen a reduction in racial differences in the percentage of students who fail to meet basic performance criteria on standardized tests of reading and math. In particular, the percentage of elementary school students performing below basic performance thresholds in most grades fell more rapidly among African American and Hispanic students than among their white counterparts.

- Reductions in racial differences were less consistent when one looked at average levels of achievement by group. Disparity in average levels of academic achievement by race narrowed in some grades and subjects but not in others.

- The case study districts have made less consistent progress at the middle school level and, in general, little progress at the high school level in raising academic achievement and reducing differences by race in achievement.

In short, the academic achievement data collected for this study indicate that the districts made progress among younger students and that this progress has begun to reduce racial disparities in student performance on standardized tests, particularly at the lower end of the achievement distribution and in the lower grades. While the districts have not raised all students to high levels of achievement or eliminated differences in achievement among races, their progress does make a compelling case for testing the hypotheses more broadly.

MDRC and Council staff conducted case studies in three districts and in an administrative division of a fourth to explore the issues. The team also examined two comparison districts that had not made significant academic progress. The information we gathered suggests the following findings.

- Both the case study districts and the comparison districts faced a common set of challenges. In the case study districts, analysis of these challenges guided the development of a strategy for reform.

- In the case study districts, the local leaders invested substantial resources in creating important political and organizational preconditions for change. Most of these preconditions involved the creation of a stable consensus among key stakeholders that school reform would be a top priority and would focus on a common vision for improved student achievement.

- The case study districts adopted a common set of strategies designed to improve educational performance in their districts. These included:

    * Focusing on student achievement and specific achievement goals associated with deadlines and consequences.

    * Developing uniform elementary and middle school curricula and instructional approaches that were supported by the central office through professional development and implemented consistently throughout the district.

  * Defining a key role for the central office whereby it supported instructional reform and created instructional coherence throughout the system.

  * Enthusiastically embracing state accountability systems, creating additional local accountability measures, and making efforts to clarify goals and align curricula with state standards.

  * Committing to data-driven decision-making and instruction. The case study districts gave early and ongoing assessment data to teachers and principals and trained and supported them as the data were used to diagnose teacher and student weaknesses and make improvements.

- While the comparison districts claimed to be implementing similar strategies, there were several important differences between them and the case study districts. Primary among these were:

  * No clear consensus among key stakeholders about district priorities or an overall strategy for reform.

  * No specific, clear standards, achievement goals, timelines, and consequences.

  * The district's central office played little or no role in improving instruction or creating a cohesive instructional strategy throughout the district.

  * The policies and practices of the central office did not result in the intended changes to teaching and learning in the classrooms.

  * Multiple and conflicting curricula and instructional expectations existed in these districts. The central office left schools to decipher these on their own.

In sum, the case study districts developed a consensus on reform priorities, created instructional coherence, and ensured that key instructional improvement strategies were implemented at the classroom level. The comparison districts, on the other hand, had not created the political and organizational preconditions for change to the same degree, had not developed clear goals and timelines regarding student performance, and had yet to develop a plan for achieving instructional coherence in their districts.

In many respects, these steps are ones that any organization would take to succeed: set priorities and specific goals; identify appropriate roles; select or develop the techniques needed to achieve the goals within the existing framework; collect and use information to track progress; identify needed refinements and special needs; and stay on course long enough for the effort to pay off.

Accomplishing these steps, however, in the complex world of urban education with its diverse stakeholders, frequent leadership changes, competing priorities, limited resources, and difficult-to-manage bureaucracies is not a simple and straightforward process. A major goal of this project,

therefore, was to provide concrete examples of how several urban school districts successfully focused on student achievement, what specific steps they took, and which reforms they implemented to achieve the gains they did.

C. Report Outline

This report is divided into four chapters. The remainder of this chapter outlines the methodology used in the study (including the case study approach), the process by which the case study districts were selected, and the methods used to collect information. Chapter 2 summarizes the educational challenges facing the districts. Chapter 3 discusses how the case study communities created preconditions for change and implemented educational improvement strategies. Chapter 3 also outlines the implementation challenges the case studies districts faced. Included in this discussion are examples of the differences between the comparison districts and the case study districts. Chapter 4 concludes by summarizing the emerging hypotheses for future research and technical assistance and outlining potential activities. Case studies for each of the school districts in this research are presented in the Appendices. Appendix A includes a description of the three case study districts, Appendix B includes a description of activities in the New York City Chancellor's District, and Appendix C consists of a combined case study for the comparison districts. The case studies contain a description of the context for change in each district and a discussion of the reform process and specific strategies that were adopted. Lastly, the case studies include an analysis of the achievement data and an attempt to characterize the trends in overall student achievement and achievement gaps throughout these systems. Appendix D contains a list of references and Appendix E provides the names of persons on various committees as well as information about MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools.

II. CASE STUDY DESIGN

This research rests on (1) retrospective case studies of districts that have shown improvements in overall student achievement and reductions in racial differences in achievement and (2) comparisons with other districts that have not yet seen similar improvements in achievement. The experiences of the case study districts (selected through a process described below) help develop theories about the reasons for improvements in achievement. The comparison districts provide a partial test of the hypotheses emerging from the analysis of the case study districts. While the comparison districts cannot provide definitive support for the hypotheses developed in the case study districts, they were used to discard alternative explanations and to better understand what was unusual about what the case study districts were doing.

A. Primary Research Questions

This study uses the experiences of the case study districts to answer four questions:

1. *What was the nature of the overall changes in student achievement* in these districts, and what are the sources of these changes (specific schools, subgroups of students, etc.)?

2. *What was the historical, administrative, and programmatic context* within which these academic achievement changes took place?

3. *What district-level strategies* for improving student achievement and reducing racial disparities were used?

4. *What was the connection* between policies, practices, and strategies at the district level and real changes in teaching and learning in the classroom?

B. Criteria and Process for Selection of Districts

The Research Advisory Group of the Council's Task Force on Achievement Gaps, with assistance from senior Council staff, chose the districts in this study. The Council established the Achievement Gap Task Force in 1997 as a working group to help urban districts teach all students to the highest standards and to close racial gaps in achievement. Its Research Advisory Group is made up of nationally-known researchers and practitioners.[7] The Research Advisory Group, the Task Force, and Council staff developed several criteria for deciding which districts to include in the study. These criteria included:

- A demonstrated trend of improved overall student achievement over at least three years.
- A trend of narrowing differences between white and minority student achievement.
- A trend of improvement that was generally faster than the respective states.
- A set of geographically representative school districts.

The Research Advisory Group selected potential case study districts from among the Council's 58 member cities that had shown both average gains and reductions in achievement gaps. It is important to note that both criteria had to be met in order to avoid any perceived "trade-offs" between policies that might affect the achievement of different groups. The data used to evaluate the districts on the above criteria generally consisted of state standardized tests, disaggregated by grade and by race.[8]

Several factors limited the analysis of these data and made comparisons across districts complex. In general, district-level average achievement scores were straightforward to collect and analyze because much of this information is available on state department of education websites. Many states, however, do not disaggregate their data by race or do not make such data publicly available. As a result, it was necessary to obtain additional data (beyond that on the websites) that was not in the public domain. Differences in the state assessments also complicated the identification of potential districts. Some states administered norm referenced tests designed to assess student performance relative to a representative sample of students from across the nation. Other states relied on "crite-

[7] The Achievement Gap Task Force consists of approximately 100 school board members, superintendents, and other personnel from the Council's member districts. The Research Advisory Group, made up of nationally known education researchers and practitioners, has provided a detailed review of the design and progress of this research, was involved in developing the criteria for selection of districts, and participated in the selection of the case study districts.

[8] These data are available in a previous Council publication *Beating the Odds: A City-by-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments*, May 2001.

rion referenced" tests, designed to assess students relative to some absolute standard. It was possible, therefore, to identify districts that had met the selection criterion but it was not possible to make direct comparisons across districts.[9]

C. Study Districts and Their Trends in Student Achievement

The districts selected for full case studies were:

- Sacramento City Unified School District;
- Houston Independent School District; and
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

Each of these districts was the subject of a case study, the results of which are presented in Appendix A of this report.[10] Table 1.1 provides some key characteristics of these districts.

The Council also secured the cooperation of New York City's Chancellor's District for limited study. In 1996 Chancellor Rudy Crew established the Chancellor's District as an administrative subunit of the New York City Board of Education. The Chancellor's District serves the lowest performing schools in the city, many of which are "Schools Under Registration Review" (SURR)—identified by the state for consistently poor performance. A school is selected by the Chancellor to enter the district and can leave the district only when students' academic performance and the school's academic program have improved and the home district is able to support it. During the study period, the Chancellor's District served 46 schools. As this "district" is actually part of a larger school system, it was not the subject of a full case study. Nevertheless, the research team collected evidence from this site to inform, confirm, and provide context for the findings in the other case study sites.[11]

MDRC, moreover, collected statistical data on academic performance in each of the case study districts to better understand performance patterns over the last several years and to help interpret the origin of the gains.[12] A detailed analysis of trends, however, was beyond the scope of this study. Most of the data collected consisted of student or school level information from standardized reading and math tests, but not all data were identical across sites. Nevertheless, a uniform pattern of achievement emerged across the districts.

Tables 1.2 and 1.3 illustrate the findings by presenting third-grade reading achievement data for Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Houston, and Sacramento, showing trends in the percentages of stu-

[9] Because simple comparisons across a common test were not possible, the Council staff, Task Force, and Research Advisory Group also consulted state NAEP data and local test results and collected college entrance test trends when evaluating progress.
[10] Some other districts were identified as showing similar progress but were not chosen in order to get the desired geographic and demographic diversity and a variety of state policy contexts.
[11] Because the school composition of this administrative unit changes as new schools are identified for poor performance and other schools leave because of improvement, we have not listed characteristics of this district in Table 1.1.
[12] MDRC did not collect and report similar data in the comparison districts because these data could compromise the anonymity of the districts.

dents failing to meet specified performance criteria. For Sacramento and Houston school districts, this number is the percentage of third-graders who fell below the 25th percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test 9th Edition (SAT-9). For Charlotte-Mecklenburg, this was the percentage of third-graders who scored in levels one and two (below grade level expectations) on the North Carolina State End-of-Grade (EOG) test.

The rows in the tables show student performance for each racial group for which data were available. The first row presents the percentage of African American students in Houston scoring below the 25th percentile in each year between 1998 and 2001.[13] The second row presents data for Asian students, the third row for Hispanic students, and the fourth row for white students.[14] Finally, the fifth line presents the average performance for all students in the district, regardless of race. The next two rows present racial differences in the percentages of Houston students from each ethnic group who fell below the threshold. The sixth row shows the differences between the percentage of African American students who fell below the 25th percentile and the percentage of white students who fell below this threshold, while the next row compares the performance of Hispanic and white students on the same metric. The data in the rest of the tables follow a similar structure. The exception is Charlotte-Mecklenburg, for which data on Asian and Hispanic students were not available.

The data show that the percentage of students from each racial group scoring below these basic criteria declined in each district. Reductions in the percentages of low-performing students, moreover, appeared to be greater among African American and Hispanic students than their white counterparts. The result was a narrowing of racial disparities.[15] Similar changes occurred among the Hispanic students in Houston, but the reductions were slightly larger in magnitude.

The data on Sacramento and Charlotte-Mecklenburg show a similar pattern. The percentage of students who scored below the thresholds declined in every group, but the percentage of African American and Hispanic students with low test scores declined by a greater amount than the percent of white students below the threshold. The result was a reduction in racial disparities in the percentage of students performing below these "threshold" criteria.

A less pronounced pattern emerges when one looks at the *average* scores of each group of students. Tables 1.4 and 1.5 present the average scores of each ethnic group in the case study districts. The layout of the tables is the same as Table 1.2. The only difference is that, instead of the percentage of students who fall below a given performance criteria, these tables present the *average* scores among each group.[16] In general, the trends in average achievement show more modest growth

[13] SAT-9 data for Houston are only available from 1998 through 2001, so the years 1995 through 1997 are blank.

[14] For example, in 1998, of the students taking the SAT-9 in reading in Houston, approximately 41 percent of African American and 40 percent of Hispanic students scored below the 25th percentile, compared to only 17 percent of Asian and 14 percent of white students taking the test.

[15] For example, in 1998 approximately 41 percent of African American students in Houston taking the SAT-9 scored below the 25th percentile, compared to about 14 percent of their white counterparts, a difference of approximately 27 percentage points. By the spring of 2001, the percentage of African American students scoring below the 25th percentile on the SAT-9 fell to approximately 30 percent, and the percentage of white students scoring below this threshold fell to about 9 percent. As a result, the African American-white difference in performance on this metric fell to about 22, narrowing the gap by about 5 percentage points.

[16] For Sacramento and Houston, these scores are presented in terms of Normal Curve Equivalents, or NCEs. For Charlotte, the scores are presented as scaled scores on the North Carolina State End-of-Grade Test.

than trends in the percentage of students above or below certain thresholds. Reductions in the minority achievement gap also look less consistent and smaller when using average scores.

The first section of Table 1.4, for example, shows average reading achievement in Houston. The first row indicates that the average reading score among African American students in Houston who took the SAT-9 in 1998 was approximately 40 Normal Curve Equivalents (NCEs). This was lower than the average achievement among white students, which equaled about 59 NCEs. The average score for both groups was somewhat higher in 2001; African Americans increased to about 46 NCEs and white students improved to about 66 NCEs. While the disparity in the percentages of students scoring below the 25th percentile had shrunk, the African American-white disparity in average third-grade test scores in Houston grew slightly. In 1998, the average African American third-grader scored approximately 18 NCEs lower than his or her white counterpart on the SAT-9. By 2001, African Americans scored approximately 20 NCEs below their white counterparts. This does not appear to be a dramatic change and does not exist in other grades.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Sacramento, the changes in racial disparities in average third-grade reading achievement are in the same direction as changes in the racial disparities in the percent "below basic." Nevertheless, the changes in average scores are not as large as those reported in Table 1.2.

The reader might note that the recently enacted *No Child Left Behind* legislation will hold The ountable for increasing the numbers of students above specific thresholds, not for increasing average scores. Each of these districts would be considered to be making adequate yearly progress using the criteria specified in the new law.

The patterns for other elementary school grades and other subjects are discussed in the individual case studies. The data suggest, in general, that African American and Hispanic students across various grades and subjects began the reform period with average scores nearer the bottom of the distribution than their white counterparts. Average scores increased during the reforms among all groups, resulting in some reductions in the racial differences in average achievement. The percentages of African American and Hispanic students scoring at or near the bottom of the test score distribution declined more sharply, resulting in a reduction in the racial differences in the percentage of elementary students performing below basic performance criteria.

In addition to these case study districts, the Research Advisory Group selected two comparison districts to participate in the study. These districts, not identified by name in this report, are the subject of a combined case study presented in Appendix C. Comparison District 1 is a large northern district with more than 100,000 students. This district has seen declining enrollment over the last few years. As is true of Houston, the vast majority of students in this district are from minority ethnic groups, but in this case the minority students are largely from one racial group. White students make up less than 10 percent of the student body. Over two-thirds of Comparison District 1 students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch and less than 10 percent of students are served by the district's program for English Language Learners. Comparison District 2 falls between Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Sacramento in size with between 50,000 and 100,000 students. It is similar to Charlotte-

Mecklenburg in terms of student ethnicity; approximately half the students are white and half are African American. About five percent of students are English Language Learners, while about half are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. While some contextual differences exist, both comparison districts have important elements in common with the three case study districts and with the Chancellor's District. Throughout the report, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Houston, and Sacramento districts are referred to as the "case study" districts, while Districts 1 and 2 are referred to as the "comparison" districts.

D. Field Research

A team of researchers from MDRC and CGCS conducted field research in each of the case study and comparison districts. The field research was necessary to understand the local context, each district's efforts to improve student achievement, and the effect of these efforts at the classroom level. Specifically, the field research included:

- Two two-day site visits to each case study district in the study.
- One two-day site visit to the comparison districts in the study.
- Open-ended interviews with key actors in each district, including the superintendent and executive staff, school board members, employee organizations, city and community leadership, and informed observers (e.g., newspaper reporters, faculty at local universities).
- Focus groups and open-ended interviews with teachers and principals to better understand district initiatives and changes in the school and classroom during the period of improvement in student achievement (usually the past five years).
- Review of relevant documentation, including district strategy memos, descriptions of key policy initiatives, and relevant clippings.[17]

1. Case Study Districts

In the case study districts, the first two-day site visit was intended to develop a clear picture of the perspectives of the district's leadership and central office personnel. It consisted primarily of open-ended interviews with key actors in the district.[18] The team sought to understand the district's history of reform (before and during the current administration), the extent of coherence in the central office reform strategy, and the roles that central office personnel played in the implementation of reforms. The research team also collected relevant documentation, including strategy memos, descriptions of key policy initiatives, and clippings.

[17] For the Chancellor's District, there was a single visit and no focus groups were conducted.

[18] The team typically started with the Superintendent and his or her executive staff and included school board members, employee organization representatives, community leaders, and informed observers such as newspaper reporters and faculty members at local universities. These interviews usually lasted 45 minutes to one hour each, and were focused around the evolution of local context, district level strategies, and student achievement patterns in the last three to five years.

The second two-day site visit to the case study districts primarily focused on understanding the connection between policies, practices, and events at the district level and changes in daily life at the school.[19] The interviewers focused their questions on the mechanisms by which district policy was translated into real building-level changes, as well as the manner and extent to which central office staff and leadership perceived district level policies, practices, and events to have had an effect on actual practice in the schools.

The research design included a substantial effort to incorporate feedback from individuals working at the school building level. Specifically, the research team conducted several focus groups with teachers and principals from a cross section of schools, including schools that had experienced some improvement over the past few years and schools that, according to the central office, were not making as much progress.[20] The team also tried to meet with groups of principals and teachers from each level of education in the district: elementary, middle, and high school. Because the first round of visits suggested that the initial wave of reforms in each district focused on the elementary level, we concentrated our resources there.[21]

The focus group sessions were generally 90 minutes long, and the discussion centered on expectations of teachers and principals in the school; "life in the school" and how it had evolved over the last several years; curriculum and instruction; recent reforms; and perceptions of district leadership and the role of the central office.[22]

2. Comparison Districts

In general, the CGCS and its Research Advisory Group sought districts that were in comparable circumstances to the case study districts in terms of geography, population of students served, and other factors. The Council also looked for districts that were attempting changes similar to those of the case study districts, but had yet to make much progress in terms of student achievement. A number of districts volunteered. The reader should keep in mind that the comparison districts have moved aggressively over the last year to realign their priorities and boost student achievement. Much of the narrative on these districts reflects conditions before their new superintendents arrived.

The field research in the comparison districts consisted primarily of one two-day visit to each district. During this single visit, the field research team undertook activities similar to those conducted in the case study districts, albeit in an abbreviated fashion. The site visit also included a set of

[19] As needed, superintendents, central office staff, and board members were re-interviewed in order to clarify our understanding of the district level factors at work and to answer unresolved questions.

[20] The team would have generally preferred to interview personnel from less improved schools separately from those from more improved schools. However, this was not always feasible. The focus groups were generally constructed by asking the central office staff to recruit teachers and principals from schools, and judgments regarding which schools fell into these categories were left to the central office staff.

[21] While there was some variation across districts, the research team typically met with two focus groups of six to eight elementary school principals, one group from relatively high performing or improving schools, another from relatively low performing or less improved schools. Similarly, the team typically met with two similarly situated focus groups of six to eight elementary school teachers. The field researchers also conducted focus groups with principals and teachers from middle schools and high schools. This typically consisted of one principal focus group each at the middle school and high school levels, including principals from both low performing as well as improving schools. A similar set of focus groups was conducted for teachers at middle school and high schools.

[22] A detailed set of research protocols was developed for the focus groups at each site. These are available upon request to the Council of the Great City Schools.

focus groups with building-level personnel, similar in scope to that which the field researchers conducted in the case study districts. As in the case study districts, a key theme in all of these discussions was the connection between policies and practices at the district level and changes in teaching and learning in the classroom.

III. Limitations of the Research Design

Case study research, by its very nature, has limits. It delves deeply into a few specific subjects rather than into many. It is also more subjective and less capable of statistical analysis. The purpose of this project was to develop hypotheses for further study. Options for future work include research in a larger sample of districts or research intended to establish causal links between specific strategies and intended outcomes. In this study, we found that the more similar the context among the case study and comparison sites and the starker the contrast between their outcomes, the greater the opportunity to identify links between strategies and outcomes. The case study districts in this study have made progress in improving achievement and reducing racial differences among students. But at this point, their progress is incremental, and the varying patterns of achievement and the disparate ways of measuring it establish limits to how well the case study and comparison districts can be compared.

Furthermore, aside from the Chancellor's District in New York, the case study districts do not include a large northern or northeastern central city district. We are, therefore, missing an important part of the urban landscape. It is critical, therefore, not to over-generalize from this small sample and to bear in mind the limits of the current work. Finally, it is often difficult to create a complete and accurate history retrospectively, when some key players are no longer present to be interviewed.

These limitations reinforce the nature of the current effort — it is exploratory work intended to develop hypotheses about promising approaches. The more these approaches interconnect and provide a clear roadmap for how districts might proceed and make real changes, the more compelling the hypotheses. But in the final analysis, the hypotheses remain to be tested in new settings and evaluated carefully to see what happens.

It is also important to understand the omission of topics in this study. There are many competing theories about how to improve student achievement, and it was not possible to explore an extensive list of possible levers of change within the confines of this project. The topics discussed in this report emerged from interviews in these districts when conversations began with broad questions about the nature of the educational challenges the districts faced and their attempts to improve student achievement. The research team did not "fish" for the effects of pet reforms but let the themes emerge from the discussions. Strategies and programs not mentioned in this study may indeed be important but they did not emerge as central to the story of improvement in these districts during the years covered by the research.[23]

[23] Some topics that are often seen as potentially important but did not surface in this research include: early childhood education programs (which were started recently in several districts but could not yet have influenced achievement trends during the period studied), university partnerships, efforts to reduce class sizes, specific whole school reform models, summer school, and rules ending social promotion.

Table 1.1
Characteristics of Case Study Districts

	Houston	Charlotte-Mecklenburg	Sacramento
Number of Students	209,716	100,553	51,898
Number of Schools	293	135	77
% of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch	65.7	38.1	60
% American Indian/Alaska Native	0.1	0.5	1.3
% Asian/Pacific Islander	2.9	4.4	25.9
% Hispanic	54.1	4.4	25.1
% Black/non-Hispanic	33	42.5	21.6
% White/non-Hispanic	10	48.3	25.3
Expenditures Per Pupil	$5,340	$5,657	$5,465
% of Students served in LEP programs	26.5	4.3	28.8

SOURCE: Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 1999-2000. National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, October 2001.

Table 1.2

Reading Achievement in Case Study Districts
Percentage of Third-Graders Below Performance Levels

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Houston Independent (% below 25th percentile)								
African American Students	-	-	-	40.5	33.0	29.6	30.2	-10.3
Asian Students	-	-	-	17.2	18.4	14.6	12.5	-4.7
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	39.6	31.3	25.1	26.7	-12.9
White Students	-	-	-	13.8	10.0	10.6	8.7	-5.1
All Students	-	-	-	35.1	28.6	24.7	25.4	-9.8
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	26.7	23.0	19.0	21.5	-5.2
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	25.8	21.3	14.5	18.0	-7.8
Sacramento City (% below 25th percentile)								
African American Students	-	-	-	57.8	41.3	39.9	-	-18.0
Asian Students	-	-	-	54.1	41.7	40.5	-	-13.6
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	57.8	45.2	41.7	-	-16.1
White Students	-	-	-	29.2	21.4	18.0	-	-11.2
All Students	-	-	-	49.3	37.1	35.0	-	-14.4
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	28.7	20.0	21.9	-	-6.8
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	28.7	23.8	23.7	-	-4.9
Charlotte-Mecklenburg (% at level 1 or 2)								
African American Students	63	61	61	48	45	43	40	-23
White Students	24	22	19	15	12	13	10	-14
All Students	40	39	37	30	28	28	25	-15
Black-White Difference	39	39	42	33	33	30	30	-9

SOURCE: These analyses were conducted using data provided by Houston, Sacramento, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

NOTES: SAT-9 data were analyzed for Sacramento and Houston. See Houston case study for TAAS data. The North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) test has four achievement levels. Students scoring at level 3 or level 4 are classified by North Carolina as at or above grade level. The SAT-9 and North Carolina EOGs are different tests with different metrics and on different scales, therefore comparisons cannot be made. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table 1.3

Math Achievement in Case Study Districts
Percentage of Third-Graders Below Performance Levels

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Houston Independent (% below 25th percentile)								
African American Students	-	-	-	44.5	29.9	25.1	22.1	-22.4
Asian Students	-	-	-	12.3	8.1	6.9	4.7	-7.6
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	38.3	23.6	18.5	17.1	-21.1
White Students	-	-	-	14.3	8.8	7.0	6.5	-7.7
All Students	-	-	-	36.3	23.8	19.4	17.5	-18.8
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	30.3	21.1	18.0	15.6	-14.7
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	24.0	14.8	11.5	10.6	-13.4
Sacramento City (% below 25th percentile)								
African American Students	-	-	-	64.8	44.5	36.3	-	-28.6
Asian Students	-	-	-	42.2	24.8	20.3	-	-21.9
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	59.8	37.3	32.6	-	-27.2
White Students	-	-	-	32.1	18.6	14.2	-	-17.8
All Students	-	-	-	49.2	30.9	25.8	-	-23.4
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	32.8	25.9	22.1	-	-10.7
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	27.7	18.7	18.4	-	-9.3
Charlotte-Mecklenburg (% at level 1 or 2)								
African American Students	62	58	59	58	53	51	47	-15
White Students	20	19	16	18	14	14	10	-10
All Students	36	36	35	36	32	31	28	-8
Black-White Difference	42	39	43	40	39	37	37	-5

SOURCE: These analyses were conducted using data provided by Houston, Sacramento, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

NOTES: SAT-9 data were analyzed for Sacramento and Houston. See Houston case study for TAAS data. The North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) test has four achievement levels. Students scoring at level 3 or level 4 are classified by North Carolina as at or above grade level. The SAT-9 and North Carolina EOGs are different tests with different metrics and on different scales, therefore comparisons cannot be made. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table 1.4

Reading Achievement in Case Study Districts
Average Third-Grade Achievement Scores

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Houston Independent (SAT-9 NCE)								
African American Students	-	-	-	40.4	43.9	44.9	45.8	5.4
Asian Students	-	-	-	54.3	57.4	57.7	59.1	4.8
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	40.9	45.0	47.1	46.3	5.4
White Students	-	-	-	58.6	62.2	62.1	66.3	7.7
All Students	-	-	-	43.9	47.4	48.6	49.2	5.3
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	18.2	18.4	17.1	20.5	2.3
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	17.7	17.2	15.0	20.0	2.3
Sacramento City (SAT-9 NCE)								
African American Students	-	-	-	33.4	40.2	41.5	-	8.1
Asian Students	-	-	-	35.1	40.6	42.2	-	7.2
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	33.6	38.9	39.9	-	6.2
White Students	-	-	-	49.2	52.8	55.6	-	6.5
All Students	-	-	-	38.1	43.3	44.8	-	6.8
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	15.7	12.6	14.1	-	-1.6
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	15.5	13.9	15.8	-	0.2
Charlotte-Mecklenburg (EOG Scaled Scores)								
African American Students	137.1	137.8	138.0	140.6	141.4	141.8	142.5	5.4
White Students	147.0	147.6	148.4	150.0	151.4	151.0	152.0	5.0
All Students	143.0	143.4	143.7	145.7	146.7	146.5	147.1	4.1
Black-White Difference	9.9	9.8	10.4	9.4	10.0	9.2	9.5	-0.4

SOURCE: These analyses were conducted using data provided by Houston, Sacramento, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

NOTES: SAT-9 data were analyzed for Houston and Sacramento. NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) developmental scale scores were analyzed for Charlotte. Developmental Scale Scores are designed to measure growth in student knowledge from grades 3-8, with a range from about 100 (lower end of third grade) to 200 (upper end of eighth grade). The SAT-9 and North Carolina EOGs are different tests with different metrics, therefore comparisons cannot be made. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table 1.5

Math Achievement in Case Study Districts
Average Third-Grade Achievement Scores

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Houston Independent (SAT-9 NCE)								
African American Students	-	-	-	39.8	47.8	50.2	50.7	10.9
Asian Students	-	-	-	62.3	69.3	69.8	70.6	8.3
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	42.9	51.0	54.1	53.3	10.4
White Students	-	-	-	59.7	67.1	67.9	67.7	8.0
All Students	-	-	-	44.9	52.5	54.9	54.7	9.8
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	19.9	19.3	17.7	17.0	-2.9
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	16.8	16.1	13.8	14.4	-2.4
Sacramento City (SAT-9 NCE)								
African American Students	-	-	-	31.2	41.2	44.3	-	13.0
Asian Students	-	-	-	42.4	51.8	55.5	-	13.2
Hispanic Students	-	-	-	33.3	43.8	47.1	-	13.8
White Students	-	-	-	47.4	56.7	61.9	-	14.5
All Students	-	-	-	38.8	48.7	52.3	-	13.5
Black-White Difference	-	-	-	16.2	15.5	17.7	-	1.5
Hispanic-White Difference	-	-	-	14.1	13.0	14.9	-	0.7
Charlotte-Mecklenburg (EOG Scaled Scores)								
African American Students	133.7	134.5	134.4	135.1	136.1	137.0	137.2	3.5
White Students	146.2	146.5	147.5	147.0	148.6	148.9	150.0	3.8
All Students	141.2	141.5	141.7	141.6	142.8	143.2	143.6	2.4
Black-White Difference	12.5	12.0	13.1	11.9	12.5	11.9	12.8	0.3

SOURCE: These analyses were conducted using data provided by Houston, Sacramento, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

NOTES: SAT-9 data were analyzed for Houston and Sacramento. NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) developmental scale scores were analyzed for Charlotte. Developmental Scale Scores are designed to measure growth in student knowledge from grades 3-8, with a range from about 100 (lower end of third grade) to 200 (upper end of eighth grade). The SAT-9 and North Carolina EOGs are different tests with different metrics, therefore comparisons cannot be made. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

CHAPTER 2

THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FACING URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Key participants and outside observers in each case study district had a similar view of the educational challenges they faced. This shared perspective, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, was critical to how the districts developed their reform efforts. The educational hurdles encountered by these districts will not sound unusual to urban schools. What is unusual, however, is that the case study districts looked at their challenges as opportunities for reform rather than as excuses for poor performance.

A. Political Conflict and Lack of Focus on Academic Achievement

Each of the three case study districts began their reforms after a period marked by political conflict, factionalism, and tension. These disputes often involved "zero sum" squabbles among school board members over salaries, hiring and firing issues, student assignment procedures, and school construction and closings. Conflicts between department heads, the board and the superintendent, superintendents and the principals, or principals and teachers were common and often serious and personal.[24] The recognition that there were "good schools" and "bad schools," rather than an overall level of quality needed everywhere, fueled the discord. Each issue became a major political battleground, exacerbated, in part, by the district's role as a major employer (especially for groups that historically faced discrimination in the labor market). Stakes were often heightened by the perception that the school board was a stepping stone to higher political office.

The comparison districts faced the same challenges as the case study districts. Both comparison districts had boards in previous years that delved into management issues, moving well beyond policy setting into day-to-day administrative operations. The boards focused on school assignment decisions and requests for exceptions to general rules, and often exerted political influence over such issues as hiring and firing. Decision-making was difficult because of the contentious nature of relations among all the parties, almost none of which was focused on student achievement. At times these tensions resulted in the frequent turnover in superintendents.

B. Unsatisfactory Academic Achievement

The reform effort in the case study districts was driven by the simple fact—and an acknowledgement of the fact—that academic performance was unsatisfactory, especially for low-income and minority students. In both the case study districts and the comparison districts, achievement for minority and disadvantaged students was noticeably below that for white and more affluent students. Further, the differences by race and economic status increased as students grew older. In Sacramento, for example, a document issued by the school board and district stated that:

[24] In the case of the New York Chancellor's District, the political factions and zero sum disputes often appeared at the level of the community district, rather than the entire New York City school system. New York City is divided into smaller community districts, which have elected boards. Once schools moved into the Chancellor's District, they were no longer under the jurisdiction of their local community district, perhaps reducing the effects of politics (at least at the community district level) on the school.

> *Today, fewer than four out of every ten students in our district meet proficiency standards in the core academic subjects, standards which themselves are too low. Some schools are doing well, but, in most of our schools, the vast majority of our students are underachieving.* [25]

Even before the emergence of a stable board majority and the arrival of a new superintendent in 1996, district leadership had started to disaggregate test scores by race and ethnicity. Testing using a nationally normed test revealed major differences by race and ethnicity in reading and math scores across multiple grade levels.[26] Though Sacramento students were doing as well as other California students of the same race, the district leadership was not satisfied with these racial gaps. As one long-time district teacher and administrator described the situation:

> *We were muddling along, taught lessons, and did not really focus on how students were doing. When we stopped and looked at student achievement, it was a discouraging picture. We faced a district where many of the kids were coming in with real educational challenges, and we were doing OK with the top 20 percent of students and not succeeding with those remaining.*

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, test scores during the mid-1990s on the North Carolina "End-of-Grade" test revealed similar disappointing results. Because the superintendent in office during the early 1990s had begun to disaggregate test scores for student subgroups, racial differences in achievement were clearly evident. On the crucial measure of third grade reading achievement, 61 percent of all students in the district met the state expectations for grade level skills, but only 39 percent of African American students and 37 percent of students receiving a free/reduced price lunch met these standards. Similar differences existed at other grade levels and for other subjects. Concerns also emerged in this district about the low proportion of high school students completing demanding courses and—once again—about differences by race and economic status of students.[27]

A district document written in the late 1990s summarized how the leadership assessed the situation. It began by stating that "to make things right we have had to identify what is wrong." It reported that many CMS schools were still not racially balanced, African American students had not been provided the same educational materials or facilities as whites, and teachers in predominately white schools were more experienced than those in predominately African American schools. Following this review of hurdles to achieving equity, the document continued:

> *However, the most disturbing remnant of Mecklenburg's once-segregated school system is the continued achievement gap between African American students and their white classmates. This disparity cuts across income level. On average, higher-income black students don't perform any better than lower-income white students.* [28]

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[25] Sacramento City Unified School District, *High Standards, Great Results!* February 1998, p. 2.

[26] Council of the Great City Schools, 2001, *Beating the Odds: A City-By-City Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments* summarizes the Sacramento data.

[27] Material prepared by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools staff in September 2001 summarizing trends in academic achievement.

[28] Eric Smith, *Achieving Equity: Why Diversity and High Expectations Matter*, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 1999. *Achieving the CMS Vision: Equity and Student Success.*

In Houston, attention in the mid-to-late 1990s focused on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) that measured whether a student met state standards for academic skills.[29] In the mid-1990s, approximately 70 percent of Houston's elementary school students and 60 percent of its middle and high school students met state standards for reading. In math, 50–60 percent of its elementary school students met state standards, and 40–50 percent of its middle and high school students met them. However, in most grade levels and subjects, passing rates for African American and Hispanic students were 20 to 40 percentage points below those for white students.[30] Summarizing the situation in the early 1990s, the HISD school board stated in its *Declaration of Beliefs and Visions* that:

> *We realize also that the serious urban problems which characterize most of America's largest cities also exist in Houston and spill into the schools. We realize that HISD has two large minority populations whose educational needs present special challenges, and that even our best schools are not performing at world-class levels.*

The Chancellor's District of the New York City Public Schools was founded because of similar recognition that some schools had persistently low student achievement levels and were on the verge of state intervention. In 1996, then New York City Chancellor Rudy Crew formed the Chancellor's District in response to the state's threat of "corrective action" in nine schools that were already under "registration review." The creation of this special district, approved by the New York City Board of Education, enabled the Chancellor to intervene directly in schools where the community boards failed to "demonstrate the capacity to redesign failing organizations."[31]

In the comparison districts, student achievement was unsatisfactory as well. In Comparison District 1, which serves a large northern city and a largely minority population, only about one-third of students were at grade level (defined as scoring at the 50th percentile and above) in reading, math, and science as measured by a locally-administered nationally normed-referenced test. Scores were lower among students in the later grades than in the early grades. Further, the majority of students failed to meet the satisfactory standard on the state criterion referenced test. In Comparison District 2, which like Charlotte-Mecklenburg served an entire metropolitan county, more than half the schools had average scores below the 50th percentile. Trend lines, moreover, were flat or declining and the district had an unusually large percentage of students in special education.

C. Lack of Instructional Coherence

District leaders in the case study districts came to realize that their systems were pursuing a variety of sometimes-contradictory educational initiatives. Likewise, the districts discovered a lack

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[29] For a brief history of the Texas accountability system, see Rod Paige and Susan Sclafani, "Strategies for Reforming Houston Schools," in Margaret Wang and Herbert Walberg, 2001, eds., *School Choice or Best Systems: What Improves Education?*

[30] See Council of the Great City Schools, 2001 for a summary of these data.

[31] *Corrective Action Plan: A Citywide Implementation Framework for Redesign Schools*, New York City Board of Education, 1996.

of alignment between instruction and the state standards. Each of the districts had recently experimented with site-based management, which had produced a variety of different educational strategies. This often proved confusing to school-level staff and difficult for the district to support. Professional development in each district was also fragmented, as it attempted to address the needs of staff who were implementing inconsistent educational strategies, and often consisted of one-shot workshops on a series of disconnected topics. The situation was exacerbated by high student mobility and inexperienced teachers, many of whom worked in schools that served predominantly low-income and minority children.

Houston found, for example, in the early 1990s that it had five different reading programs eligible for funding in the district. A cutting-edge curriculum project written in the late 1980s by master teachers was used by only about one-third of the teachers. Some used the assigned textbooks to decide on the scope and sequence of what to teach, while others followed their personal preferences. At the same time, the state accountability system was bringing in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). According to the district leadership in Houston, teachers had difficulty interpreting the TEKS and understanding its implications for instruction. Then a 1995 study of curriculum alignment revealed a strong correlation between student test scores and the extent to which teachers covered textbook content. The teachers and building-level leaders needed instructional guidance regarding instructional standards and the district as a whole lacked a consistent approach to teaching students or attaining state standards.

The Sacramento superintendent learned after his hiring in 1996 that school staff considered the district's lack of focus, both on goals and methods, to be a major barrier to progress. The district had adopted a math and a reading curriculum for elementary grades, but they were not closely followed or standardized. Teachers used an eclectic mix of materials (some observers counted 17 different reading programs in use) with little consistency across schools or grades and little guidance from the district on how to teach them.

A previous superintendent in Charlotte-Mecklenburg was a strong supporter of site-based management and advocated a vision of independent schools under the district's aegis. He called them 130 school districts. After the new superintendent arrived in 1996, Charlotte-Mecklenburg held a conference on aligning curriculum with state standards. Discussions at the conference revealed two problems: first, teachers, principals, and central office leaders did not have a firm understanding of the content and objectives of the state test; and second, basic reading and math were being taught using a variety of different strategies in schools across the district. Some elementary schools, for example, used phonics-based approaches, while others used whole language instruction—with both types of programs feeding into the same middle schools. An examination of curriculum and instruction throughout the district revealed that a substantial number of teachers picked topics and concepts to teach based on a short tri-fold overview pamphlet, while the state-mandated curriculum remained on the shelf in its original shrink-wrap.

When the New York City Chancellor's District was formed, the staff, curriculum, and professional development plans of each school were assessed. Schools were located throughout the City and contained deficiencies similar to the three case study cities. The schools had a great variety of curricula, lacked strong professional development, focused on different instructional approaches, and were operated without strong leadership.

The comparison districts faced the same problems of multiple and potentially conflicting instructional approaches. In Comparison District 1, there was a district curriculum that was aligned with state standards, but it was difficult for inexperienced teachers to use, was not supported by strong staff development, and ran counter to a recent emphasis on site-based management. District staff acknowledged that curriculum implementation varied widely across schools and between teachers. Further, there were numerous school reform programs in place across the district. More than one-third of all the district's schools were participating in some comprehensive school reform. Consequently, teachers were given little support for implementing the district curriculum and often had another option about what and how to teach.

In Comparison District 2, a different process created a similar lack of instructional coherence. The district had developed and promulgated multiple curricula: some developed by the central office, some mandated by an outside funding source. At times, the central office monitored the implementation of these different approaches and aggressively sought compliance with each of them. Some argued that this produced a compliance mentality whereby teachers simply checked the appropriate boxes on the monitoring forms associated with the various approaches. When time remained, teachers made their own choices about how to use available resources and created their own teaching approaches. Complicating matters further, until recently teachers felt that the state standards were not concrete enough to guide instruction, and district staff acknowledged that instruction was not well aligned with the state test.

D. Low Expectations and a Lack of Demanding Curriculum

In each of the districts, staff felt overwhelmed at times by the substantial challenges faced by many of their lower-income and minority students. This led some staff to dampen expectations for achievement in the lower grades and justify the students' lack of progress accordingly. In the higher grades, where instruction and expectations can differ starkly across groups of students, low-income and minority students were under-represented in college preparatory and advanced placement classes. In some schools that served primarily low-income and minority students, the more demanding classes were offered infrequently or not at all. In an extreme example in one of the case study districts, a prior superintendent proposed that the district explicitly set lower academic achievement goals for low-income and minority students.

When the Chancellor's District was formed, some of its schools had ineffective or missing key administrative staff and did not have school safety officers or functioning parent associations. Moreover, school facilities were often in disrepair. Many of the staff working in these schools focused on getting through each day; the goal of high academic performance seemed remote at best.

One of the comparison districts provides an example of the situation. When asked to what they attributed the decline in test scores, a leader cited:

> *Outside issues, the things that destabilize families—housing, unemployment, community instability, family instability. I attribute the decline to many of the things that impact kids before they get to school.*

E. High Student Mobility

Each of the case study districts had very high rates of student mobility. Previous research suggests that moving from school-to-school can negatively impact student learning, a problem that is exacerbated by shifts in instructional approaches.[32] Because of the lack of consistency in instructional strategies, students who moved within the district faced additional educational hurdles. For example, a student might shift from one reading approach to another or encounter a math or social studies program where the sequence of topics was dramatically different. Senior staff in each district also believed that higher mobility rates among low-income and minority students were aggravating racial and economic achievement gaps.

In the comparison districts, student mobility was also an important issue. Comparison District 1 served a significant percentage of low-income families, and student mobility was quite high. Comparison District 2, on the other hand, had to design complex student assignment procedures (including splitting the elementary and middle school years for students across several schools) in an attempt to settle a desegregation lawsuit. This often meant that students attended multiple schools during their elementary and middle school years. Student mobility, therefore, posed serious educational challenges to these districts, regardless of whether it was caused by residential changes or school assignment.

F. Inexperienced Teaching Staff

Each of the case study districts also acknowledged that they employed many inexperienced teachers and suffered from high teacher turnover rates, especially once teachers gained some experience. This was due in part to the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers when school districts in the surrounding areas could offer higher salaries, better facilities, a less-challenged student body, and less stressful working environments. Staff in Sacramento reported that teachers were often embarrassed to work for the district because of its reputation for mismanagement and political infighting, bad facilities and materials, and low student achievement and graduation rates. Teachers in Charlotte-Mecklenburg were often drawn to a bordering state that had less demanding teacher certification requirements. These difficulties were compounded by the limited training that the districts offered new teachers before they entered the classroom. Additionally, new or inexperienced teachers were not provided with the professional development and support they needed to improve their skills. These districts were aware that schools that served low-income and minority students had a higher proportion of inexperienced teachers on staff and that this disparity contributed to racial differences in achievement.

These same problems were evident in Comparison District 1. There was a shortage of certified teachers, with nearly 1,000 positions filled by substitute teachers at the start of a recent school year. This occurred despite the fact that the district could pay higher-than-average starting salaries. Teacher retention was a major problem because experienced teachers are lured to nearby districts with better working conditions. Though state law requires mentoring for new teachers, the district did not have a program to provide it and did not require schools to implement it. As a result, the

[32] Cuban, Larry. *Improving Urban Schools in the 21st Century: Do's and Don'ts or Advice to True Believers and Skeptics of Whole School Reform*. Address to the OERI Conference on Comprehensive School Reform, Denver, Colorado, July 2001.

initial years of teaching could be quite stressful. In Comparison District 2, the problem was not the inability to attract staff, but rather the lack of strong supports for new teachers. Resources devoted to mentoring were stretched thin, and teachers confronted multiple layers of curriculum without much support.

G. Unsatisfactory Business Operations

One of the most frustrating aspects of daily life for teachers and principals, prior to the recent reforms, involved the difficulty they faced in getting the basic necessities to operate a school or classroom. In each district, the new leadership uncovered horror stories about poorly maintained or dangerous school facilities: schools that had to be closed when it rained because of leaky roofs, buildings that collapsed in severe weather, and facilities with poor maintenance. Too many schools began the year without their full complement of teachers, and students were taught by substitutes for part or all of the school year. Teachers did not have an adequate supply of books and materials for their students and had to pay for basic supplies out of their own pockets.

The new leadership in the case study districts found that much of their business operations were managed by staff who had been promoted because of tenure in the district, rather than expertise in their fields. Some administrative systems were outdated and cumbersome, and new expertise was needed to bring them up to speed. In some districts there was the perception —and too often the reality—that direct political influence by school board members and other elected officials affected decisions such as hiring, promotions and assignments, and contracts for supplies or services. Finally, the new leadership found that school-level staff often viewed the central office as unresponsive, bureaucratic, and overly directive. Some school staff believed that the district office behaved as though the schools should support its needs, rather than the reverse.

Many examples of similar problems existed in the comparison districts. Facilities were not properly maintained, materials were not available, and recruitment and personnel systems did not meet the needs of district managers or the schools. In both comparison districts, data processing systems were antiquated and unable to process data quickly (either on student attendance and achievement or on business operations). The comparison districts also lacked the capacity to deliver customized reports on either management or instructional issues or the professional development to support for new teachers.

H. Three Key Contextual Factors

1. Financial Resources

None of the case study districts were in desperate financial circumstances, but each of the districts faced budget pressures, had to cut spending in recent years, and had lost bond elections to raise funds for capital improvements. The case study sites were located in metropolitan areas that had experienced substantial population and economic growth during the 1990s. Each case study district had a tax base from which to draw revenue and a student body that was growing and yielding an increasing amount of state aid. In addition, each of these communities enjoyed a strong base of support for education and local institutions that provided financial and other support for the schools.

Nevertheless, district leaders had been unable to convince local voters to authorize new bond issues prior to the recent reform period. In Sacramento (in 1994), Charlotte-Mecklenburg (in 1995), and Houston (in 1996) the school districts presented voters with bond issues to finance facility construction and renovation, only to see them voted down. In each case, the defeat was widely interpreted as a vote of "no confidence" in the way the district was managed. Subsequent improvements in each city renewed voter confidence and led to the passage of bond issues the second time around. Funding mechanisms in the Chancellor's district are different because schools in New York are funded as part of the New York City budget. Nevertheless, the instructional and management reforms instituted as part of the creation of the Chancellor's District were linked to higher funding for schools in the district and for several years after they had left the district.

In the two comparison districts, budget pressures were clearly present, as was true in the case study districts prior to their improvements in student achievement. In District 1, there were severe budget pressures, reflecting the higher costs of operating in a city, declining enrollments in recent years, a high proportion of students with special education challenges, and a revenue base that was tied to local sales tax (making it susceptible to economic downturns). Nevertheless, this district has per pupil expenditures that are as high as or higher than most other large urban districts. In District 2, the metropolitan population and economy was growing, creating substantial wealth in the community. A lack of trust in the management and performance of the school district, however, limited support for district funding without strings attached. At one point, for example, a powerful local elected official agreed to provide additional funding for the district if it would adopt a particular curriculum and focus the new resources on specific types of instructional programming.

2. State Focus on Student Achievement and Accountability

Evolving state accountability systems with strong academic achievement goals have helped focus local attention on student achievement. By school year 1997–1998, California, North Carolina, and Texas were testing students in multiple grades; had systems that focused on student achievement as measured by standardized assessments; held schools (and, in Texas, districts) accountable for performance; and used subgroup performance (by race and socio-economic status) as key indicators of performance and improvement.[33] An *Education Week* rating of state accountability systems in 1999 found that only two states—North Carolina and Texas—were judged as having a "comprehensive system" for holding schools accountable for the student academic performance.[34] California introduced changes in its system starting in school year 1999-2000 that increased the accountability measures schools faced. Each of the three case study districts, then, operated within a broader policy context that emphasized student academic achievement, concrete goals for improvement, and incentives and consequences for performance. The same was true of the Chancellor's District.

The comparison districts, on the other hand, were in states where the educational accountability systems had developed more slowly. One of the comparison districts was the subject of a state takeover, but it was not clear that the intervention was triggered solely by low student achieve-

[33] See material prepared by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) on *Assessment and Accountability in the Fifty States: Survey 2000* on the CPRE Web site for details. Also see *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2002" issue of 10 January 2002 for information on state accountability systems.

[34] "Taking Stock," *Education Week*, 11 January 1999, p. 81.

ment (since local observers noted it did not have the worst test scores in the state). Some observers cited management and fiscal problems. Only one of the comparison districts was in a state that issued school report cards or ratings, and only recently added technical assistance and sanctions to their accountability systems.

3. Local Politics and Power Relations

The process of decision-making in the case study sites was complex and had to accommodate many different interests. However, there were important distinctions between the interest group politics that exist in some older, central city districts where the vast majority of residents and the student body is made up of a single racial group and the politics of other cities. Urban education involves the community's children, its identity, its economy, and its influence. It is not surprising that power relationships and political considerations come into play. When issues such as race and class are involved, things become more intense still. The situation is further complicated by a governmental structure that involves school boards, mayors, county commissions, and state officials in decisions. Each of the case study districts had to maneuver through this landscape as it developed a vision of reform, built support for that vision, and set the changes in motion. These districts reflect much, but not all, of the variety in urban education: districts that serve only the central city; a county-wide district that includes suburban areas; districts with substantial racial diversity and emerging groups that seek greater influence in decision-making; districts without formal unions; and districts where strong and politically-influential unions represent teachers and administrators in contract negotiations.

It is important to note that some types of urban districts are not represented in the case study districts. Districts in cities that have suffered substantial population loss and that primarily serve a single minority population are not included. One of the comparison districts is such a district, selected in part to provide some understanding of the effect of these two characteristics.

CHAPTER 3

THE RESPONSE TO EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

Chapter 2 described the primary challenges faced by the case study and comparison districts. This chapter offers a summary of the districts' responses to these challenges. In each district, the efforts to improve the education system were complex, driven by existing local and state circumstances, available resources, leadership decisions, and local priorities. One important finding is that—despite local variations—there are striking parallels across the case study districts and many clear contrasts with the comparison districts. This chapter draws together the major themes behind this conclusion. Individual district stories are told in more detail in the case studies in the Appendices.

Local participants and observers often identified two stages in their district's improvement stories. The first stage involved the creation of the political and organizational preconditions for reform. The second step involved identifying and implementing specific educational improvement strategies. This chapter, therefore, follows that sequence.

The path to reform in each of the case study districts was controversial and filled with challenges and setbacks. This chapter concludes, therefore, with a brief summary of the key difficulties faced by each case study district in its quest to improve student achievement. Examples from the comparison districts are used to illustrate key points.

I. THE POLITICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRECONDITIONS FOR REFORM

Each of the case study districts had a long history of education reform and political and personnel changes. These kinds of efforts and changes are commonplace in urban school districts; in fact, this state of constant innovation has been one of the primary impediments to progress, according to some researchers. One researcher recently observed that, "A state of constant reform is the status quo in urban school districts."[35] What was unusual in the history of the case study districts was how they moved from a period of distrust, turmoil, and flux to a period of stability with a focus on implementing better instruction.

A. Creating a New Role for the School Board

Important to the initial reform of the case study districts was the role of the school board. In each jurisdiction there was—

- A major "shake-up" of the school board whereby a new board majority (or other governing unit) with a focus on student achievement was put into place.

- A change—sometimes gradual—in the role of the school board to focusing on specific goals for measuring district success, making one critical hire (the superintendent), and developing an accountability framework for gauging the superintendent's performance.

[35] Frederick M. Hess, 1999, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution), p. 5. Much of this section benefits from the framework presented by Hess in this book.

Political conflict, for example, marked the Sacramento board in the early to mid 1990s, leading to low district morale, the rapid turnover of superintendents, deteriorating or overcrowded facilities, and a lack of public support to meet capital needs. The city's mayor eventually decided to focus on schools as a citywide issue affecting the economic future of the metropolitan area.[36] He appointed a special blue-ribbon commission to document the sad state of the schools. The conclusions of this commission led the mayor, business leaders, and the press to back a slate of "reform" candidates for school board. With this support, four new board members were elected in 1996, and, with an incumbent member, they formed a working majority committed to ending factionalism. This new board marked its intent to break with the past by setting a new rule for itself: decisions would be made with at least a six-to-one majority.

In Houston, the transition was less dramatic and more gradual, but observers still cite it as important. The 1989 elections resulted in four new members and the re-election of one incumbent to the school board. Several members had the backing of local businesses that also supported the sitting superintendent. The previous board had hotly debated the priorities, leadership style, and achievements of the superintendent but the election signaled a new majority in support of the superintendent. In the early portion of 1990, the new majority on the school board developed a common vision for the Houston district outlined in a document titled *Declaration of Beliefs and Visions*.

The turmoil was far from over, however, as disputes among board members and between board members and the superintendent continued throughout the superintendent's tenure, through her successor's tenure, and through the selection of a third superintendent (discussed below). Looking back, many observers note that the nature of these disputes gradually evolved and became more about goals and policy and less about operations, administration, and "zero sum" decisions.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg saw much of the same kind of turmoil except that it was largely focused on the district's desegregation efforts. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools was created in 1959 as the consolidation of a city and a county system. Many observers credit this move with lessening the economic and racial segregation that might have otherwise existed. Nevertheless, the school system was the defendant in a landmark school desegregation case that led to court ordered district-wide busing of students in 1969. Differences over student assignment plans sometimes split the board along racial lines, but over time board members found ways to "agree to disagree" about some issues (busing, student assignment disputes, placement of new schools, etc.) and still focus, in a collegial way, on student achievement and overall policy. This effort was supported by many of the most important business and political interests in the metropolitan area who saw school improvement as critical to regional economic development and wanted to develop an image of Charlotte-Mecklenburg as a city that could make integration work.

The New York City Chancellor's District, by design, altered the decision-making process for schools by moving them out from under the jurisdiction of elected community boards and making them accountable to a supervising superintendent. This superintendent reports directly to the central

[36] See Alan Richard, "Sacramento Mayor's Legacy: Improved Schools, Sacramento is Touted as a Model for Urban School Change," *Education Week,* February 2, 2000, for a discussion of Mayor Serna's role.

Board of Education. Members of the public, unions, and school staff generally support this measure because they realize that, without aggressive action to focus on student achievement, the state would likely intervene.

Other research on district reform has articulated how larger economic and political forces often impose "harsh political consequences" on controversial elected governing boards. Fred Hess's 1999 research, for example, has suggested that strong incentives for uniting school board members often evolve when boards become too contentious or become a "civic embarrassment." At times, as was the case in the study districts, important local people representing political and economic interests exercised their influence by refocusing board activities on school improvement.

One way that boards demonstrate a shift in *modus operandi* and seriousness of purpose is by emphasizing "school reform." Unfortunately, Hess finds that when boards take up the cause of school improvement, it is often difficult for them to play an in-depth role. Many boards consist of part-time members who are not deeply immersed in the details of school policy, administration, or instruction. Moreover, they face complex issues with little staff support. These boards often find it hard to define success in concrete ways. Many boards that make the transition from factionalism and turmoil to a more unified and less contentious approach are still hard pressed to take effective action. Many are enticed to make *reform activity and effort* a measure of effectiveness and to seek a superintendent with a strong vision of how to bring change to the district. An important finding in the case study districts is that the school boards took a different path when the period of intense political conflict was left behind.

Boards in the case study districts came to see their role differently. They increasingly sought to avoid involvement in operations and administration, personnel matters, or choices about how to achieve goals. Each board, however, was active in building support for the district through community outreach, seeking feedback on the progress of reform efforts, keeping the leadership focused on improving student outcomes, and—in the case of Charlotte-Mecklenburg—deciding how to respond to litigation over student assignment procedures. Choices about staff recruitment, instructional materials, business operations, and facilities were made largely by the superintendent and his senior managers. This transition in the board's role was a signal of major change in the districts, and it differentiated them from many other large urban districts.

The comparison districts have recently seen changes in their governance structure, but it is too soon to see how these changes will play out. In District 1, the state disbanded the elected school board as part of its takeover and appointed a new board. In District 2, a new board majority was recently elected and has started to undertake the kind of reforms seen in the case study districts.[37]

[37] The circumstance in the Chancellor's District in some ways resembles a state takeover because the elected board is temporarily excluded from governance, but the activities of the Chancellor's District are not focused on bringing about substantial reform of community boards. However, recent events in New York City, such as the change to mayoral control of the school district, may be another instance of local political forces moving to rein in the excesses of the local political forces governing the school system.

B. Crafting a Shared Board–Superintendent Vision of Reform

- Each of the school boards in the case study districts sought a superintendent — in some cases after several searches—who shared their vision of the district's needs.

- The board also required that the superintendent be held personally accountable for achieving the goals that they had jointly established.

The process of diagnosing the problems, developing a vision for reform, and crafting a plan of action was not a simple sequence of steps. In each case, the board in the case study districts had to create a framework for action based on its assessment of the situation, identify a superintendent who was a "good match" with this vision, and then work with the new leader to diagnose problems, devise a response strategy, and define success, often through extensive contact with representatives from the community. Board members then had to help sell this vision of reform to district staff and the community and give them a strong sense of ownership. The board's partnership with the superintendent in this process resulted in a singularity of purpose that helped the school district stay the course throughout the inevitable ups and downs of the lengthy reform effort.[38]

In Houston the process of creating a board-superintendent team was not ideal, but it does illustrate the length that a board would go to find the person who they see as the right match for their district.[39] The new board majority took office in early 1990 and decided to craft a mission statement. This prompted a series of disputes with the incumbent superintendent (who had been in the position for four years) about roles, priorities, and policy directions.

In mid-1990, the board published and adopted its mission statement, *Declaration of Beliefs and Visions,* which stated the following core principle:

> *HISD activities must support improvements in the relationship between teacher and student, must decentralize, must focus on student performance and not on program compliance, and must require a common core of academic subjects for all students.*

The incumbent superintendent did not support decentralization, prompting new disputes with the board. She resigned within a year. The next superintendent did support decentralization, but he gradually lost board support over controversies surrounding the proposed budget, tax, and accountability measures. By mid-1994 he, too, had resigned. Shortly afterwards, the board picked as superintendent fellow member Rod Paige, who had played a central role in drafting the *Declaration.* The process through which this decision was made was controversial, irregular at best, and prompted an acrimonious debate within the Houston community. But the decision produced a superintendent and board with a common vision for school improvement.

[38] The phrase "constancy of purpose" is from the National School Boards Association, *The Key Work of School Boards,* on the National School Boards Association Web site at www.nsba.org. The ideas presented offer a similar vision of the most effective strategies for school boards.

[39] For a full account from the perspective of a board member who was part of this new majority, see Donald R. McAdams, *Fights to Save Our Urban Schools… and Winning! Lessons from Houston.* New York: Teachers College Press, 2000.

The school board in Sacramento also went through a series of superintendent changes before it found someone who was attuned to board priorities. During the period when the board was divided into shifting factions, it selected a series of superintendents each of whom brought a specific vision of reform. While board members disagreed on many issues, they were able to agree on the selection of a series of superintendents (several of whom were already or soon to be nationally prominent). Each of these superintendents made school reform a priority. Perhaps the board thought that by selecting a dynamic and up-and-coming superintendent it could improve its public image and energize its efforts. However, in each case, the majority of the board did not actually *agree* with the new superintendent's reform approach.[40] This factionalism weakened the superintendent's base of support and in the end, the superintendent either resigned or had his contract bought out.

After the election of a new board majority in 1996, the board members decided to work closely together as a group. They focused on developing a statement of core beliefs and goals and worked hard to develop a sense of trust as a group. This work led to the board's committing to a six-to-one majority vote on all decisions. The board decided that the current superintendent's approach was not consistent with its goals; it bought out his contract in early 1997. The board picked Jim Sweeney as interim superintendent. Sweeney was a former education professor who had been brought into the district as an assistant superintendent by a previous superintendent and then demoted by the just-released superintendent to an obscure job within the district. Board members and other observers thought Sweeney had distinguished himself throughout the contentious period by his focus on achievement and instruction and his lack of personal or political ambitions. In the board's search for a new superintendent, they realized that they wanted a candidate who knew the district and shared their vision for reform, so they gradually turned to Sweeney. In October 1997, Sweeney was appointed superintendent and stated publicly that he wanted to be held accountable for meeting district goals. These goals became the framework for his annual evaluations by the board. To distinguish himself from the prior superintendents, Sweeney stated that he did not want a buy-out clause in his contract. If the board became dissatisfied with his performance, he could be fired easily.

Over the last decade, Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board selected two superintendents from outside the district. When making the second superintendent selection, the board was much more focused on finding someone who agreed with their vision than when they were making the first choice.

Much of Charlotte's attention at the start of the 1990s was focused on desegregation litigation and orders coming out of the federal court. Local observers report there being relatively little attention on academic outcomes for students. In the fall of 1991, however, the board selected a new superintendent who it viewed as an agent of change. The new superintendent, after seeking extensive input from national education reformers and local experts on business systems, developed a blueprint for change that set goals for key actors within the district. The superintendent then began to orient the district toward a measurement system with goals and standards for student achievement. He also strongly supported site-based management coupled with accountability for results.

[40]Fred Hess's work discusses the phenomenon of boards trying to use school reform to burnish their public image during times of extended political and personal conflict.

During his tenure, local observers report that the superintendent terminated 250 teachers, one-third of all principals, and all area supervisors. He expanded magnet school programs to respond to student assignment controversies and to court-mandated remedies. Gradually, however, he encountered opposition on the board. Many members perceived him to be overly ambitions and abrasive. His proposal to institute different academic goals for white and African American students was the last straw. The proposal lost him the support of key minority members of the board. And when a spring 1995 bond issue was defeated, the superintendent resigned.

In the fall of 1995, the structure of the board changed to include three at-large members, with the remainder elected from within local districts. This new board sought community input on designing a superintendent search process that reflected local priorities and developing a plan to guide the search. Three goals were identified through this process as most important: improved student achievement, safe schools, and collaboration with the community. As board members reviewed the list of final candidates, they refined their objectives further and fleshed out more specific needs within the three key areas. When they offered the position to Eric Smith, they were able to provide him with specific objectives. Through detailed discussions, the board and Smith worked out a series of performance measures for a five-year period that became part of his contract. Each year Smith's performance was measured on those criteria. Smith was then charged with implementing these objectives in the classroom; the board set the goals and gave him latitude on how to achieve them.

The Chancellor's District shared some similarities with the other case study districts. Once the administrative structure of the district emerged, its leaders crafted a clear mission and goal statement. The schools in the district had become demoralized, so the task of focusing on team building and clarity of mission was a priority of the district's early leadership. That priority continues to this day. Sandra Kase, the current supervising superintendent, has taken the priority to new levels, however, implementing and refining the district's mission and goals in greater detail and specificity.

The histories of the comparison districts reflect a different experience. After the state takeover of District 1, a common vision between the school board and superintendent about how to improve student achievement was slower to evolve. In District 2, the school board selected several superintendents in recent years, but this selection was driven in large part by the board's search for skills needed to deal with student assignment issues and to settle the longstanding desegregation litigation. Only after the litigation was settled did the board shift its focus and begin to emphasize student achievement and instruction.

C. Diagnosing the Local Educational Situation

- School boards, superintendents, and district staff—in the case study districts—developed a vision of the educational challenges, local strengths, and broader context they faced that was specific to their own district.

- This analysis focused on what the district could change and guided district actions as the case study districts moved to improve their schools.

Leaders in each district sought to identify factors affecting student achievement that were within their power to change and those that were part of the broader social and political context with which they had to contend. They also eliminated some possible explanations for low student achievement (especially, presumptions that students could not learn) that would not be tolerated as excuses for poor performance. Through its own process, each of the case study districts began to focus on a common set of challenges and a general sense of the broader context for change. These challenges, outlined in Chapter 2, sound familiar to many larger urban districts. What was important was how the districts recognized difficulties but took them into account when they were designing their reform strategies (for example, high student mobility and inexperienced teachers), rather than being bogged down by them. Even the Chancellor's District, which consists of individual schools scattered throughout the city, undertook a detailed assessment of conditions in their schools and developed a similar list of challenges (student mobility, demoralized and inexperienced staff, unfocused curriculum, weak professional development) that drove their reforms. The process of diagnosing the situation resulted in greater ownership of the resulting framework and in a theory of change that subsequently guided district actions.

The existence of a commonly acknowledged framework for action in key areas was one feature that distinguished the case study districts from the comparison districts. Until recently, the comparison districts have focused on issues other than student achievement. Much of the attention in District 1 has been focused on fixing dysfunctional operating systems and solving finance problems. No systemwide analysis has been done on factors shaping districtwide student performance. In District 2, the problems posed by the litigation have dominated the political debate and high-level administrative activity until the last year.

D. Fleshing out the Vision for Reform and Selling it to District Stakeholders

- The district leadership and school board in each of the case study districts worked together to develop a *concrete and specific* vision of the goals for the district and the key methods for attaining those objectives.

- The district leadership worked hard to communicate the strategy to key actors within the district and the community and to develop school-level support for the approach.

Each of the case study districts went through a process after the initial turmoil where they had to convey a sense that things would be different, a sense of focus and teamwork. The specific approach varied from district to district, but the board and superintendent in each city worked to communicate a vision of reform, listen for reactions, engage in conversations about the plan, and then refine it. As the case study districts began this phase of reform, board members and superintendents all worked hard to be visible to the community, rebuild trust in and support for the schools, and gain the political capital they needed for major and lengthy changes.

Sacramento had the most explicit process and one of the longest, working for nearly a year to develop a thorough consensus regarding the goals of reform and the overall strategy for achieving them. As superintendent, Jim Sweeney began working to change the culture of the schools by developing a statement of core beliefs and values and setting specific goals for improving student out-

comes, called "vital signs." District staff and board members spent 10 months developing a district action plan, *High Standards, Great Results*, that laid out the vital signs and the "puzzle pieces" that described the essential factors they believed were required to achieve the goals.

Early in this effort, dozens of staff visited another district that had successfully made the transitions Sacramento sought, and Sweeney and his senior managers worked closely with a consultant who provided a framework for organizational transformation. As the plan was being developed, Sweeney and the board members visited virtually every school to test their ideas and seek input. They consciously set what they called audacious goals (nine out of 10 students would meet achievement standards) to reinforce the break with the past sense of hopelessness, the need for major change in district operations, and their commitment to focus on student achievement. The board, superintendent, and the mayor signed a pledge to achieve the vital signs in the plan and to be held accountable for the success of their efforts. While there were differences of opinion and staff members were skeptical, many could see that this extensive effort represented something different. When the goals and action plan were publicly unveiled at a rally attended by 4,500 people, there was an impressive show of support by the board, other elected officials, union officials, teachers, and community leaders.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, local observers report that Eric Smith showed good political skills, a willingness to reach out to the staff and the community to convey the district's vision for reform, and an emphasis on attacking problems and fixing things. Smith was hired, as was mentioned before, under a contract that set specific performance goals. Early in his tenure, Smith communicated his vision of high aspirations for high school graduates (e.g., to complete AP courses and to attain International Baccalaureate [IB] diplomas) and then mapped out the kinds of educational experiences that were needed at earlier grades to attain these goals. Working with the board and his senior staff, Smith developed key goals related to student achievement and the operations of the district. These goals were persistently communicated throughout the district and to the community and became the framework within which subsequent decisions were made.

In Houston, the *Declaration of Beliefs and Vision* was developed early in the reform process. It staked out a specific reform vision and prompted controversy with all of the superintendents until Rod Paige. Paige's appointment, the defeat of a bond issue, and a highly critical state audit prompted the district's leadership to communicate a new vision of reform and build community support. The new superintendent—Paige—chose to acknowledge the concerns raised in the state audit and use them as grounds for far-reaching reforms. In fact, the superintendent and his team invited members of the community—including those most critical of district performance and operations—to serve on committees charged with developing solutions. Through this effort to reach out to critics and the community, the district leadership gradually built broader support for its efforts to reform.

Much of the initial work of the Chancellor's District also focused on developing a clear mission that would be supported by the New York City Board of Education, staff in the central office, and key employee unions. District staff documented how schools were to be identified, the extent of the intervention (an instructional overhaul and intense professional development were promised), goals for improvement (significant progress in student achievement), and the circumstances under which a school would leave the district (when it was stable and making progress and its

home community district demonstrated readiness to reassume responsibility). These early efforts to define the nature and scope of this new administrative entity have been carried forward and developed further by subsequent leaders.

The comparison districts also had goals for improving student achievement. In one case, the specific goals were very ambitious and concrete. But neither district developed goals through a process that involved many stakeholders, sold the goals to the broader community through outreach efforts, or linked the goals to an accountability system focused on the leadership of the district.

E. Improving District Business Operations

- The central offices in each case study district revamped and professionalized the district's business operations and pushed to change the central office culture so its focus would be on service *to schools*.

- The districts focused first on fixing immediate problems—leaky roofs or a lack of textbooks—to foster good will between the schools and the central office.

District leaders in the case study districts believed that they could not expect schools to do a better job and take more responsibility for meeting goals if the central office did not give the schools the tools they needed to succeed. The task of district leaders in this phase of the reforms was to transform a central office culture that was focused on ensuring that schools met various bureaucratic requirements to one focused on serving the schools and helping them achieve their mission.

In addition to changing the culture of the central office, the district leaders attempted to professionalize it and improve its operations. This often involved bringing in professionals who were not career educators. Some districts, for instance, hired personnel specialists from the private sector to help design teacher recruitment and retention programs, while others hired public relations executives to manage relations with the press, teacher organizations, and the public.

Eric Smith brought the *Balanced Scorecard* to Charlotte-Mecklenburg's central office in the 1999-2000 school year to help the organization clarify its vision and translate it into action. The district developed metrics and collected and analyzed data with the management scorecard to keep all functions focused on student achievement goals. Pay increases for principals and central office staff above the director level were affected by performance on the scorecard. A key component on the scorecard was customer satisfaction, which meant assessing the perspective of principals and teachers when evaluating central office staff. Charlotte-Mecklenburg conducted school surveys in order to tell how well the central office staff supported the schools.

Rod Paige instigated a similar culture change in Houston's central office. His strategy included using a common vocabulary called "model-netics" that kept the focus on values and ideas that were important to school change. Houston shifted greater resources into the schools as the district decentralized many business functions. Principals were given greater responsibility, but they also had greater control over budgets. Business functions that remained at the central office underwent significant scrutiny by committees with members who were not district employees. Experts from the private sector were hired to run certain business functions and some outsourcing was done.

Sacramento also developed a customer service orientation. The central office developed surveys for principals and other stakeholders to collect feedback and monitor progress. The new board understood that its ultimate customers were parents and students, and needed tangible ways to demonstrate the district's renewed commitment to children. As a start, Sweeney and the board picked "low hanging fruit," diverting funds to help pay for basic school needs, such as providing textbooks and cleaning up facilities. This initial strategy was intended to show the community that *High Standards, Great Results* was more than hype.

Leaders in the Chancellor's District also focused on improved business operations. Initially, schools within the district remained a part of their home community district, which was supposed to provide basic operational support. Early assessments of the schools entering the district showed serious problems with facilities, staffing, and school safety. Over time, the district built up its own administrative capacity to serve all the operational needs of its schools with a central office and regional substructure. The district now has its own human resources office for recruitment and hiring. Currently, schools within the district receive this special administrative support while they are part of the district and for a two-year transitional period after they rejoin their home community districts.[41]

Basic administrative systems and business operations continue to be problems in the comparison districts. Both districts had student and teacher records systems, for instance, that were incapable of meeting demands. One district had difficulty getting customized reports on student achievement; in the other district, teacher seniority records were kept on note cards. One district, in fact, has had to focus almost exclusively on fixing its broken operating systems before turning to student achievement. New leadership in each district has overhauled recruitment, personnel, maintenance, data processing, and budget and finance to remedy deficits. The payoff in improved operations is just now beginning to appear.

F. Pursuing New Funding to Support the Strategies

- Each case study school district secured the additional funding it needed to implement key reforms, yet did not seek funding and or pursue new programs that were not in line with its stated goals.

Bond elections are crucial to school districts, both as indicators of public support and as a means of raising funds for school improvement. In Sacramento, the 1994 defeat of the bond issue helped draw the mayor into school politics. A report by a blue-ribbon commission on the state of the schools soon followed; a mayor-backed slate of board candidates won the next election; and a major change occurred in the direction of the schools. Voters approved a new bond issue in 1999. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the superintendent took the 1995 bond defeat as a rejection of his educational strategy and resigned. Later in the decade, when new reforms were being implemented, voters approved a subsequent bond issue. In Houston, voters rejected the 1996 bond issue while the district was in the midst of a state performance audit. Soon after, auditors released a highly critical report but the district's leadership used the results as grounds for far-reaching administrative reforms. In 1998, voters approved a new bond issue, and the board approved a tax increase to provide more operating funds.

[41] At the end of that transitional period, the schedule will be reevaluated, and support may be extended.

These districts were also proactive in pursuing additional public and private resources to support their reforms. In Sacramento, a $1.5 million grant from the Packard Foundation supported teacher coaches and the implementation of the *Open Court* reading program. When schools eventually took over funding for these coaches, district leadership cited early funding as key to enabling reform. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the county commission approved tax hikes and spending increases. The county commissioners and school board members report feeling that after the new superintendent Eric Smith arrived, their trust in the school system increased. This was an important factor in securing additional funds for the district.

In the Chancellor's District, additional resources resulted in extra per-student funding. Due to the intensity of the school redesign efforts and the new level of administrative support for the schools, the New York City Board of Education increased per-student funding by approximately one-third. Spending is approximately $12,000 per general education student in elementary and middle schools and $13,400 per high school student, compared to a citywide average of approximately $9,000 at all grade levels.[42] These extra funds are used for salary incentives for teachers, reduced class sizes, extended school hours and after-school programs, the purchase of instructional materials, and professional development.

A look at the two comparison districts illustrates the risks of "chasing" money and special programs. Focus groups in each city revealed that individual programs with special revenue sources or grants were seen by many as the answer to educational problems. When principals were asked about efforts to improve achievement, they talked about special programs rather than their efforts to align and focus instruction or to create a coherent instructional strategy. In District 2, leaders reported that the district was receptive to virtually any special project or resources proposed by local funding sources or educational innovators, whether or not the programs fit into a focused plan. One administrator commented that the district seemed to be more concerned with accommodating the supporters of specific reform approaches than with selecting initiatives that would support a chosen strategy for improvement.

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Each of the case study districts, then, pursued an important set of initial activities that set the stage for real reform. These activities, in summary, included—

- Building a stable coalition to support the key goals and direction of reform.
- Diagnosing the challenges facing their schools.
- Developing a shared vision for a basic reform strategy between the superintendent and board.
- Achieving a basic level of consensus and clarity throughout all levels of the system about goals, strategies, and priorities for reform.

[42] Information obtained from the New York City Board of Education Web site, http://www.nycenet.edu/dist_sch/dist/default.asp?Dist=85.

The comparison districts, by contrast, were slower in the development of a vision for instructional improvement, had not conducted the same level of analyses or diagnosis of the instructional challenges, had not pursued the same level of community outreach. They were also more likely to pursue resources in ways that were disconnected with their goals.

The next section describes how the two sets of districts differed in the specific strategies they used to improve student achievement.

II. EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ACHIEVEMENT

This section describes the specific reform strategies adopted in each district and their connection to changes in daily life in the schools. The analysis that follows summarizes information gained from open-ended interviews and focus groups about the recent history and focus of reform in each district. The exploratory nature of this research does not enable us to offer definitive conclusions about the linkages between district efforts to change classroom practices and student learning. But, we offer evidence that such a link exists.

It is important to note that the leadership in each case study district was emphatic in stating that the progress their districts were making could not be attributed to one or two strategies, however critical each strategy was to reform. Rather, district leaders felt strongly that the strategies that are discussed in this section were an inseparable part of the overall effort and that crediting any one of the several interlocking initiatives with improving student achievement would be a misrepresentation.

A. Creating a Goal-Focused Culture and Building a Supportive Infrastructure

- Setting specific performance goals and targets and a culture of accountability helped the case study districts support the political preconditions for reform and for the implementation of specific policies and practices.

- The goal-setting process served as a consensus-building exercise, and the specific goals and timeframes served as a roadmap to reform.

The early stages of actual reform and the final stages of the consensus-building process focused on setting goals and developing a system of accountability for achieving them. Sometimes the discussion of district goals was initiated by the superintendent or other district leaders. At other times, conversations about goals and accountability were stimulated by the launch or impending launch of state accountability systems to which the districts would have to respond. In either case, the need to set goals often facilitated important conversations about core beliefs regarding what the students in the district could achieve.

In Sacramento, these conversations were an intentional part of the consensus-building and reform process. To facilitate conversations about core beliefs, Sweeney and the school board drafted what became their strategic plan and then presented and discussed it extensively throughout the district. Sweeney and other district leaders met with principals, the teachers' union, and other key

stakeholders with the goal of developing a plan that reflected a consensus on core beliefs and district goals, as well as a basic approach for achieving them.

Each case study district, while developing a consensus around their goals, had to overcome the belief that the students it served would not be able to perform at the levels the district leadership was proposing. All the case study districts served high percentages of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and all served substantial numbers of African American and Hispanic students. Sacramento and Houston served a significant number of students for whom English was a second language. According to the superintendents and central office staff in each district, conversations about district goals often revealed a belief at the central office and the building level that, because of poverty, family hardships, and other challenges, the students could not be expected to perform at a much higher level. "We can't do it with these kids," and "We can't do it with these resources" were common refrains during the goal-setting phase of the reform process.

An important strategy employed by the case study districts was the use of "existence proofs" to counteract negative beliefs about who could achieve and who couldn't and to instill a sense of responsibility for student success. This strategy was probably used most extensively in Sacramento, which as mentioned earlier, organized a trip to a high-poverty district in Texas that had reformed instruction and experienced a turnaround in student achievement. This trip, which occurred early in the Sacramento reform process, included district leaders, the school board, principals, and teachers. The superintendent also invited the press. Both central office staff and building-level personnel reported that witnessing what they believed to be "high quality instruction" in a district that served a disadvantaged population went a long way toward convincing them that student achievement could improve in Sacramento as well. The district also used the early successes in what some leaders called "schools that broke ranks" within their own city as further proof that schools could succeed with the populations they were serving. District leaders argued that "These schools had not changed the kids [they were serving] and had not bought them new parents … So schools couldn't say, 'We can't do it with these kids.'"[43]

Although the other case study districts did not travel to other school systems in search of existence proofs, all of them reported using the early successes of individual schools in their own districts to show that schools could succeed with "these kids" after all. For example, in the Chancellor's District, leaders cited other schools within the New York City system that served a similar student body and were performing well as evidence that schools could and must improve.

When individual schools within these districts improved, recognition was typically incorporated into the accountability systems. Sometimes recognition took the form of flags, awards, extra resources, and so on. Whatever the specific form of recognition, it was generally designed to be as public as possible and designed to counteract typical excuses, challenge negative core beliefs, and show other schools in the district that success was attainable.

Both the comparison districts had goals for improving academic achievement, but the goals were not clearly stated at the school level and were not used to focus efforts at the central office

[43] Interview with Mutiu Fagbayi, Consultant with Sacramento City Unified School District, June 7, 2001.

level. In fact, neither district—until recently—heralded other school districts that had made dramatic strides in student achievement or used them as positive role models. District 1, however, has begun using this strategy rather extensively over the last year, visiting a number of districts highlighted in this study. District 2 tended to focus on compliance. Goals were vague in these districts, and few leaders could articulate how they were going to improve student achievement.

B. Creating Local Accountability Systems That Go Beyond State Systems

- The case study districts tied their high, specific goals to deadlines and consequences in order to communicate expectations about student performance and genuine progress in the districts.

- Accountability systems in some case study districts were more rigorous than their states.

- The accountability structures started with district leadership and then extended through the central office and ultimately to building-level personnel.

As they worked to change core beliefs, the case study districts developed high, specific goals associated with specific deadlines and consequences. While this process was sometimes stimulated by the impending implementation of the state accountability systems, these districts often put local accountability systems in place ahead of state mandates. In general, district leaders tried to set ambitious goals and to hold people in the district, including themselves, responsible for achieving the goals within a specified timeframe. While district leaders admit their goals were set high, they maintained that their conversations with staff were often about why goals weren't pegged even higher so as not to undermine the bold ambitions set out in statements by the superintendent and the board.

This goal-setting process was used to communicate expectations about performance and genuine progress in the district. As Superintendent Sweeney in Sacramento put it, "How can you say six out of 10 when you're trying to change the world?" Sweeney went on to say that "People would say 'nine out of 10?' and you'd say, 'You got a problem with that?' 'Oh no, it's the right thing to do.'" In the case of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the reform was focused on the goal of having "all students achieve high levels of performance." For Superintendent Eric Smith, this meant that every high school student would take at least one AP or International Baccalaureate course. In both of these districts, the idea of high expectations for student performance shaped reform and specific reform goals.

The case study districts took several specific steps toward making their goals real for personnel throughout the district. In addition to setting long-term goals, short-term and intermediate goals were set to make clear how individual schools and the district as a whole were to perform in each year. Rather than simply trying to "improve student achievement," the case study districts had specific, measurable long-term goals associated with deadlines and specific intermediate goals for each year of reform. In some instances, this involved yearly targets for each school. In Houston, the district created its own accountability system to supplement the Texas state system, adding targets for improvement (in addition to the state targets for absolute levels) to provide recognition to schools making progress but not yet reaching acceptable levels. In the Chancellor's District, goals were linked

to the state school registration review process, and success was defined as moving off the list of schools under this review within three years, thus averting state action and opening up the possibility of returning to the home community district.

Another part of making these goals real was developing public systems of accountability that associated the goals with rewards and consequences. Across the case study districts, important rewards and sanctions involved public attention. For example, Sacramento and Charlotte-Mecklenburg began publishing test scores by school. Public discussions were about rewards for success, but the consequences of failure were serious enough to get people's attention, most notably principals, who faced the possibility of dismissal if their schools repeatedly failed to improve. The specificity of goals, combined with the reality of timeframes and consequences, was enough to get schools and districts motivated to meet performance targets.

In the comparison districts, accountability systems exist, but they do not yet seem to be a part of any real reform process. Performance targets do not seem to communicate a new set of expectations regarding district or school progress.

The superintendents in the case study districts, as we mentioned earlier, often worked with their school boards to set district goals and asked specifically to be held publicly accountable for achieving the goals. The superintendents and boards then set up mechanisms to accomplish this. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Sacramento, for example, the superintendents began their tenures by stating publicly that the system was to blame, rather than the students themselves or even the teachers, for the low levels of achievement. They asserted that all students could learn and that district leadership should be held responsible for making that happen. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the district leadership made this statement real by including specific performance targets in Eric Smith's contract, so that he could be terminated if the district did not achieve them. In Sacramento, Jim Sweeney's decision to have the buy-out clause taken out of his contract essentially made him an at-will employee of the board. Should the school board decide he had not performed as promised, he could be terminated easily and inexpensively.

Members of the school board also joined some of the superintendents in taking responsibility for past failures of the system and for the future success of their students. In Sacramento, the entire school board joined Sweeney in publicly signing a statement that declared that the district had failed the students in the past, and that should the district be unable to improve student achievement, they too should be replaced. The school board, the mayor, and the superintendent all signed this pledge of accountability at a press conference covered in the local news. The pledge was circulated throughout the district and teachers, principals, and other school personnel were asked to sign it as a symbol of solidarity and commitment to success.

The leadership in Houston used the state controller audit as an opportunity to make a statement about accountability. The recommendations in the audit, often taken directly from existing district proposals, drew sharp criticism of the district from the community. Rather than being defensive, Superintendent Rod Paige took the opportunity to admit past district shortcomings in order to create public support for changes that he wanted to make. In short, his willingness to be held publicly accountable in the audit gave him leverage to pursue his agenda.

In each case study district, accountability started with leaders at the top and filtered through the central office. It then radiated out to the schools. Superintendents and other staff reported that substantial numbers of central office staff members were dismissed or transferred, either because they were incompetent or because they did not support the reform agenda. At times, structural changes were implemented in order to hold the central office staff accountable. District superintendents in Houston, for example, were held accountable to their performance contracts in exchange for salary increases. This policy was not always popular with some staff members and resulted in additional turnover.

Accountability at the central office was followed generally by the implementation of accountability measures at the building level—largely focused on principals. In Houston, the establishment of performance contracts for principals in exchange for higher salaries followed the establishment of performance contracts for administrators. In all the districts, most of the focus on poor student performance came through principals. After performance contracts were established, principals were given greater power over staffing and budgets. Eventually, even assistant principals were put on performance-based contracts. As a result of this growing accountability for academic performance, each case study district experienced a substantial amount of turnover and transfers among principals. In Sacramento, which has about 75 schools, there were 45 new principals in three years.

In the case study districts, the focus on accountability for all students, starting at the central office, helped bring key constituencies on board the reform effort. It also served as a signal (and a mechanism) for others to leave. This enabled district leaders to make many of the personnel changes they felt were necessary.

The willingness of the superintendent to be held accountable, combined with the existence of an agreement with the board and other key actors regarding overall strategy, enabled the central office to pursue reform more aggressively than it otherwise would have and to hold district and building-level personnel responsible in ways that it otherwise could not have.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the superintendent before Eric Smith proposed goals and targets that were adjusted for students' backgrounds. This effectively resulted in different goals for students of different races, a policy that was not received well by some members of the school board and factored into the superintendent's departure from the district. Eric Smith's commitment to ensuring that all students were educated to a high standard and to achieving parity in the performance of minority and white students resonated strongly and positively with the board. His willingness to be held accountable for agreed-upon performance goals enabled the school board to trust that its superintendent was pursuing an agenda that they could support. As a result, they gave Smith a free hand in running the district. The board could then focus on higher-level policy issues rather than day-to-day operations. This level of trust and consensus enabled Smith to make potentially controversial personnel decisions at the district and building-level without losing the support of the board and to hold the rest of the district accountable without losing the support of the community.

In Sacramento, the community's tolerance for the implementation of accountability measures was tested early. In May 1997, Jim Sweeney fired five central office staff members and 15 principals at the same time. Most of them were Hispanic, and the backlash in parts of the local

community was substantial. The firings were the subject of a public school board meeting at which the decision was angrily contested and Sweeney was accused of racism. In the end, the school board voted to support Sweeney's decisions. According to board members, they were able to do so because they had developed an agreement on a basic approach to reform and because Sweeney was willing to be held accountable for his results. Sweeney and his staff worked hard to find qualified minority applicants to fill these positions, and they succeeded. Sweeney contends that the board's decision was crucial to his ability to implement reform. As Sweeney put it, "I can't do this without the right people."

By setting specific targets for student performance, establishing deadlines for the achievement of these goals, and making it clear that schools would be held accountable for the performance of all students, the leadership in the case study districts forced key constituencies to take the new reforms seriously and not settle into a "this too shall pass" attitude.

The origin of the Chancellor's District, in addition, illustrates an unusual alliance between district administrators and employee organizations, including the teachers union, which is an important political force in many jurisdictions. When Rudy Crew created the district, the severity of the problems in its schools, the inexperienced and overwhelmed teaching staff, and the real possibility of state intervention all contributed to strong union support for the creation of this special district. The unions worked cooperatively with the community and district to develop its own professional development program to strengthen instruction in a way that was integrated into the services the district offered its schools. The union also strongly supported the selection of fairly prescriptive reading and math programs (*Success for All* and *Math Trailblazers*, supplemented by a district-developed pacing guide), and agreed on higher-than-normal certification requirements and differential pay. The union collaboration also enabled the Chancellor's District to implement an extended school day.

The comparison districts did not emphasize staff accountability for student achievement in the same ways as the case study district. In one district, a previous superintendent had tried to put schools on notice for academic failure, and he did reconstitute some schools. But a subsequent superintendent toned down the rhetoric about accountability and shifted discussions to steps for school improvement, in the belief that "the system was not ready" for such an aggressive drive for change.

C. Focusing on Low-Performing Schools

- The central offices in each case study district paid special attention to low-performing schools, typically sending expert teams to diagnose problems and aid in the development of a plan of action to address them.

- The case study districts sometimes provided extra educational resources to these schools and tried to improve the stock of highly-qualified teachers and principals at these schools.

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these schools and tried to improve the stock of highly qualified teachers and principals at these schools.

In each case study district, reform began primarily in low-performing schools and worked its way through the rest of the district. An important way in which the case study districts used data was in identifying low-performing schools. While each district approached this differently, identifying and improving low-performing schools was an important element of each district's strategy. Each believed that addressing problems in these schools was an important first step in reform, and that improving these schools would have a disproportionately positive effect on the achievement of disadvantaged and minority students. The districts were also responding to existing or emerging mandates from their state accountability systems.

The Chancellor's District represents the most rigorous example of focusing on low-performing schools. Schools in this district are removed from the usual management structure of the system and integrated into a special administrative unit that works intensively on school redesign and improvement. The existing teaching force in these schools is given the opportunity to opt out of serving in a Chancellor's District school; those who stay are offered more professional development, smaller class sizes, more per student funding, and salary incentives in exchange for greater pressure to raise student achievement, more prescriptive instructional approaches, and higher certification requirements.

Each of the other case study districts established criteria for classifying schools as low-performing. Typically, this was linked to existing or anticipated classifications emerging from state accountability systems. Subsequently, the districts typically dispatched central office teams to visit the schools, assess problems and progress, and make recommendations for improvement. Superintendents or other high-level administrators were often personally involved in working with the schools to create and execute plans for improvement. Superintendents often personally monitored progress in these schools and held frequent conferences with district leaders to assess successes and identify areas in need of improvement.

The districts often attempted to target additional resources for low-performing schools. This sometimes involved an effort to improve the stock of teachers and administrators. Charlotte-Mecklenburg probably had the most highly evolved system for targeting and providing assistance to needy schools. The district developed an *A-Plus* and *Equity Plus* system (see case study for details), which provided additional resources to low-performing schools and schools that served high proportions of disadvantaged and minority students. Among other resources, these programs provided salary incentives for teachers to teach at these schools, funding support for the pursuit of masters' degrees, and performance bonuses when test scores improved. The district also required more regular assessments of student performance and provided additional resources to reduce student-teacher ratios at schools where many students received free and reduced price lunches.

The comparison districts, on the other hand, did not focus a similar level of attention or resources on low-performing schools. District 1 relied on test data to identify low-performing schools and required them to develop improvement plans. These schools were accustomed to receiving help from area superintendents who managed about 25 to 30 schools and who had staff support to ad-

dress issues of curriculum, special educational challenges, and attendance problems. But this administrative system was discontinued; the new administrators worked with approximately 25 schools each *without* support teams. Central office staff as a result helps write school improvement plans but cannot offer much continuing support for their implementation. Moreover, there are no incentives for teachers to serve in low-performing schools, in part because of opposition by the unions. The district, however, has recently implemented a Chancellor's district-like structure to focus on schools in "school improvement" status. It is too early to tell how it will work.

In Comparison District 2, a previous superintendent did create an accountability system based on achievement, attendance, and other factors. Low-performing schools were placed on a list and given two years to improve. While his successor continued the system that included district goals for achievement, there was little threat of reconstitution or other consequences for not meeting improvement targets. Since inception of the system, the district has not met its goals, and principals report that, until recently, there has been little district intervention to help low-performing schools.

D. Identifying and Creating Districtwide Curricular and Instructional Strategies

- The case study districts addressed problems of poorly aligned curriculum, student mobility, achievement gaps, and unequal distributions of qualified teachers by creating or adopting a uniform, districtwide curriculum or instructional framework.

- The reading and math curriculum or instructional framework in the case study districts tended to be fairly prescriptive, aligned with the state standards, at the elementary grades.

Each case study district, as mentioned in Chapter 2, made a concerted effort to review curricula and instruction in order to better understand the factors driving student achievement. These reviews revealed substantial problems with curriculum alignment, student mobility, and teacher supply. Each district discovered multiple curricula unaligned with state standards and a general lack of clarity in instructional objectives and state standards. In other words, there was no systematic approach to teaching and no consensus about what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.

District leaders believed that high levels of student mobility, inexperienced teaching staff, and the lack of instructional coherence produced a negative effect on student achievement. They further believed that the problem was worse for minority students because these children had higher-than-average mobility and were educated in schools with higher concentrations of inexperienced teachers.

Leadership in the case study districts believed that a uniform, centralized approach to curriculum alignment and instruction was the most appropriate response to this set of problems. They felt that such an approach would help eliminate the discrepancies between what was taught and what was tested. Moreover, they believed that a more uniform approach would help create consistency across schools, as well as across grades within schools, and increase the district's ability to improve instruction through focused professional development.

The districts implemented this basic approach in a variety of ways. With respect to reading, three case study districts adopted existing published curricula, and one district fashioned its own approach. Sacramento and Charlotte-Mecklenburg adopted *Open Court* as their elementary school reading curriculum, and the Chancellor's District selected *Success for All*. In all three districts, a uniform curriculum was seen as a way of ensuring instructional consistency. Given the variation in teacher qualifications and experience across each district, the prescriptiveness of *Open Court* and *Success for All* and their alignment with state standards were also seen as mechanisms for ensuring that all students were exposed to a common curriculum. Finally, the districts betted that uniform pacing and instruction would minimize the negative effects of student mobility within the district.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Sacramento also chose similar approaches to reforming math instruction. Sacramento chose *Saxon Math*, also a relatively prescriptive and structured approach to instruction. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, instructional reform in math is still evolving, but many of its low-performing schools have adopted *Saxon Math* as well. The district is now considering it for districtwide adoption. In the Chancellor's District, *Math Trailblazers* was selected for elementary school math, supplemented by a district-developed pacing calendar and materials that help align the program with state standards. The *Math Trailblazers* program is not as scripted and prescriptive as the reading program, and teachers are given some flexibility to adjust topics, to assure students receive instruction on material that will be on the state examination.

Despite an historic and publicly-stated philosophical preference for decentralized decision-making, the leadership in Houston eventually came to believe that they could not effectively reform instruction without making important curricular decisions at the central office. Unlike the other districts, Houston did not focus on the implementation of existing "off the shelf" curricula. Instead, it made several centralized decisions about curriculum and instruction in order to accomplish a similar set of objectives.

At the time HISD was addressing reading instruction, its leaders wanted to avoid becoming embroiled in the ongoing "whole language" versus phonics debate. Instead, they created a committee in 1996 of personnel from inside and outside the district to develop a set of recommendations for reading instruction. The committee's report proposed the development of a districtwide reading curriculum and outlined the components of a research-based reading initiative. Known as the *Balanced Approach to Reading* (BAR), this initiative guided reading instruction in the district. The BAR provides more choices in the higher grades and for exemplary schools but requires *Open Court* in grades 1 through 3, except for exemplary schools, which may choose another curriculum.[44] Despite different processes, the approach to reading instruction in each case study district ended up leaning toward prescriptiveness and uniformity in reading instruction.

Houston also embarked on a centralized effort to clarify learning objectives and instruction in math, writing, and science. Under the auspices of *Project CLEAR* (Clarifying Learning to Enhance Achievement Results), Houston worked to translate the Texas state standards and learning objectives into instructional practice. District leadership believed that the state-established learning ob-

[44] Paige and Slafani, 2001 p. 297. Certain other schools that are part of feeder pattern-wide reforms (for example, Project GRAD) were also allowed to select *Success for All* as their reading program.

jectives were open to interpretation, and, consequently, not all students would receive access to the same challenging curriculum. Therefore, in 1998 the district created *Project CLEAR* to provide detailed information about each learning objective, prerequisite skills, how the concept connected across grades, and a variety of strategies for teaching each objective.[45]

In short, the case study districts took different approaches to defining learning objectives and creating uniformity of instruction, but each city took an active role in defining good instruction and each made an effort to create consistency in instruction by centralizing certain decisions about curriculum and how to implement it. Rod Paige still refers to this process as taking responsibility for the "core business" of education.

The decision to create instructional coherence appears to have been driven by a belief that the district needed to clarify instructional objectives and train teachers uniformly to deliver that curricula. Combined with the variation in teacher qualifications and experience and high levels of student mobility, district leaders believed that uniformity of instruction would have a disproportionately positive effect on students who need help the most. Furthermore, beyond simply choosing curricula, the districts offered professional development and other resources to ensure effective implementation. Put simply, the leaders concluded that it was nearly impossible for their districts to hit their academic targets when each school was aiming in a different direction.

The comparison districts, as we described in Chapter 2, faced a similar set of challenges regarding curriculum and instruction, but the approaches they took were quite different. Comparison District 1 had a district-wide curriculum in place, but it was viewed as difficult for inexperienced teachers to implement. In addition, whole-school reform models—used extensively throughout the district—could override district-wide curriculum. Comparison District 2 had a variety of curricular options, and teachers often felt they were left on their own to make selections among the options.

E. Implementing the New Curriculum and Providing Professional Development

- The case study districts pushed for faithful implementation of their chosen curricula, despite teachers' frustrations with the perscriptiveness.

- The case study districts used focused, substantive, and intensive professional development as the primary tool for implementing and supporting instructional improvement.

Teachers and teachers' organizations in Houston, Sacramento, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg initially resisted the implementation of the more centralized curricula. Many teachers felt that the structure and prescriptiveness of the curriculum would undermine their freedom and take the creativity out of their jobs. Some teachers also felt that they were not being treated as competent professionals, and others were concerned that adopting a more structured approach to teaching and learning would require that they "dumb down" their teaching or push out other subjects.[46] This resistance was more prevalent in Sacramento and Charlotte-Mecklenburg than in Houston where the

[45] Paige and Sclafani, 2001, p. 300.
[46] Sacramento City Field Notes, interviews with union leaders on 7 June 2001.

process of developing the *Balanced Approach to Reading* may have mitigated some of the criticism. On the other hand, conversations with teachers in all the districts suggested that some, especially inexperienced teachers, were happy to receive direction from the district and pleased that someone had linked the curriculum to the state standards. These comments apparently grew out of past criticisms about the lack of direction from the central office regarding instruction.

The districts tried to respond to criticisms about lack of freedom and creativity, but they pushed for faithful execution of the curricula nonetheless. Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Sacramento put pressure on teachers and principals to implement the programs as designed. This was particularly true for low-performing schools, which received particular scrutiny from district officials. Because principals were a focus of new accountability systems, they were often inclined to follow the direction of the central office. The districts also found various ways to monitor the implementation of curriculum, including site visits and teacher coaches. Teachers and principals got the message that deviation from the curricula was not acceptable.

The origins of the Chancellor's District created a different dynamic in which the teachers union supported the selection of a fairly prescriptive reading program. Furthermore, teachers in schools selected to be part of the Chancellor's District were given the option of transferring to other schools; those who remained were aware of the instructional approach and were willing to follow its requirements as part of an agreement that provided salary incentives and enhanced professional development.

Beyond simply discouraging teachers from deviating from the instructional programs, the case study districts used focused, intensive professional development programs to show teachers how to use the new curricula effectively. In Sacramento, a grant from the Packard Foundation enabled the district to hire 28 teacher coaches. These coaches went to schools to model lessons and to observe and critique instructional practice. The district also gave new teachers six days of training in the fundamentals of instruction and the implementation of the district curriculum. They also taught principals and vice principals to monitor instruction. The district, in addition, instituted common planning time and directed that grade-level meetings be held every six weeks in each school. While they sometimes felt overwhelmed, teachers generally responded well to the substantial resources provided by the district and sometimes noted the professionalism with which the curriculum was implemented.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg also invested substantial professional development resources in ensuring the accurate and effective implementation of its new curricula. Among the most important elements of this implementation effort were the pacing and alignment guides, as well as the daily lesson plans the district created and provided to teachers and principals. The district leadership believed that, given the inexperience of many of its teachers, it was imperative for the district to provide as much instructional leadership as possible. Charlotte gave teachers three full days of professional development on implementing the new reading curriculum. Charlotte-Mecklenburg—like Sacramento—also initiated common planning periods for teachers. While the district did not hire teacher coaches per se, it trained lead teachers and relied on them and the principals to provide leadership on the district's curriculum. Sacramento and Charlotte-Mecklenburg made principals responsible for the effective implementation of the curriculum.

Houston also used professional development as a key tool. The district put on a five-day training institute to train lead teachers and principals in *Project CLEAR* standards. The goal of this training was to create a deeper understanding of the principles embedded in *Project CLEAR* and to build campus-level knowledge among lead teachers. Data collected by Houston suggested that this training was effective. (Some 75 percent of the respondents to a survey reported that *Project CLEAR* was their first choice for planning lessons.) Houston also used professional development programs to support the implementation of the *Balanced Approach to Reading*. By 1999, almost 90 percent of teachers in grades 1 through 3 had been trained in the BAR. District leaders also provided more extensive training to lead teachers, whom they hoped would guide the implementation of the curriculum, and developed curriculum and pacing guides.

As the Chancellor's District evolved, intensive professional development emerged as a top priority. Originally, curriculum vendors were responsible for much of the professional development, but over time the district developed the capacity to do its own. Because its schools are spread throughout the city, the district needed to develop a strategy for taking professional development programs to individual schools. Under Kase, the professional development structure evolved to include curriculum leaders at the district office who work with and train six curriculum specialists in regional offices. These regional curriculum specialists, in turn, work with specialists at the school level. Each school has a team of at least five people (in addition to the assistant principal) who have roles in professional development.[47]

In the comparison districts, the district-chosen reading and math curricula are not being consistently implemented, in part because there is no strong or centralized professional development effort. In one of the districts, budget pressures have led to cutbacks in professional development and the closing of the professional development center. Moreover, much of the district sponsored professional development is optional. The rest is arranged independently by each school often in conjunction with the reform models. In the other district, professional development has been sporadic, at times consisting of brief training just before school starts or using a train-the-trainer model wherein a teacher in each school is trained to train others. Unfortunately, there has not been sufficient time allotted within each school to allow the trainers to work with all teachers. In this district, much of the central office effort has focused on providing checklists for teachers outlining the skills they should be teaching within six-week blocks of time.

F. Driving Reforms into the Classroom

- The central offices in the case study districts focused on thorough implementation of district strategies at the classroom level. Leadership made a commitment to ensure that district-level strategies were implemented at the building level.

- Guiding and improving classroom instruction was an important goal and a key responsibility of the central office.

[47] There are curriculum specialists who focus on literacy, math, and either technology or bilingual education; a *Success for All* coordinator, and a teachers' union professional development center specialist. The team focuses on both teachers' knowledge base in curriculum areas as well as effective practices in instruction.

An important characteristic of the reform efforts in the case study districts involved an attribute some researchers have called "reform press."[48] Rather than simply making policy at the district level and then waiting for reform to happen, the district leadership committed itself to ensuring that the policies adopted by the central office were implemented in the schools throughout the district. This appears to have been a result of new accountability systems and sustained focus at the central office, in addition to policies and practices that substantially affected classroom practice. Under this pressure, it became difficult for teachers and principals to treat the reforms as fleeting because they were being required to change specific classroom practices.

The willingness of the leadership to dismiss staff also made it hard to ignore district mandates. This was true in the lower echelons of the central office staff as well. The frequent presence, moreover, of the superintendents in school buildings throughout the districts was impossible for building-level staff to ignore.

A striking example of "reform press" occurred in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. In the 2000–2001 school year, district leaders discovered that SAT scores had risen overall, but scores for African American students had not. Despite district initiatives designed to increase the numbers of minority students in algebra and other college preparatory classes, a much lower proportion of African American than white students were enrolled in advanced math courses. In response, Eric Smith decided mid-year that all students in middle-school language arts and math would be rescheduled in accordance with their test scores. District leaders gave the schools five days to comply. While there was some complaining among the schools, one of which went to the local newspaper, the schools complied. The teachers who initially complained about the move reported being pleasantly surprised by the performance of students whom they had initially thought were not ready for these courses. In short, rather than simply stating "high expectations for all students" as a point of rhetoric, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg leadership made sure the policies and practices at the school level carried out this edict.

Until recently, district leaders in the comparison districts have been absorbed with issues other than pressing for the implementation of instructional reforms. In one district, constant budget pressures and the need to fix broken operating systems were top priorities; in the other, leaders focused on developing a settlement to a longstanding desegregation lawsuit. Individual schools in one district were allotted five half-day professional development sessions to address needs identified by individual schools. Schools in both comparison districts appeared to be left to their own devices to work around or comply with district instructional practices and to find ways to improve the skills of their teaching staff.

G. Collecting Data Regularly and Using It to Guide Instruction and Allocate Resources

- Central office staff in the case study districts used data extensively to understand barriers to teaching and learning, improve instruction, and target resources where needed.

[48] This term was suggested to the authors of this report by Linda Powell, a member of the CGCS Research Advisory Group and one of the primary advisors for this report.

- Performance assessments were administered regularly and results were disaggregated by school, race, and socioeconomic status.

- Central office staff trained themselves, administrators and teachers to use assessment data to refine instruction and direct additional resources towards students, schools and teachers in need of special assistance.

Among the most striking differences between the case study and the comparison districts was their commitment to data. The case study districts were far more sophisticated in using data to better understand the challenges they faced, to monitor progress towards their goals, and to refine their approaches to reaching them. The districts also made a concerted effort on an ongoing basis to improve their systems for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data on student achievement and other performance measures. This was in part due to new state accountability systems to which the districts had to respond. But it was also part of a conscious effort to better understand the educational challenges in these districts and how they might best be solved. The case study districts, for instance, were better at providing data to teachers and administrators earlier in the school year. These data were used for diagnostic purposes as well as for accountability. The central offices in each district, moreover, have consistently focused on quantitative data to assess progress toward their academic goals.

There has also been a push in the case study districts to identify students and teachers in need of help earlier in the school year. Teachers are often provided with scores from the previous year's classes, as well as the scores of their incoming students, to use in planning instruction. These data help identify specific content areas that teachers and students need assistance with. The case study districts produce reports that disaggregate data by school, teacher, and student. These reports are used to identify teachers in need of support and training. District staff and building leaders work to keep the focus on professional development, at least when a teacher in need of support is first identified, so there is not a sense that the data are being used punitively.

Data disaggregated by race and socio-economic status are also used to monitor the progress of specific subgroups of students who have not been well-served traditionally. These disaggregated data are made available to the public in all three case study districts. In Houston, Texas standards mandate that schools be held accountable not only for the average levels of performance, but also for performance of various subgroups. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, disaggregating data was part of the desegregation litigation and the ongoing discussion of racial equity throughout the district. Achieving high levels of performance for *all* groups of students was a specific part of Eric Smith's mandate from and commitment to the school board. Therefore, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's systems for data and accountability focused explicitly on the extent to which students from different subgroups were improving. In Sacramento, public discussions about achievement less often singled out specific groups of students that the district had failed to serve effectively. But achieving results for disadvantaged and minority students was a clear priority for the district, which now has one of the most sophisticated data systems of any urban school district in the nation.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, assessment data were also used to identify likely candidates for AP and college prep classes and to examine course-taking patterns by race. From the beginning of his tenure, one of Eric Smith's primary goals was to ensure that students from *all groups* were educated to a high standard, and participated equally in AP and IB courses. In addition to improving the basic skills of disadvantaged and minority students, the district wanted to assess the extent to which students with the requisite skills were not being placed in more demanding courses. Starting in the early 1990s, the district paid for every eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-grade student in the system to take the PSAT. Under Eric Smith, the district began to use the results to assess how many African American students with the requisite skills were participating in advanced courses.

The analysis in Charlotte revealed a very large disparity between the AP participation rates of African- American and white students. To address this disparity, the district provided additional counseling and placement resources to students with PSAT scores that suggested they were likely to succeed in AP courses, and then attempted to increase their participation in these advanced classes. Furthermore, the district worked to identify and address racial disparities in algebra placement among students who, according to the data, possessed the requisite skills. Since the inception of the Charlotte program, there has been a dramatic increase in the participation of African American students in advanced placement courses.

The Chancellor's District has a similar focus on data-driven decision-making with student achievement measures guiding schools' selection for and departure from the district. The third supervising superintendent had a strong interest in using achievement data at the school level. During this period, principals began to display charts of achievement (disaggregated by class and topic) to help identify areas in need of improvement and those showing progress.[49]

The case study districts also conducted regular and ongoing assessments of student progress, particularly at lower grades. Providing periodic data to teachers and principals in a timely manner and in a digestible format promoted the use of data to guide instruction.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Sacramento, six- to eight-week ongoing reading assessments are part of the *Open Court* curriculum package; in the Chancellor's District, *Success for All* provides similar data. Both districts make a concerted effort to provide these and other data to teachers and administrators in an easily interpreted format throughout the school year, so effective instructional responses can be devised. In Sacramento, the central office, and Superintendent Sweeney in particular, has persistently tracked achievement data to monitor progress and identify problems. Sacramento invested in a new computer system to enable them to track data at the school, teacher, and student level in a timely manner. School and student level information is color-coded by quartile, and an instructional response is devised for low-performing students and schools. Moreover, teacher and student data are made available to principals and teachers, so that each can better identify strengths and weaknesses. Both schools and teachers receive assessment data from the previous year at the beginning of the school year. They are expected to use these data to plan instruction. Beyond this, the ongoing assessments provided by the district's reading and math curricula are discussed at grade-level meetings every six weeks.

[49] In the comparison districts, we did not observe any similar emphasis on using data on student achievement to focus resources or guide instruction.

The focus here is less on accountability and more on feedback and support. The central office in Sacramento developed an intervention package to map out instructional responses for low-performing students, depending on where the data indicated weaknesses exist. Beyond this, the district analyzed correlations between ongoing assessments and end-of-the-year tests in order to help understand which areas to focus on. In CMS, achievement outcomes are tracked for each school, classroom, and child. The ongoing assessments are provided to the teachers with the expectation that they will be used to modify instruction. At the elementary school level, quarterly exams, in addition to the *Open Court* assessments, are used to measure students' development. If administrators find slow progress, they analyze data down to the teacher level and provide resources to address the problems. Early in its existence, the Chancellor's District also instituted frequent benchmark testing (initially by using district-developed tests and later those from curriculum vendors) and used the results to identify areas for improvement. The district also developed warm-up exercises on selected topics for use during the first 15 minutes of instruction each day.

In addition to providing teachers with the previous year's test scores, HISD provides teachers with 12-week "snap-shot" tests. Recently, these assessments have been made available to teachers online through the "Profiler for Academic Success of Students" (PASS) system, a web-based portal that disaggregates student test data in a variety of ways. The assessments focus on objectives outlined by *Project CLEAR's* guidelines for each 12-week instructional period.

In the comparison districts, timely feedback on student achievement was uncommon. In one district, until recently, data were only available from the previous school year. Teachers and principals did not have recent data to use in adjusting the current year's instruction. In the other district, most of the instructional feedback focused on teachers' compliance with the requirements of the traditional district curriculum. Furthermore, principals and teachers did not have access to periodic data on the current year's patterns of achievement.

Beyond providing data, the case study districts trained teachers and administrators in the interpretation and use of assessment data. Sacramento, for example, trained principals and teachers to use data to run effective meetings, monitor instruction, and give feedback. The leadership in Houston asked district superintendents to report passing rates for each teacher and set up teacher/principal meetings during the school year. Houston also trained lead teachers in the use of data. Those teachers are, in turn, expected to be resources at their schools. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the quarterly test data (which are processed and redistributed quickly) are used to organize conversations with individual teachers about student progress; to make instructional decisions; and to target interventions, tutorials, and supplemental services. A teacher may find, for example, that some of her students need more practice in a reading objective, so the principal arranges staffing to allow for small-group work. In the past, the Chancellor's District used ongoing benchmark testing as a tool to inform small-group instruction and measure progress against state standards. According to the current supervising superintendent, the use of data and training in the use of data have improved since these practices were initially adopted.

The comparison districts, by contrast, are much less consistent in their use of data to guide instruction. One of the districts provides the schools with data (disaggregated by teacher and student) from the prior year's achievement tests and trains principals on the use of these data. However,

the district does not require them to use this information to identify problems, guide instruction, or arrange interventions. The other district produces reports from the prior year's state test, but there are no districtwide requirements for how principals should use the data. Neither district provides ongoing test results and lesson plans for what to do with the results during the school year and neither uses data to modify instruction or identify teachers and students in need of help.

H. Starting with Elementary Schools

- The case study districts found substantial problems with curriculum alignment at the elementary school level.

- The need to stem the tide of students arriving at middle and high schools lacking basic skills was apparent among the case study districts.

- The belief that instructional and organizational issues were more straightforward in the elementary schools in all of the case study districts.

In each case study district, reform efforts began at the elementary school level and worked their way up through the system. In CMS and Sacramento, for instance, the efforts to improve reading instruction began with the adoption of a uniform reading curriculum in the early grades. In Houston, early instructional reform in reading focused on the development and implementation of its elementary school reading curriculum. Initially, the Chancellor's District included six elementary schools and three middle schools. Over time, the district has incorporated high schools as well as additional middle schools. In general, it was only after districts had implemented several years of reform at the elementary schools that they began to address reform at the middle and high school level. This evolution is illustrated in the Chancellor's District, where after several years of intense work in elementary schools, staff began to bring the same focused and prescriptive instructional strategies to middle schools. In most of the case study districts, however, progress in changing high school instruction remains at an early stage, as reforms still focus mainly on safety issues, building size, and restructuring.

According to the leadership in the case study districts, the focus on the early grades was driven by several factors. Primary among them was the belief that general achievement problems as well as specific problems of curriculum alignment and consistency had their origins in the elementary school years. In each case study district, systematic problems with curriculum and instruction were viewed as the root cause of the district's failure to teach students basic skills by the end of elementary school.

This, in turn, resulted in waves of students arriving, unprepared, at middle schools and high schools. The schools in these districts are not generally staffed nor organized in a way that enables them to effectively solve this problem. In particular, middle schools are generally geared towards teaching the skills necessary for high school, but do not have the capacity to remediate students who have fallen behind. The case study districts eventually initiated several programs designed to teach basic reading and math skills to those who arrived at middle school without requisite skills. The primary goal, however, was proactive—to reduce the number of students who left elementary school

needing remedial help. Therefore, the case study districts focused on bolstering instruction at the elementary school level as well as creating additional early childhood literacy programs.

The leadership in the case study districts also believed that reforming elementary schools was a more straightforward proposition from an organizational and instructional perspective than reforming high schools. While the instructional mission of elementary schools focuses largely on teaching reading and math skills, the instructional goals of middle and high schools are more varied and complex. Instruction at the elementary level tends to be organized by grades while instruction at the middle and high school levels is organized by subject and department. Determining how to reform and drive instruction at these levels is still an open question.

I. Identifying Strategies to Teach Basic Skills to Middle and High School Students

- The case study districts started at the elementary grades but did not leave the middle and high schools unattended.

- The case study districts devised or adopted programs to train middle school teachers to teach basic reading skills and implement programs designed to help students catch up through intensive instruction, at times made possible by sacrificing electives or even instruction in other core academic subjects.

Beyond their attempts to reform instruction and curriculum at the elementary level, the districts implemented programs to train middle school teachers to teach basic reading skills and help students catch up through intensive intervention. This sometimes meant sacrificing electives, however, or even instruction in other core academic subjects.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg's middle schools, the "Instructional Preventions and Intervention Project" includes extended-day programs or double blocks of math and reading/language arts on top of daily math and language art periods for students not performing at grade level. Houston has incorporated reading instruction at the middle school level as part of its district curriculum. Lead reading teachers in each school support language arts teachers in using the district's *Balanced Approach to Reading*. District in-service training for BAR is also offered to all teachers at the middle school level with an emphasis on cross-curriculum connections.

Each middle school in Sacramento adopted one of two district-sponsored reading programs, *Language* or *Corrective Reading*, which are intended to accelerate learning. With the *Language* program, only extensively-trained language arts teachers teach reading. Under *Corrective Reading*, teachers have a three-day practicum and are further supported by district reading coaches. In at least one school, non-language arts teachers gave up seven minutes of class time so that students could have six periods of language arts per week. Another school went from a six-period to a seven-period day so that it could include additional time for reading without giving up electives. Sacramento high schools recently adopted the *Language* program for below-grade-level readers. Within the last school year, the Chancellor's District in New York also began to institute a prescriptive instructional approach for teaching basic skills to middle school students needing help.

These examples are in stark contrast to one comparison district, which is just now beginning to consider district reading interventions for students below grade level. While school-level personnel were aware that many students arrive at middle and high school far below grade level in reading, there was no district (or often even school) level response. There were no interventions for students not reading by third grade. These students were often held back and/or classified for special education, and were considered likely to drop out of high school. The district acknowledges that few of its middle and high school teachers are trained to teach reading, and many of its new elementary teachers were not effectively trained to teach reading in their college programs. Further, concerns about tracking or ability-grouping in the district led to a prohibition against such practices in many circumstances. Most class time, instead, is devoted to whole group instruction and/or workbook assignments since many teachers are not adept at differentiated instruction within a classroom.

III. WHAT MADE THESE EFFORTS DIFFICULT?

The case study districts worked hard to develop and implement the changes outlined in this chapter, but the process was not without setbacks or controversy. Across the districts, some common challenges appeared. This section summarizes the key challenges faced by the districts and what the districts did to address them.

A. Changing the Role, Attitudes, and Perception of the Central Office

School-level staff in each district were often quite skeptical that the central office staff could redefine its roles and focus on supporting schools in meeting district goals. In fact, there were substantial barriers to building initial support for the improvement effort: the history of poor support for daily school operations; frequent changes in policy direction and leadership; and the perception that the central office staff believed the schools were there to support them. The district leadership tried to change attitudes about real change and foster good will by making some initial changes that would build support for their efforts. They made quick improvements in facilities and material support, instituted the new accountability system for the most senior central office staff first, and "cleaned house" by firing or demoting ineffective staff and bringing in employees from outside the district (or even outside the education field).

B. Facing the Controversy When Staff Were Removed or Demoted

In each district, senior administrators were committed to removing staff they felt were ineffective. As the reforms moved forward, central office staffers or principals were removed from their posts; some were fired while others were demoted to less demanding positions. This inevitably created controversy and pressures for the school boards to renew their involvement in personnel decisions. In the case study districts, however, the boards resisted this and reinforced the authority of district administrators to make these decisions. The change in attitude by the school boards may be attributed to two factors. First, the superintendents were willing to be held personally accountable for student achievement and the boards believed that in exchange, superintendents had the right to assemble the leadership team they desired. Second, the superintendents were committed to creating a racially and ethnically diverse leadership team and were able to fill vacancies with many minority administrators.

C. Building the Infrastructure to Meet the Data Needs of the New Approaches

Each of the districts began this process without the data needed to push their reforms forward. In some cases, the basic data processing systems were antiquated. In others, new types of reports needed to be designed. Further, the districts needed to create methods to distribute data in a useful form and timely fashion, and teachers and principals needed to be trained to understand and use the reports. At crucial stages in this process, several of districts had to go outside the usual channels to make this happen. One district hired a consultant to produce the reports, while another brought the technology group into the effort to supplement the work of the research department that had traditionally produced reports. Over time, each district invested substantial resources in learning how to produce the necessary information.

D. Building Support from Experienced Teachers for Uniform and More Prescriptive Approaches in the Early Grades

Experienced teachers were often the most resistant to changes in curriculum that they felt restricted their freedom to use teaching strategies that they believed worked. However, data from the case study districts revealed that although the existing practices of these teachers might feel successful, in reality their favorite lesson plans and activities were often not actually producing the needed gains in student achievement. It is important to note that some experienced teachers were in fact very successful with prescriptive curricula, inspiring greater achievement gains among their students. District leadership called on these successful teachers to be role models for others. District staff and principals also provided basic tools and ongoing support so that less experienced teachers could be successful.

E. Confronting the Charge of a Narrow Educational Focus

Throughout the debate about the changes described in this chapter, district leaders were accused of restricting the material that children were taught. In some districts, for example, expanded instruction in reading and math took time and resources from electives, art and music, field trips, or just fun activities for children. In some circumstances, critics could argue convincingly that—given the disadvantaged circumstances of many children—schools were *the only* setting in which children could gain this broader array of knowledge and experience. There was no simple answer to these concerns. District leadership consistently argued that children without basic academic skills would be severely hindered in later life. Facing a difficult choice and limited resources, district leadership opted to focus on basic academic skills but, at the same time, sought supplemental funding (public and private) to expand other offerings.

F. Confronting the Charge that Reforms Undercut Efforts to Achieve Academic Excellence

Much of the activities described in this chapter focused on raising the achievement of low-performing schools and students. The analysis of achievement trends presented earlier suggests that this is where the districts have had their greatest success. But in each of these districts, critics expressed concerns that the emphasis on remedial students diverted attention away from students who had already demonstrated academic proficiency. Critics further argued that this would tempt families of high-achieving students to seek other educational opportunities, and broad support for the public education system would therefore be undermined.

In each district, leadership publicized the achievements of high performing schools and students. There continued to be schools where achievement was much higher than the district average and special educational offerings remained in place. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the leadership directly addressed this issue by focusing on what it would take to produce highly qualified high school graduates and then worked to make these educational opportunities available to every student. In addition, the district worked to expand academically demanding programs at the high school level (such as AP and the International Baccalaureate), assure equal access to these programs, and increase the number of graduates successfully meeting the requirements of these programs. Nevertheless, the leaders of the case study districts readily admit that while their reforms addressed basic academic achievement, they did not yet create reforms that would be necessary to move to higher levels of academic performance on a systemwide basis.

G. Fighting the Fatigue and Stress of the Constant Push for Improvement

Throughout the case study districts, principals and teachers reported that their jobs were much more demanding and stressful than in the past. Many reported that the continual pressures took a toll on their emotions and threatened to take the joy out of being educators and working with children. District leadership confronted this problem in several ways: by trying to improve the quality of facilities, materials, and administrative support that principals and teachers received; continuously stressing the importance of the mission of educating young people; telling those who did not want to increase their level of effort that it was time to leave; celebrating successes along the way; and being visible in the schools and listening to what the staff had to say. Despite these efforts, the work remained grueling and everyone involved felt the pressure.

Summary of Case Study and Comparison Districts

Key Characteristics	Case Study Districts	Comparison Districts
Preconditions		
1. School Board Role	Major change in school board membership.	Major change in school board membership.
	Board role changes to policy.	Board often focused on "zero-sum" decisions.
	Board sets first priority as raising student achievement.	Board is slower to focus on student achievement or is distracted by other issues.
2. Shared Vision	Board defines initial vision for district.	Board is slower to define vision.
	Board seeks superintendent who matches initial vision.	Board seeks superintendent with own ideas and platform.
	Board seeks superintendent who is willing to be accountable for goals.	Board may not hold superintendent accountable for goals.
	Board and superintendent refine vision and goals jointly.	Board and superintendent may not pursue joint vision and goals.
	Board and superintendent have stable and lengthy relationship.	Board and superintendent experience repeated turnover.
3. Diagnosing Situation	Board and superintendent analyze factors affecting achievement.	Board and superintendent may not diagnose what affects achievement.
	Board and superintendent assess strengths and weaknesses of district.	Board and superintendent may not assess district strengths and weaknesses.
	Board and superintendent consider district options and strategies.	Superintendent may develop solutions without board involvement.
	Board entrusts superintendent to run district.	Board may continue micromanaging administration.
4. Selling Reform	Board and superintendent build concrete and specific goals for district.	Board and superintendent may not build concrete goals for district.
	Board and superintendent listen extensively to community needs.	Board and superintendent may not listen to or involve community.
	Board and superintendent begin selling goals and plans to schools and community.	Administration may not seek extensive buy-in.
	Board and superintendent exclaim urgency, high standards, and no excuses.	Board and superintendent may not develop urgency or new attitude.
5. Improving Operations	Central office revamps business operations to be more effective.	Central office may revamp operations to the exclusion of student achievement.

	Central office develops new sense of customer service with schools.	Central office may not have customer orientation.
	Central office moves to fix immediate problems that annoy all.	Central office may not respond to immediate problems.
6. Finding Funds	District pursues funds to initiate reforms and launch priorities.	District may pursue or accept funds unrelated to reforms & priorities.
	District builds confidence in reforms in order to attract funds.	District may pursue funds to fill shortfalls.
	District shifts funds into instructional priorities.	District may shift funds into other priorities, instruction being one.
Educational Strategies		
1. Setting Goals	District sets specific performance goals and targets for self and schools.	District may set more general goals and lack school targets.
	District uses goals to build consensus and rally support.	District may not move to build consensus or support.
	District spends time considering what works elsewhere ("existence proofs").	District may not seek "existence proofs."
	District sets specific timetables for meeting goals and targets.	District lacks specific timelines for meeting goals and targets.
	District focuses relentlessly on goal to improve student achievement.	District sometimes distracted by other priorities.
2. Creating Accountability	District goes beyond state accountability system.	District does not go beyond state accountability system.
	District puts senior staff on performance contracts tied to goals.	District does not put senior staff on performance contracts.
	District puts principals on performance contracts tied to goals.	District probably does not put principals on performance contracts.
	District creates rewards & recognition for progress on goals & targets.	District has no reward & recognition system for progress on goals.
3. Focusing on Lowest Performing Schools	District creates system for focusing on lowest performing schools.	District may lack full system for focusing on lowest performing schools.
	District uses school improvement process to drive schools forward.	Districts may have more generalized school improvement strategy.
	District has detailed bank of interventions for lowest performing schools.	District may lack intervention strategies for lowest performing schools.

	District shifts extra help, funds, and programs into lowest performing schools.	District lacks strategy for handling lowest performing schools.
	District tries to improve quality of teachers in lowest performing schools.	District may lack ways to improve quality of teachers in these schools.
	District closely monitors schools.	District may not closely monitor schools.
4. Unifying Curriculum	District adopts or develops uniform curriculum or framework for instruction.	District has multiple curriculum or no framework for instruction.
	District uses more prescriptive reading and math curriculum or tight framework.	District curriculum may be more vague or lack unifying framework.
	District differentiates instruction and provides extended time.	District may not differentiate instruction nor provide extended time.
	District curriculum explicitly aligned to state standards and assessments.	District may not have tied curriculum to state standards and assessments.
	District has clear grade-to-grade alignment in curriculum.	District does not align curriculum between grades.
	District uses scientifically-based reading curriculum.	District may use older reading curriculum.
	District uses pacing guides for classroom teachers.	District may or may not have pacing guides.
5. Professional Development	District pushes for faithful implementation of curriculum.	District may not monitor implementation closely.
	District has uniform professional development built on curriculum.	District may rely more on school-by-school professional development.
	District focuses professional development on classroom practice.	District may not have such focused professional development.
	District provides teacher supports when needed.	District may not have teacher support mechanism.
6. Pressing Reforms Down	District works to drive reforms all the way into classroom ("reform press").	District may wait for reforms to trickle down.
	District has system of encouraging or monitoring implementation of reforms.	District has no way to tell if reforms are being implemented.
	Central office takes responsibility for quality of instruction.	Central office leaves instruction up to individual schools.

7. Using Data	District uses data extensively to monitor system and school progress.	District may not use data for monitoring either system or school progress.
	District assesses student progress throughout school year.	District more likely to use previous year's data on performance.
	District disaggregates data in numerous ways.	District may or may not disaggregate data.
	District uses data to decide on where to target interventions.	District does not use data to shape intervention strategy.
	District provides training in interpretation and use of test score results.	District training may be voluntary or lack detail.
	District uses data to target professional development.	District does not use data to target professional development.
8. Starting Early	District starts reform efforts in early elementary grades and works up.	District has not defined where to start reforms.
9. Handling Upper Grades	District had fledgling strategies for teaching older students.	District has no strategies for teaching older students who are behind..
	District has some middle and high school interventions.	District lacks intervention strategies at the middle and high school level.
	District doubles up on teaching basic skills to students who are behind.	District has no strategies for teaching older students.
	District begins expanding AP courses in district high schools.	District lacks AP courses in many high schools.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

Large urban school districts represent a major component of the American public education system. While the number of districts that fall within this category is small, they educate a disproportionate number of students and an even larger segment of the disadvantaged and minority students in this country. Moreover, some would argue that the challenges facing the American education system are most pronounced in our major urban school districts. This chapter is a brief summary of the findings presented in this report and the implications for policy, practice, and research.

I. IMPLICATIONS

The large urban school districts included in this report face systemic challenges that exist above the level of individual schools. These challenges are not new, and their existence suggests that the district might play an important role in driving educational reform in urban settings. The experiences of the districts in this study suggest specific hypotheses for promising practices aimed at addressing the challenges urban school systems face.

The individual histories of these districts suggest that political and organizational stability and consensus on educational reform strategy is a necessary prerequisite to meaningful change. It is noteworthy that the leaders in these districts invested substantial amounts of time, effort, and resources in changing the culture of their districts and creating a system-wide consensus for reform. Previous research on system-level change echoes these findings and suggests that without such a foundation, it is unlikely that any district-level strategies for reform can be implemented or sustained for long enough to create genuine changes in patterns of student achievement. Such a foundation includes:

- A consensus among the political leadership regarding the direction and goals for reform.
- A shared vision between the chief executive of the school district and political leaders regarding the strategy and goals for reform.
- Support for this vision throughout all levels of the system.
- A system of accountability that holds district leadership and building-level staff personally responsible for producing results.
- Stability and longevity of the leadership team that can create this foundation.

Beyond this, the findings in this report suggest a number of important educational strategies for improving urban school districts.

A. Instructional Coherence

These school districts suffered from a lack of clarity regarding instructional standards and had a wide variety of curricula pacing, and instructional approaches through their districts. These problems were exacerbated by high levels of mobility, particularly among minority and disadvantaged students. The experiences of the case study and comparison districts suggest that a constellation of problems related to teacher supply and skill hampers the ability of schools to improve instruction and meet the needs of their students. As is the case in most urban school systems, the districts reported shortages of qualified and experienced teachers, particularly at schools that serve high numbers of disadvantaged and minority students.

The case study districts responded to these problems by developing and implementing a coherent instructional strategy, particularly for elementary schools and low-performing schools. While leaders came into these districts with differing opinions on centralization, most of them eventually agreed that it was necessary to make instructional decisions at the district level.

To achieve this instructional coherence, the case study districts either adopted or developed their own uniform, relatively prescriptive reading and math curricula for the elementary grades. The districts supported the implementation of these curricula with extensive professional development, including the use of teacher coaches and grade-level planning periods. Significantly, these districts monitored and enforced the implementation of these curricula through central office visits and other compliance mechanisms. This is in stark contrast to the comparison districts, which generally did not view the development and strong implementation of an instructional strategy as the central office's responsibility. This suggests the following hypotheses that may be worth further exploration:

- A systematic, uniform, and relatively prescriptive approach to elementary instruction might improve student learning and have a disproportionately large effect on achievement among disadvantaged and minority children and children in low-performing schools.

- It may be more effective to provide extensive professional development focused on a specific curriculum than to provide professional development resources distributed across a wide variety of educational initiatives.

Additional research might also prove useful in determining the extent of the instructional cohesion necessary to produce achievement gains. It may not be necessary for all school sites to look and act alike as long as they are operating under the same general framework. The findings, to date, are not clear on this point.

In short, the experiences of these districts suggest that the central office may play a valuable role in providing guidance and consistency regarding instructional strategy and curriculum, and that professional development resources spent supporting the implementation of this curriculum may increase this strategy's effectiveness. These experiences also suggest the possibility that the central office may play an important role in addressing the variation in teacher qualifications and other resources across their districts. In particular, efforts to direct additional resources to certain schools suggest the following questions:

1. Do district efforts to improve the stock of highly qualified teachers and administrators at low-performing schools or schools serving a high proportion of disadvantaged and minority students result in higher student achievement?

2. Do changes in the credentials and experience of teachers and principals result in systematic improvements in teaching and learning in these schools?

B. Data-Driven Instruction and Decision-Making

One striking characteristic of the case study districts was their effective use of data to guide instruction and decision-making. In general, the leadership of these districts used assessment data and other sources of reliable information to better understand the challenges they faced and to monitor progress toward their goals. As state accountability systems have come online, most districts have begun to review assessment data to track performance. In addition to using achievement data as a measure of end-of-year performance, the case study districts provided early and ongoing assessment data to teachers and principals and offered them training and support in how to use the data to diagnose achievement problems and devise instructional responses.

There are challenges and pitfalls to this approach. Each of the case study districts had to improve their systems for managing data. Perhaps more important, the districts had to work with central office and building-level personnel to change their attitudes so that they viewed data as an effective tool for improving instruction rather than a reminder of their inadequacies. While staff generally found the assessments to be effective tools, some of them raised valid questions about whether the availability of data always promoted a valid instructional response as opposed to attempts to "game" the system in order to maximize the *appearance* of progress. However, in general, the focus on data-driven instruction and decision-making appeared to prompt conversations between teachers and principals, as well as among teachers, regarding instructional practices and areas of weakness. These experiences suggest that the following hypotheses may be fruitful avenues for exploration:

- Providing achievement data to teachers at regular intervals beginning early in the academic year, training teachers and principals in the diagnostic use of these data, and helping them develop instructional responses may improve instructional practice and increase student learning and achievement.

- Assessment data may also be used as an effective tool for increasing the equity of the placement process (assigning students to curricular options) and the representation of disadvantaged and minority students in AP and college preparatory classes.

C. The Role of the District

The evidence in this report suggests an important role for school districts, particularly large urban school districts, in addressing the major challenges facing the American education system. There are many problems in education that must be addressed at the level of the individual school, although the experiences of the case study districts suggest that leadership from the central office can provide a coherent direction for reform, create the organizational infrastructure necessary to provide schools with the tools they need to educate students, and address problems that affect many schools in the system simultaneously. In other words, there are some problems that may be more effectively addressed by the system as a whole than by individual schools.

The idea that some of the instructional challenges facing urban schools may be dealt with most effectively at the central office is consistent with the lack of "organizational development" in urban schools documented by researchers such Payne and Kaba.[50] The importance of a coherent district strategy for instructional reform is also suggested in some critiques of the "jumble of multiple, incompatible reforms" at the district level, and the notion that, without systemic reform in the district, even schools that are successful in turning themselves around may not succeed in sustaining their progress.[51]

From a research perspective, this suggests that additional resources should be invested in ascertaining how central offices can drive reform and improve teaching and learning across their districts. From a practical perspective, the experiences of these districts and the educational improvement strategies they used may provide a useful roadmap for urban school district leaders as they set priorities for reform.

D. The Importance of "Reform Press"

Beyond their implications for specific reform strategies, these districts' experiences suggest the importance of the *manner* in which strategies are pursued. The case study district leaders pursued their reform agendas with an intensity that distinguished them from many urban superintendents and school boards. They devoted many hours to building a new vision of what was possible in their schools, crafting and selling a strategy to improve student achievement, and changing the culture of their districts and schools. Once a plan was developed, the superintendents relentlessly pushed for its implementation, followed up when efforts were stalled, rewarded with increased stature and responsibility those who bought into the plan, and pushed out those who opposed their approach. Much of their efforts focused on ensuring that plans at the district level actually led to changes in daily life in the schools, a link that too often is not made.

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[50] Payne, Charles and Mariame Kaba, "So Much Reform, So Little Change: Building-Level Obstacles to Urban School Reform" *Journal of Negro Education*, Feb. 2001.

[51] Cuban, Larry, "Improving Urban Schools in the 21st Century: Do's and Don'ts or Advice to True Believers and Skeptics of Whole School Reform." Paper Presentation, July 2001.

In many ways, this "reform press" was more unusual than the specific strategies that these leaders adopted. Their goals, data systems, instructional approaches, and accountability systems might have been atypical and often represented advances over usual practice in urban districts. It might even be more unusual to see these strategies implemented in combination with one another. But many staff working in the districts reported that somehow the *effort* was more than the sum of the parts. It was systemic, not programmatic. This came out in comments from all corners of the district about how no one piece was by itself responsible for the districts' improvements, and that the districts had to pursue many different reforms in order to succeed. It also came through in comments the leadership made that discussing the specific actions they took somehow did not convey the "fire" and "soul" of what was involved in this type of effort — not to mention the almost missionary zeal with which it was pursued. Ironically, it also came through in comments from those who did not support aspects of the reforms; these people felt that they simply could not ignore or avoid the district initiatives: this was *not* a case of "this too will pass."

It is important to remember that the findings in this report suggest that this reform press was effective because it was combined with specific reforms that responded to some of the major problems facing urban school districts. However, while this type of crusading reform pressure does not always lend itself to tests of specific actions, we believe it is an essential component of these reform efforts and goes a long way in explaining why their overall efforts were in fact greater than the sum of the parts.

II. Limitations

This study is fundamentally exploratory in nature. While the findings may be suggestive, the evidence does not allow us to establish definitive causal links between the policies and practices observed in these districts and changes in student achievement. This study relied on evidence accumulated from strategic plans, interviews with district leaders and other personnel, and interviews and focus groups with teachers and principals about the history of reform in each district. This information does not enable us to determine whether or not the districts would have experienced the same changes in student achievement in the absence of the reforms that occurred in these districts or under an entirely different set of reforms. Moreover, these districts implemented policies and practices other than the ones that became the focus of the report. This report focuses on those central office phenomena that appeared to be most common across the case study districts, appeared to be most distinct from the approaches taken by the comparison districts, and were most logically connected to changes in teaching and learning in the classroom. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that some other factor or factors were the primary drivers of changes in student achievement.

There may be differences between the districts in this study and other urban school districts in need of reform. Clearly, the circumstances faced by the case study districts mirrored the challenges faced by many large urban school districts across the country. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the case study districts may not share some important characteristics with some of what might be considered the most difficult environments for school reform. In particular, the case study districts do not include a single large, northeastern district, in a city with a predominately African American population; a powerful, entrenched union; and a shrinking economy and budget.

It was difficult to identify any such district for participation in the study because few of these systems have made as much progress in improving student achievement and reducing racial differences in student performance. Their absence raises the question of whether the hypotheses regarding promising practices are directly applicable to these environments. This question cannot be answered definitively based on the data gathered for this report. Nevertheless, the policies and practices employed by the case study districts were direct responses to specific problems of instructional disorganization, teacher qualifications, and student mobility, most of which affect the vast majority of urban school systems around the country. To the extent that these policies help address these particular problems in the case study districts, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that, if implemented, these reforms might address some of the problems facing these more challenging environments. Therefore, the key question seems to be whether it is possible to establish the political and organizational preconditions necessary to implement these reforms in these environments. Answering this question is an important priority for future research.

The promising practices outlined in this report do not represent a panacea for the problems facing America's urban schools and urban school districts. Previous research on urban school reform points to many structural impediments affecting student achievement. The findings in this report do not obviate the need to address these challenges. Issues such as insufficient funding, large class sizes, and teacher supply were challenges in these districts at the outset of this study, and they continue to plague daily life in the schools.

While the policies and practices suggested here are not substitutes for reforms that remove these structural problems, they do suggest how districts might cope with today's challenges, and they suggest strategies that might make reforms that address these structural impediments more effective. Moreover, the experiences of these districts suggest that, even in the face of such challenges, urban school systems can still embark on meaningful reform.

III. Remaining Questions and Next Steps

As they reflected on what they considered to be their recent successes, the leadership in each case study district expressed concern about the future of reform in their districts. Specifically, they questioned:

1. How to sustain the progress and extend it into the future?

2. How to build on the recent improvements in student performance and move beyond basic levels of proficiency to achieve excellence?

3. How to extend the reforms from the elementary level to the middle school and secondary levels of education?

The inability to sustain reform in urban schools and school systems is common enough to be a cliché among educators and administrators. Frequently, the reforms of one leader are quickly forgotten or even reversed after a change in leadership or political environment. While each school district has experienced several years of progress and reform, it is not clear whether these changes

will continue over time. How reform in these districts evolves and what it takes to *sustain* reform in these environments are important questions for research and practice.

Related to the issue of sustaining urban school reform, the districts in this study focused most of their efforts on the improvement of low-performing schools and students. Often, the district leadership was focused primarily on reducing the number of students who failed to meet basic standards of proficiency, such as performing at the 25th percentile or meeting grade level criteria on locally developed tests. In large part, the reforms these districts employed appeared to be sufficient for reaching these goals. However, the strategies that help districts reduce the number of low-performing schools and students are likely to differ from the strategies that would help these districts reach the higher levels of student achievement that are common, for example, among the wealthier suburban districts across the nation.

In addition to the focus on basic skills, the first wave of reform in these districts centered largely (though not exclusively) on teaching and learning at the elementary school level. Some district leaders readily admitted that they were uncertain how to tackle reform at the middle and high school levels. In addition to the problems of remediating students who arrive at middle and high school without basic skills, urban school district leaders are confronted with organizations that are more complicated and instructional tasks that are broader and more complex. Therefore, the task of creating instructional coherence across the system becomes more complicated at the middle and high school levels than in the primary grades. The case study districts have made some progress on these fronts but would probably admit that they have farther to go and more to learn on this dimension. If so, they would have a great deal in common with educators and administrators throughout the country.

With this in mind, the next phase of reform and research might focus on what it takes to sustain reform, create instructional coherence, improve student achievement at the middle and high school level, and move large urban school systems beyond basic levels of performance. This is a tall order indeed. This might involve monitoring these districts as they move on to the next stages of reform or studying the efforts of other districts as they strive to reach a higher set of standards.

Finally, the findings in this study underscore the importance of the district as a unit of analysis for research and as a lever for reform. It is important to refine the hypotheses regarding promising practices at the *district level* and establish a strong empirical basis for understanding the relationship between these educational improvement strategies and changes in teaching, learning, and student achievement in large urban school systems. The findings also underscore the importance of testing these strategies in as many diverse settings as possible in order to establish their applicability to systems where reform is most needed and laying the foundations for success are most important.

[49] Payne, Charles and Mariame Kaba, "So Much Reform, So Little Change: Building-Level Obstacles to Urban School

Appendix A:
Case Study Districts

CASE STUDY

Houston Independent School District

I. INTRODUCTION

On August 2–3, 2001, the field research team from MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools visited the Houston Independent School District (HISD) to gather information for this study on school reform in urban school districts. The team met with the superintendent, senior staff, assistant superintendents, other key central office personnel, union representatives and members of the greater Houston community. The team returned to HISD on November 28–29, 2001 for follow-up interviews with district leadership and central office personnel. Additional interviews and focus groups with principals and teachers were also conducted. This case study summarizes the information gathered from these interviews, as well as from the background materials and data provided by the district. The case study is divided into the following four sections:

- Context in which the reform occurred.
- Political preconditions for reform.
- Educational improvement strategies.
- Achievement trends.

II. CONTEXT

A. District Demographics

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) is the largest public school system in Texas and the seventh largest in the United States. It enrolls approximately 210,000 students, employs over 12,500 teachers, and operates nearly 300 schools. Each school in the district is assigned to one of 13 administrative districts, eleven of which are organized around geographic feeder patterns of elementary, middle, and high schools. A second administrative district is composed of alternative schools and programs, and the third district is composed of charter schools.

The racial composition of HISD is 55% Hispanic, 32% African American, 10% white, and 3% Asian/Pacific Islander. Twenty-seven percent of HISD's students are English Language Learners and about 70% are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch. The district's 1999-2000 per pupil expenditure was approximately $5,672.[1]

[1] SOURCE: *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 1999-2000*. National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, October 2001.

B. Key Challenges at the Outset of Reforms

- **Challenging student population.** HISD, like many urban school districts, educates students who are poor, less likely to speak English, change schools frequently, and have histories of low academic achievement. Fewer than half of the district's students met minimum reading or math standards on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in 1993–1994, the period before many of the current reforms took place. One quarter of the district's students were not fluent in English and 51 percent were designated as "at risk" of dropping out on at least one Texas Education Authority (TEA) criteria—limited English proficiency; failure to pass any section of TAAS; failure to meet promotion standards; failure to pass two or more basic subjects in high school; in ninth grade but not expected to graduate within four years; or two or more years below grade level on a standardized reading or math test.

- **Inexperienced teaching force.** In 1994, 25 percent of HISD teachers had less than three years of teaching experience. This percentage has grown with the need to hire new teachers to handle increased enrollments and to replace retiring teachers. The district offered little training to new teachers and did not have a comprehensive curriculum around which to organize professional development.

- **District waste and mismanagement.** There was a strong public perception before the reforms that HISD squandered funds and did not efficiently run its operations. The district's own internal assessment and a state audit revealed numerous ways in which the district could better manage its resources.

C. Background

- **Employee organizations lack collective bargaining but are a political force.** Employee unions, especially those for teachers and administrators, have traditionally had consultative relationships with the superintendent. The unions do not have collective bargaining rights, but they wield strong political influence in Houston. This influence was particularly evident during the bond elections of the early to mid-1990s.

- **Business support is key in the district.** The mayor's representative, union leaders, and central office administrators state clearly that the business community is very important to HISD. Historically, the schools have been seen as a critical part of Houston's economy. Businesses need educated employees and need HISD to be a school system that will help attract and retain employers. HISD is the largest employer in Houston with 28,000 full-time employees and 2,000 more part-time staff. The Greater Houston Partnership is an important funding source during bond elections and supported the campaigns of several reform trustees (school board members). The needs of the business community and employee organizations were important considerations in determining the nature, timing and pace of reforms the school board was willing to undertake.

- **The State of Texas has made education a priority**. In the 1990s, Texas loosened regulatory and educational mandates on schools and replaced them with an accountability system focused on results. Smaller class size requirements for grades pre-K–4 are still in effect, however. In the fall of 1990, the Texas Education Authority (TEA) adopted the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), which is a key component in Houston's accountability system. The TEA adopted the Texas Accountability System in June 1993—a system that uses student attendance, dropout rates, and performance on TAAS to rate districts and schools. Each variable is measured districtwide and for individual student sub-groups (African American, Hispanic, white, and economically disadvantaged). Governor George Bush launched a major campaign in January 1996 to improve reading instruction in Texas public schools.

- **Representative school board trustees.** Every two years, either four or five of HISD's nine trustees are elected to four-year terms. Each trustee represents a single-member district. District lines were drawn with an eye on ethnic representation on the Board. Historically, the needs of individual districts have often overshadowed the needs of HISD as a whole. It was not uncommon for board members to intercede in staffing decisions on behalf of constituents or friends since the district was the city's largest employer.

III. Political Preconditions for Reform and Recent History

A coalition of reform-minded trustees (school board members) were elected to the Houston Independent School District's school board in 1990. This group developed *Beliefs and Vision*, a mission statement that would guide the district through several superintendents, as well as through a decade of organizational and instructional change. Board members sought greater decentralization of budgeting and decision-making authority, more accountability for performance, common academic subjects for all students, and greater focus on building relationships between teachers and students. Frustrated by the slow pace of reform, the trustees chose one of their own to lead the district in 1994. Dr. Rod Paige led the district for the next seven years before being tapped to head the U.S. Department of Education.

A. "Reform" Trustees are Elected to the 1990 Board of Education

The 1989 elections brought four new trustees to the Houston school board: Paula Arnold and Rod Paige, well-known community leaders; Ron Franklin, a trial attorney; and Don McAdams, a quality management consultant and former university professor. Cathy Mincberg, a former teacher with a doctorate in education, was reelected for a third term and became board president. This group of five members was eager to reform HISD and their first act was to create a mission statement and plan for the board.

Since the 1989 election, HISD has enjoyed relatively stable leadership. Several reform trustees have rotated off the board but the general philosophy of change and reform has remained consistent. Paige, moreover, had an unusually long term as an urban superintendent, leading HISD for seven years after having served on the board as one of its key reform architects. The current superintendent, Dr. Kaye Stripling, has worked in HISD for over thirty years as teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and district superintendent. The board chose her to maintain the district's vision and to build on the success of the last several years.

B. 1990 Declaration of *Beliefs and Vision* Guides HISD Reform for a Decade

Soon after being elected, the "reform board" drafted its *Beliefs and Vision*—a statement that outlined the school district's direction and expectations for employees. Rod Paige and Cathy Mincberg were the primary authors of the document, which guided the board through several superintendent searches and served as the foundation for Paige's eventual stewardship of the district. The document established four mandates and a new structure for HISD. The restructured system would:

- Be decentralized and feature shared decision-making.
- Build on the relationship between teacher and student.
- Focus on performance, not compliance with regulations.
- Require a core of common academic subjects for all students.[2]

C. *Beliefs and Vision* is Delayed

Beliefs and Vision is still referred to by district personnel today. A poster-size version of it decorates the board's meeting room in district headquarters. But, its implementation was delayed by two superintendents who did not buy into the vision.

Joan Raymond was superintendent when the reform board was elected. According to the author of a book on Houston's school reforms, Raymond and the board clashed frequently when the new board came to power over who set the district's vision and direction. Raymond had her own plan and had made some progress on it. She apparently did not welcome the new mission statement and had strong opinions about what its message should be. The board plowed ahead and crafted their vision and mission statement without her. When it became clear that Raymond would not implement the board's vision, the trustees voted to buy her out in 1990.[3]

The board hired Frank Petruzielo as superintendent in August 1990, believing that it had found someone to make *Beliefs and Vision* real. Petruzielo designed his own "Blueprint" that required shared decision-making committees and school improvement plans at every school. His next step was to implement school-based budgeting. Petruzielo made a number of moves toward decentralization and received glowing reviews from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), but the board came to feel that he was moving too slowly on accountability. As time elapsed, some board members became less convinced of his commitment to *Beliefs and Vision*. Petruzielo left the district in 1993, eager to return to his native Florida and become superintendent of the Broward County Public Schools.

The board faced the prospect of searching for a new superintendent to embrace and implement *Beliefs and Vision* and to satisfy the diverse constituencies in Houston. The board, individually

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[2] HISD *Purpose, Strategic Intent, Goals, and Core Values and 1990 A Declaration of Beliefs and Vision*, p. 4.
[3] McAdams. D. *Fighting to Save Our Urban Schools… and Winning! Lessons from Houston.* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), pp. 4-9.

at first and then collectively, decided the best choice was a man within their own ranks, Rod Paige, who had been the key architect of the vision statement. The board nominated Paige in January 1994 soon after Petruzielo announced his resignation.

D. A Failed Bond Election and State Audit Give Paige Needed Leverage

Rod Paige became Superintendent in February 1994 and spent much of his first year getting up to speed and learning the complexities of the district. He began then to implement some components of *Beliefs and Vision*: decentralization to feeder patterns with 12 district superintendents; a curriculum audit to determine the extent of alignment with state standards; and the first wave of performance contracts for administrators. The pace of change, however, largely frustrated both Paige and the reform board members. This all changed in 1996, when a failed bond election and the state comptroller's audit of HISD gave Paige the leverage and the public mandate he needed to accelerate the reforms.

A long delayed bond issue went before the voters in May 1996. HISD needed $1 billion for repairs and renovations to fund the next phase of the district's school construction plan. Public perception of waste and mismanagement in HISD, however, was amplified in a series of investigative reports on local television news that exposed the district's misuse of funds and run-down facilities. A city official said that it seemed like there was a bad headline every other day about HISD. A strong anti-tax campaign opposed the bond and disgruntled employee organizations, particularly teachers upset over changes in contracts and due process rights, declined to support the bond issue. In fact, many employees voted against the measure and encouraged others to do the same. The bond election was a huge public failure.

At about the same time, Texas Comptroller John Sharp began a "Texas School Performance Review" of HISD. Sharp did not shy away from publicity and kept the media focused on his search for district waste. Sharp's report was released late in 1996 with hundreds of proposals. Although many of the report's recommendations were lifted from HISD's own internal audit, the Sharp report damaged HISD's image. Paige, however, saw the report as an opportunity—an opportunity to undertake many of the reforms he had wanted to implement for some time. In the fall of 1996, Paige developed a new plan, hired a communications officer, and organized a series of "Peer Examination, Evaluation, and Redesign" (PEER) committees to implement every recommendation proposed by Sharp. Paige, in fact, went further than Sharpe on numerous management issues, especially those related to the out-sourcing of services.

The *PEER* committees were particularly unusual because they were designed as a way of bringing critics and outside experts into HISD to develop ways to implement the "Sharp Audit." The committees consisted of members of the local community who had special expertise in instruction and management. They were used on everything from outsourcing business functions to developing a reading curriculum. Paige used these committees effectively to handle recommendations from the Sharp Audit and to move controversial initiatives like outsourcing through the district's political mine fields. It was at this point that the district separated its business and educational functions. Paige's view was that the district could effectively and efficiently manage some business functions, but that others should be delegated to private contractors. The *PEER* committees helped to make these recommendations a reality and absorbed some of the political fallout that the proposals drew.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

During Paige's tenure, HISD implemented a districtwide accountability system, adopted a common approach to reading for all elementary schools, developed a comprehensive K–12 curriculum aligned with state standards and tests, brought performance contracts to regional superintendents and principals, targeted assistance to low-performing schools, developed the capacity to use student data to impact instruction, outsourced many business functions, and decentralized many operational decisions to schools. None of these initiatives were undertaken in isolation; all were part of the systemic change that Paige and the board believed was necessary to raise student achievement in Houston.

A. Key Elements of the District Action Plan

In the fall of 1996, Paige unveiled *A New Beginning*, a five-point plan for reforming the district. The basic tenets of the plan were:

1. *Accountability*: establishing objective, believable measures of accountability so the community can track HISD progress.

2. *Best efforts*: rewarding innovative practices that lead to excellence and creativity.

3. *Competition*: making students "academic free agents" by allowing them to choose the HISD school they would like to attend.

4. *Decentralization*: giving schools more control over their programs and progress.

5. *Parental and community involvement:* giving primary stakeholders greater say in how children were educated.[4]

Although this plan was "new," Paige had begun to implement many of its tenets (articulated in *Beliefs and Vision)* early in his tenure. Accountability and decentralization efforts were well underway and an initiative to ensure curriculum alignment and instructional reform was already in the works. The plan, however, assured that all students would receive a solid core of academic subjects and better instruction.

B. Goals and Accountability

At the same time Paige was working to decentralize much of HISD's business activities, he was also centralizing standards, curriculum and accountability. Both the Texas' and HISD's accountability systems set clear standards for student outcomes and rated school performance as exemplary, recognized, acceptable or low performing. By 2001, HISD saw the number of its low-performing schools drop to two and the number of its exemplary schools grow to 35.

[4] HISD State of the Schools, 1996, p.1.

1. Accountability systems set clear goals

The Texas Accountability Rating System was approved by the state legislature in June 1993. The first school ratings were available in 1994. HISD also developed its own accountability system, which was passed by the board in May 1994. Both systems relied on multiple indicators of student performance, including attendance, dropout rates, and TAAS results.

The main difference between the two systems was that HISD's gave credit for "current progress" as well as "current performance." The state system, moreover, demanded that all subgroups succeed in order for a school to do well. This was consistent with the district's high expectations for all students and was incorporated into the district's thinking about improving the achievement of all students.

HISD also began administering the Stanford-9 test in the fall of 1997, although it was not required by the state. The board was eager to get more diagnostic information to teachers and parents, and wanted to compare HISD to districts outside of Texas.

2. Decentralization and performance contracts bring greater accountability

Decentralization was a major theme in *Beliefs and Vision*. District leaders believed that it was necessary to delegate responsibility in a district the size of Houston and to demand accountability throughout the administrative structure. Paige and the board believed no one could be held accountable without giving them real decision-making power. The district's decentralization plans were designed to give district superintendents and principals this authority. Performance contracts for district superintendents and principals grew out of this notion.

Paige created 12 administrative subdistricts in 1994, each with a superintendent responsible for holding their schools accountable for meeting district and state performance standards. District superintendents were charged with being visible in the schools, monitoring progress, and reporting school needs to the central office. Their role was not to dictate practice but to make sure that principals had the skills and resources they needed. District superintendents were also responsible for hiring principals in the schools of their administrative unit and had the authority to remove them.

District superintendents also agreed to performance contracts in exchange for higher salaries, making them at-will employees. There was significant turnover among district supervisors in the first several years of this system. Performance contracts were then pushed down to principals and vice principals in exchange for higher salaries.

In return for this accountability, principals were given greater discretion over staffing and budget decisions. Principals now have the authority to hire and fire, and have considerable flexibility over school funds because of school-based budgeting, a practice that has become very important to them. Principals are more able to accommodate the special needs of their schools; use resources to encourage parent involvement; create prizes to build student and staff morale; design incentives for good work; support common planning time for teachers; and hire more aides. Some principals have

commented, though, that the added financial responsibilities can distract from instructional duties. Some schools have hired business assistants to manage some of the budget-related work.

C. Focus of Reform

School leaders in Houston are adamant about the fact that improving student achievement was the result of systemic change, rather than any one initiative or program. Many people in the district, in fact, feel that restructuring business operations was as important as changing curriculum and instruction. A great deal of reform in the district, nevertheless, was focused on the lowest performing schools and on the earliest grades.

- **Low-performing schools**. Schools identified as "low-performing" by the Texas Accountability Rating System are targeted for assistance. "Each targeted school is paired with a team of principals, curriculum specialists, and researchers to observe current practices, discuss issues and data with the staff, and assist in the development and implementation of an improvement plan that is funded by the district."[5] This effort is led by district superintendents, whose offices have teams of curriculum and other specialists to assist schools throughout the year.

- **Curricular change in the lower grades**. Two major reforms to curriculum and instruction were particularly important to the district: *Project CLEAR* (Clarifying Learning to Enhance Achievement Results) and the *Balanced Approach to Reading* (BAR). Both initiatives are described in the section below. In short, these initiatives had the greatest impact, at least initially, on elementary schools. BAR, a research-based approach to reading, was adopted at all elementary schools in the district and limited the schools to a choice of two texts instead of the five used before the reforms. *Project CLEAR,* on the other hand, clarified TEA standards in K–12 writing and K–8 mathematics. Elementary school teachers reported finding the project's materials especially helpful for classroom instruction.

D. Curriculum and Instruction

One of the most critical components of HISD's instructional reforms involved aligning the district's curriculum with state standards and assessments. *Project CLEAR* (Clarifying Learning to Enhance Achievement Results) was a curriculum project that spanned grades K–12 and focused on writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. The district also developed a uniform approach to reading, known as the *Balanced Approach to Reading*. The district relied on lead teachers and professional development to support both *Project CLEAR* and the *Balanced Approach to Reading*.

1. Project CLEAR (Clarifying Learning to Enhance Achievement Results)

Project CLEAR stemmed from a 1995 study of curriculum alignment, which found strong correlations between teachers' coverage of textbook content and students' test scores. The results showed that students of teachers who were covering more textbook content scored better on stan-

[5] Paige and Sclafani in *School Choice or Best Systems*, M. C. Wang and H. J. Walberg, eds., p. 295.

dardized tests. *Project CLEAR* evolved into an effort to direct what was covered in the classroom by clarifying learning objectives and developing curriculum frameworks and sample lesson plans accessible to the average teacher. It began with grade-levels and subject-areas covered by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The district, however, felt that many of the objectives in TEKS were vague and open to interpretation, so HISD worked to define the objectives themselves in jargon-free terms, using specific examples. Prerequisite knowledge, concepts and skills were included in the district's revisions of TEKS, as were references to textbook sources.

HISD began implementing *Project CLEAR* in the fall of 1997 starting with mathematics and writing. A five-day *Project CLEAR* Institute trained principals and lead teachers, one in math and one in writing, from each school. The institute served the purpose of deepening staff understanding of key instructional principles in a few content areas and building campus level ownership. Each lead teacher, in turn, presented three 45-minute modules to classroom teachers in their home schools. *Project CLEAR* now has training in reading, math, science and social studies for new teachers and lead teachers.

Lead teachers are instructional leaders at their schools and, along with principals, are responsible for supporting curriculum implementation. Lead teachers are charged, along with principals, with implementing the curriculum. They are paid extra for the work and may have reduced course loads. They attend training throughout the year and work with teachers on their campuses modeling lessons, presenting new materials, and supporting instructional teams and individual teachers. Finally, the project uses teacher specialists working out of district offices to support better instruction and curriculum implementation in their areas.

Teachers at all grade levels find *Project CLEAR* to be a helpful, practical guide that translates TEKS into instructional practice. They report liking the detailed information about what students are expected to have mastered, and apparently feel that there is sufficient flexibility in the curriculum to give them latitude over daily classroom practice. Teachers also note that having a common curriculum helps students adjust to their new school more quickly and to helps the district dampen the effect of a high student mobility rate. They also report that the project's pacing guides are extremely helpful and have resulted in more team teaching. *Project CLEAR* has finally reached the high schools this school year. Many teachers at this level are apparently hopeful that the project will help with vertical integration of curriculum content across grades and levels.

2. Developing unified reading curriculum aligned with standards

When Paige became superintendent, there were five different reading programs in HISD. He supported decentralizing curriculum decisions as a board member but reconsidered his position when faced with the realities of high student mobility and wide variations in teacher skills and experience. The district also wanted to avoid a divisive debate about whole language and phonics, so Paige commissioned a *PEER* committee to study reading. In 1996, the committee developed the *Balanced Approach to Reading* (BAR), which combined both approaches and outlined six components of an effective research-based reading program: phonological awareness, print awareness, alphabetic aware-

ness, orthographic awareness, comprehension strategies, and reading practice.[6] The district subsequently adopted SRA/McGraw-Hill's *Open Court* for grades 1–3 because of its alignment with these research-based components, but exempted high-performing schools and schools that received district approval to use other programs. Upper grades have more discretion to pick other programs, but all programs have to be aligned with BAR's general curriculum framework.

3. Professional development

The district uses professional development to support the implementation of its curricular reforms. Most professional development at the district level focuses on curriculum included under *Project CLEAR* and BAR. HISD trained teachers in grades K–3 and 4–6 on the key components of BAR in 1997 and 1998 and provided phonics strategies for middle school reading teachers. HISD has now trained about 90 percent of its grade 1-3 teachers in BAR. The district also used its federal "class size reduction" funds to secure more teachers to focus on reading. These teachers were allocated to schools based on reading achievement scores. One teacher organization representative once described the extent of reading training in the district as "almost overkill."

The district also developed a five-day *Project CLEAR* institute, as described earlier, to train lead teachers and principals. The effort was used to strengthen skills and build ownership. The institute now trains new teachers and lead teachers in reading, math, science, and social studies, and disseminates *Project CLEAR* materials to campuses.

There are, moreover, five professional development days on the regular school calendar, with two reserved for district-wide initiatives. The administrative districts or individual schools organize about 60 percent of the professional development. Principals report that the district has been very supportive of staff development at the school site. Each administrative district has curriculum supervisors in math, reading, and writing who come to the school site to model instruction for individual teachers or grade level teams.

The professional development teams at the central office rely heavily on student achievement data to identify where staff development is most needed. The district has moved away from one-shot "drop-in" training sessions and instead provides professional development in a number of forms, including study groups, online training, partnerships with local universities, summer workshops, and training through lead teachers. The district presented a two-week *Project CLEAR* summer institute for 1,700 teachers last summer.

The central office relies on lead teachers in reading, math, social studies, and science to conduct formal and informal training and curriculum dissemination sessions at their campuses throughout the year. Lead teachers at each school use *Project CLEAR* and BAR materials as part of the professional development experience. Some principals report that the district's lead teacher program helps them balance their roles as managers and instructional leaders. The principal is considered to be part of the support team for teachers rather than the sole support.

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[6] Paige and Sclafani, p. 297.

The district also has a three-year mentoring program for new teachers. The program is tied to the school calendar to help new teachers navigate logistical problems. Mentors are, moreover, a critical part of the training for teachers entering HISD through its *Alternative Certification Program* (ACP). Many of these mid-career professionals do not have formal training on classroom procedures and are often unfamiliar with how schools work.

E. Use of Data

Data are critical to the decision-making process in HISD. The district relies heavily on test scores to guide curriculum initiatives and teacher surveys to develop professional development. The accountability systems developed by TEA and HISD determine the demand for school and classroom data. Houston has, moreover, provided school, teacher, and individual student-level data to its schools for many years, but has improved its usability and has provided more extensive training on how to use it to modify instruction. The district also has performance indicators for its business operations.

1. Evolution of academic data use

The Research and Accountability Department of HISD provided teacher level data (TAAS scores by objective for individual students) to schools in paper form between 1994–95 and 1997–98. Paige asked district superintendents to report passing rates by teacher and set up teacher-principal meetings based on the data during the 1996–97 school year. This coincided with the more formal classroom level reports produced by the Research Department in 1996–97 and 1997–98.

The use and availability of the data varied by administrative district, however. Some district superintendents contracted with private vendors or developed their own internal capacity to provide reports by school and teacher. The Technology Department, in the meantime, was developing a student data system that eventually evolved into the web-based **"**Profiler for Academic Success of Students**"** (PASS) system that is now used districtwide.

Thanks to a substantial investment in PASS and the technology to support it, HISD now has a first-class data system to handle both administrative and instructional records. District superintendents and principals can access reports on each child and each classroom to see how individual students and teachers are doing. District superintendents meet and plan with principals using the data, and principals then meet with teachers, but the process is not always uniform.

2. Use of data in schools and classrooms

HISD also provides its teachers with the results of "snap-shot" tests conducted throughout the school year and data on the previous year's test scores. Results of the 12-week "snap shot" assessments are made available to teachers online through the PASS system. The assessments measure objectives that are taught in specified 12-week periods using *Project CLEAR* guidelines. Training on the PASS system is done using a "train-the-trainer" model with lead teachers.

Principals now have student and teacher level data at their fingertips. Some use PASS constantly to analyze performance data to see who needs help with which objective. Principals use the data to design growth plans for teachers whose students are not improving and to develop school-wide initiatives to boost performance.

F. Reform Press

Principals describe being constantly pushed by district leadership, the board, and the superintendent—an outgrowth principals claim of *Beliefs and Vision,* which set high expectations and resulted in a major culture change districtwide. Early success has simply led to more pressure for better results.

Still, principals in this project's focus groups report that the board and the central office support their efforts and allow them to make important decisions about instruction. A number of principals also report that the district has provided more help with ESL students over the last several years as the demographics of the school system continues to change.

G. Efficient Business Operations

1. Political strategy and communications

After the failed bond election in 1996, Paige declared that "from this moment on, we are not going to be building schools, we are going to be building relationships."[7] Paige hired an experienced and talented communications director, Terry Abbott, to shape the district's messages to the public, handle media, and to correct misinformation about the district. He also produced a steady drum-beat of material about the positive things the district was doing. This effort ended up being invaluable in a district with so many political factions eager to derail reform and return to the status quo. The anti-tax lobby wanted to defeat the bond proposals; teachers wanted to dampen the new power given to principals; and cafeteria workers opposed management outsourcing. The good news about what the district was doing to reform the system helped keep these forces in check.

2. Human resources

Principals report better support from the district's Human Resources (HR) unit, which has a full-time recruiter working nationally. The department was restructured two years ago to allow "one-stop shopping" for people at the school level. Principals give HR their lists of staffing needs and HR responds by sending back resumes and short personnel summaries of available candidates. HR processes applicants and new-hires more quickly now, something that is helping the district address its perennial shortage of qualified applicants.

The recruitment pool is open to all schools and principals, who must sell themselves and their schools at HISD job fairs. Principals can hire and fire and are encouraged to critically evaluate teachers before offering contracts beyond the three-year probationary period. Tenure is not automatic.

[7] As quoted by Kaye Stripling, 8/2/01.

3. Financial resources

As HISD improved its public image and boosted student achievement, the district was able to pass bond issues after the defeat of 1996. This new revenue allowed HISD to launch its capital construction initiative. Budget constraints were no longer cited as a barrier to the educational and organizational reform strategies. District observers, moreover, claimed that outsourcing some business functions recommended by *PEER* committees had reduced some district costs.

V. ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS

- Data provided by HISD show that elementary student performance improved between 1998 and 2001, and that the number of elementary school students performing below basic levels of proficiency declined during this period.

- There was a reduction in racial disparities in the percentage of elementary school students who failed to meet basic criteria for proficiency in reading and math.

- While average achievement was improving among all groups, there was not a consistent reduction in racial disparities in average achievement among elementary school students.

- There were somewhat weaker improvements in average achievement and reductions in racial achievement gaps at the middle school level.

- There was not much improvement of student performance or racial disparities in academic achievement at the high school level.

MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools obtained student level data from the Houston Independent School District to test achievement claims. The data obtained included student-level Stanford Achievement Test results for the 1997–1998 through the 2000–2001 academic years. MDRC also obtained data on Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) passing rates from the Texas Education Authority (TEA) website.

Tables H.1 through H.16 summarize trends in student performance on the Stanford Achievement Test and TAAS.

A. Elementary School Achievement

- The percentage of elementary school students performing below the 25th percentile on the SAT-9 declined during this period.

- Racial disparities in the percentages of students who scored below this threshold on the SAT-9 declined during this period.

- Similar patterns occurred with respect to student performance on TAAS.

1. Passing rates

Table H.1 shows the percentage of HISD elementary school students in each ethnic group who scored in the lowest 25 percent (compared with test takers nationally) in reading on the SAT-9 in 1997–1998 through 2000–2001. The table is divided up into five sections, one for each grade from one through five. The first row of each section shows the percentage of African American students who scored below the 25th percentile in each academic year. The second row shows the percentage of Asian students in this category; the third row presents the percentage of Hispanic students; the fourth row shows the percentages of white students; and the fifth row shows the percentages of all students who fall in this category. The next row shows the differences between the percentage of African American students and the percentage of white students who scored in the 25th percentile. The final row of the section shows the difference between the percentage of Hispanic and non-Hispanic white students who scored in the 25th percentile.

The data, in general, suggest that the percentages of students scoring in the bottom quartile of the SAT-9 have been declining in each ethnic group over the study period. They suggest, as well, that racial disparities on this measure have been declining.

Table H.1, for example, presents SAT-9 results for first grade students in Houston. The first row of the table shows that approximately 35 percent of African American first-graders scored in the bottom 25 percent in 1998. The third row shows that about 36 percent of Hispanic students scored at this same level that year. About 13 percent of white students fell into this category in 1998. The African American-white achievement gap in 1998 and the Hispanic-white gap (as measured by the percentage of students scoring in the bottom 25th percentile) was approximately 23 percentage points.

By 2001, however, performance had improved and the gaps had narrowed. The percentage of African American and Hispanic first-graders scoring below the 25th percentile in 2001 had declined to approximately 20 percent and 19 percent, respectively. Moreover, the African American-white gap declined to just under 13 percentage points, while the Hispanic-white gap declined to about 12 percentage points. This suggests that the district eliminated almost half of the original racial gaps in first grade reading scores. This same basic pattern generally holds up across all of grade levels in the table.

In short, the data in Table H.1 show that reading performance, particularly among students scoring at the lower end of the distribution, increased in most grades and for most ethnic groups in the Houston Independent School District. Achievement levels among African American and Hispanic students, moreover, appeared to have grown faster than that of white students, resulting in a substantial narrowing of the racial disparities in reading performance.

Table H.2 shows the same kind of SAT-9 data for math. The results show the same patterns as in reading. The percentage of students performing in the lowest 25th percentile declined between 1997-98 and 2000-2001. Gains appear to be most substantial among African American and Hispanic students, resulting in a narrowing of racial disparities at this performance level.

Tables H.3 and H.4 show the percentages of elementary school students in each ethnic group who failed to pass the TAAS between spring 1994 and spring 2001. These data show a pattern of improvement that is similar to results on the SAT-9. The percentages of students failing the TAAS declined and the racial disparities shrank.

2. Average achievement

MDRC also looked at changes in average performance rather than just the percentages of students under the 25th percentile. Table H.5 presents the findings on SAT-9 from spring 1998 to spring 2001. The lay out of the table is the same as in Tables H.1 and H.2. These data generally show improvements in average achievement across every ethnic group and every grade. The results also show, however, that reductions in racial disparities as measured by average reading scores were more modest than the reductions in the percentage of students scoring in the bottom quartile. Some grades, in fact, did not show reductions.

The data, for example, show a slight increase in racial disparities on the SAT-9 among third graders. The third section of Table H.5 shows that third grade reading achievement for African American students increased from about 40 "normal curve equivalents" (NCEs)[8] in 1998 to about 46 NCEs in 2001. The average achievement for white students during the same period grew from 59 NCEs to 66 NCEs. This resulted in a 2.3 NCE or 13 percent *increase* in the African American-white achievement gap among third graders, in contrast to the approximately 20 percent *decrease* in the gap when one looked at the percentage of students below the 25th percentile on the same test. We did not find this anomaly in other grades.

Table H.6 shows changes in average elementary-school math scores on the SAT-9. The data show patterns in average math achievement that are more consistent with the patterns found by looking at the percentage of students scoring below the 25th percentile. Average math achievement increased and racial disparities narrowed.

One might expect changes in average scores to be more modest than changes in passing rates. It is also possible that a ceiling effect on the state test is masking gains at the upper levels of performance.

The overall pattern in the district's elementary school reading and math performance on both the SAT-9 and the TAAS shows across-the-board gains but faster gains among African American and Hispanic students at the bottom of the test score distribution. The improvements are more pronounced when one looks at reductions in the percentage of students scoring below the 25th percentile than when one looks at average performance levels. Improvements in racial gaps are not as consistent when one looks at average achievement, although all groups showed improvement.

B. Middle School and High School Achievement

- Achievement data collected from Houston show substantial reductions in the percentage of HISD middle students scoring at the bottom of the test score distribution.

[8] Normal Curve Equivalents, or NCEs, are a standard metric of student achievement with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99.

- These changes appear to be more substantial among African American and Hispanic students, than among their white counterparts, resulting in reductions in racial disparities in the percentage of middle school students at the bottom of the test score distribution.

- The data regarding *average* achievement show increases in average performance among most groups.

- The reductions in racial disparities in *average* achievement, however, are more modest and less consistent than the reductions in racial disparities at the bottom end of the test score distribution.

- Overall changes in student achievement and reductions in racial disparities in academic performance were smaller and less consistently positive at the high school level than at the middle or elementary school level.

Tables H.7 and H.8 show the percentages of sixth, seventh and eighth graders in each ethnic group scoring below the 25th percentile in reading and math on the SAT-9. These data suggest substantial reductions in the percentage of African American and Hispanic students in this category. The percentage of white students scoring in this category also declined, but at a slower rate than African American and Hispanic students—resulting in a shrinking achievement gap.

Tables H.9 and H.10 show the *percentage* of sixth-, seventh-, eighth-, and tenth-grade students from each ethnic group not passing the reading and math portions of TAAS. These data also show substantial reductions in the percentage of students scoring below passing levels and improvements in racial disparities.

Tables H.11 and H.12 show *average* SAT-9 achievement levels for sixth, seventh and eighth grade students from each ethnic group. Again, these data show improvements in average achievement and racial disparities, although the improvements appear to be smaller than those seen by looking at changes in the percentage of students in the bottom quartile.

Tables H.13 and H.14 show the *percentage* of high school students from each ethnic group scoring below the 25th percentile on reading and math portions of the SAT-9. These data do not show consistent reductions in the number of students scoring at this level.

Tables H.15 and H.16 show changes in *average* reading and math achievement on the SAT-9 among high school students from each ethnic group. Neither metric of achievement, however, suggests consistent overall improvements or reductions in the achievement gaps at the high school level. Some data, in fact, show slight declines in reading achievement at the high school level. Math trends are more positive but the data do not show a consistent reduction in racial disparities at the high school level.

In sum, SAT-9 achievement trends suggest substantial improvements in performance at the elementary level, modest gains at the middle school level, and almost no change at the high school

level. Achievement gaps by race were also significantly reduced at the elementary grade levels. The effects are stronger when one looks at changes in the percent of students scoring in the 25th percentile than when one looks at average gains. Data on average achievement showed inconsistent changes in racial disparities in some grades.

C. Achievement Trends Compared to the State

Finally, the Council of the Great City Schools looked at the performance of the district compared with its state. This was possible, of course, only with TAAS data since the SAT-9 is not administered by the state. The reader is referred to tables published in the report *Beating the Odds II*, which shows the percentage of students in Houston passing the TAAS in reading and math by grade level. It also shows trends in the percentages of students passing the test statewide.

The results show that HISD has increased the percentage of students passing the TAAS in almost every grade level faster than statewide averages. For instance, HISD improved the percentage of third grade students passing the reading portion of TAAS by 1.6 percentage points a year between 1994 and 2001, compared with an average statewide improvement of 1.3 percentage points a year. The district improved the percentage of fourth graders passing the reading test by 2.6 percentage points a year over the same period, compared to an average statewide gain of 2.2 percentage points. This same pattern exists at the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and tenth grade levels.

The data show the same trends in math, although HISD improved at a slightly slower rate than the state among third graders. Every other grade tested—fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and tenth—shows HISD improving its passing rates faster than the statewide average.

Table H. 1

Percentage of Houston Elementary School Students in the First Quartile on SAT-9 Reading by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 1					
African American Students	35.3	29.5	23.5	19.8	-15.6
Asian Students	18.8	11.7	9.3	7.1	-11.7
Hispanic Students	36.0	25.5	22.2	19.3	-16.8
White Students	12.6	10.3	7.9	7.0	-5.6
All Students	31.4	24.9	20.5	17.4	-14.0
Black-White Difference	22.8	19.3	15.6	12.8	-10.0
Hispanic-White Difference	23.5	15.2	14.3	12.3	-11.2
Grade 2					
African American Students	40.0	32.9	25.8	26.3	-13.7
Asian Students	23.4	11.1	7.8	11.8	-11.5
Hispanic Students	40.0	29.3	24.1	25.9	-14.1
White Students	15.7	11.3	10.0	8.4	-7.3
All Students	35.4	27.7	22.3	23.2	-12.3
Black-White Difference	24.3	21.6	15.9	17.9	-6.4
Hispanic-White Difference	24.2	17.9	14.1	17.5	-6.8
Grade 3					
African American Students	40.5	33.0	29.6	30.2	-10.3
Asian Students	17.2	18.4	14.6	12.5	-4.7
Hispanic Students	39.6	31.3	25.1	26.7	-13.0
White Students	13.8	10.0	10.6	8.7	-5.0
All Students	35.1	28.6	24.7	25.4	-9.8
Black-White Difference	26.8	23.0	19.1	21.5	-5.3
Hispanic-White Difference	25.9	21.3	14.5	17.9	-7.9
Grade 4					
African American Students	46.2	38.6	33.6	32.3	-13.9
Asian Students	21.7	17.1	18.3	13.9	-7.8
Hispanic Students	48.4	36.1	30.2	28.0	-20.4
White Students	16.7	11.4	10.6	9.2	-7.5
All Students	42.0	33.3	28.4	26.8	-15.2
Black-White Difference	29.5	27.2	23.0	23.0	-6.5
Hispanic-White Difference	31.7	24.8	19.6	18.8	-12.9
Grade 5					
African American Students	48.7	42.1	39.7	32.6	-16.1
Asian Students	25.6	18.6	21.4	17.1	-8.5
Hispanic Students	55.0	45.1	40.9	37.2	-17.8
White Students	15.3	12.2	11.2	9.3	-6.0
All Students	46.7	39.3	36.3	31.7	-15.0
Black-White Difference	33.4	29.9	28.5	23.3	-10.1
Hispanic-White Difference	39.7	32.9	29.8	27.9	-11.8

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: National percentile scores were used in this analysis. Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 2

Percentage of Houston Elementary School Students in the First Quartile on SAT-9 Math by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 1					
African American Students	42.0	44.6	35.0	31.5	-10.4
Asian Students	17.9	15.6	10.3	9.9	-8.0
Hispanic Students	37.9	37.2	29.2	28.4	-9.6
White Students	13.4	14.7	11.0	11.2	-2.2
All Students	35.3	36.9	28.9	26.8	-8.4
Black-White Difference	28.6	29.9	24.0	20.3	-8.3
Hispanic-White Difference	24.6	22.4	18.2	17.2	-7.4
Grade 2					
African American Students	48.7	42.0	35.6	33.3	-15.4
Asian Students	19.4	9.7	8.4	8.4	-11.0
Hispanic Students	42.1	32.2	26.8	26.1	-16.0
White Students	17.6	12.7	9.9	9.4	-8.2
All Students	40.3	33.2	27.9	26.5	-13.7
Black-White Difference	31.1	29.3	25.7	23.9	-7.2
Hispanic-White Difference	24.5	19.5	16.9	16.6	-7.9
Grade 3					
African American Students	44.5	29.9	25.1	22.1	-22.4
Asian Students	12.3	8.1	6.9	4.7	-7.6
Hispanic Students	38.3	23.6	18.5	17.1	-21.1
White Students	14.3	8.8	7.0	6.5	-7.7
All Students	36.3	23.8	19.4	17.5	-18.8
Black-White Difference	30.3	21.1	18.0	15.6	-14.7
Hispanic-White Difference	24.0	14.8	11.4	10.6	-13.4
Grade 4					
African American Students	37.0	31.1	22.0	21.9	-15.1
Asian Students	10.0	8.2	7.3	5.2	-4.8
Hispanic Students	32.0	22.2	15.7	14.5	-17.5
White Students	12.2	7.8	6.9	6.3	-5.9
All Students	30.3	23.6	16.8	16.1	-14.2
Black-White Difference	24.8	23.4	15.2	15.7	-9.2
Hispanic-White Difference	19.8	14.5	8.9	8.3	-11.6
Grade 5					
African American Students	39.3	32.5	31.0	22.7	-16.6
Asian Students	14.7	9.1	9.0	8.4	-6.3
Hispanic Students	36.0	26.3	21.5	17.7	-18.4
White Students	13.2	10.8	9.1	8.1	-5.1
All Students	33.7	26.2	23.2	18.1	-15.6
Black-White Difference	26.0	21.8	21.8	14.6	-11.5
Hispanic-White Difference	22.8	15.6	12.4	9.5	-13.3

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: National percentile scores were used in this analysis. Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 3

Percentage of Houston Elementary School Students Not Passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in Reading

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 3									
African American Students	32.9	29.6	26.5	23.7	15.9	26.2	20.4	19.9	-13.0
Asian Students[a]	15.8	10.1	8.8	6.9	9.4	11.1	7.9	5.7	-10.1
Hispanic Students	30.6	29.3	25.3	24.3	17.9	22.7	15.5	17.4	-13.2
White Students	9.5	8.9	6.4	6.1	4.5	5.0	4.4	5.5	-4.0
All Students	27.6	25.0	22.4	20.6	14.6	21.2	15.8	16.5	-11.1
Black-White Difference	23.4	20.7	20.1	17.6	11.4	21.2	16.0	14.4	-9.0
Hispanic-White Difference	21.1	20.4	18.9	18.2	13.4	17.7	11.1	11.9	-9.2
Grade 4									
African American Students	35.5	32.7	26.1	22.9	13.4	22.9	13.5	13.6	-21.9
Asian Students[a]	15.1	10.2	8.1	5.6	3.3	8.5	4.9	4.4	-10.7
Hispanic Students	31.0	26.4	24.6	18.5	10.4	20.8	10.9	11.5	-19.5
White Students	10.1	7.1	8.3	5.1	2.2	4.3	3.4	2.7	-7.4
All Students	28.8	25.6	21.9	18.0	10.3	18.8	10.6	10.9	-17.9
Black-White Difference	25.4	25.6	17.8	17.8	11.2	18.6	10.1	10.9	-14.5
Hispanic-White Difference	20.9	19.3	16.3	13.4	8.2	16.5	7.5	8.8	-12.1
Grade 5									
African American Students	34.6	30.3	20.7	18.3	13.5	23.6	18.4	9.0	-25.6
Asian Students[a]	12.2	6.8	6.7	3.5	3.2	11.4	8.5	6.0	-6.2
Hispanic Students	32.3	25.0	18.6	17.7	12.1	28.0	18.4	12.1	-20.2
White Students	8.8	6.9	4.4	4.0	2.8	5.5	3.0	2.3	-6.5
All Students	28.8	23.7	17.1	15.4	11.1	23.1	16.2	9.7	-19.1
Black-White Difference	25.8	23.4	16.3	14.3	10.7	18.1	15.4	6.7	-19.1
Hispanic-White Difference	23.5	18.1	14.2	13.7	9.3	22.5	15.4	9.8	-13.7

SOURCE: The Texas Education Agency website.

NOTES: The minimum passing score is a Texas Learning Index (TLI) of 70. TLI scores range from 0 to approximately 100 (the maximum score varies from test to test). A TLI of 70 is equivalent to answering approximately 70% of the test items correctly. This percentage varies depending on the difficulty of a particular test; for example, in 2000, this percentage ranged from 65-69% on the reading tests depending on the grade. The Black-White and Hispanic Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

[a] In 1994, this category also included Native Americans and students of unclassified ethnicity.

Table H. 4

Percentage of Houston Elementary School Students Not Passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in Math

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 3									
African American Students	50.8	42.1	30.5	29.5	26.6	43.2	36.1	28.8	-22.0
Asian Students[a]	16.5	9.7	7.7	6.5	10.6	13.8	12.1	6.5	-10.0
Hispanic Students	47.1	40.3	27.3	25.1	25.0	31.7	27.2	26.2	-20.9
White Students	18.3	14.5	8.9	7.8	7.0	9.9	10.5	8.6	-9.7
All Students	43.1	35.3	25.3	23.9	22.5	33.1	28.2	24.2	-18.9
Black-White Difference	32.5	27.6	21.6	21.7	19.6	33.3	25.6	20.2	-12.3
Hispanic-White Difference	28.8	25.8	18.4	17.3	18.0	21.8	16.7	17.6	-11.2
Grade 4									
African American Students	57.8	48.8	28.7	30.5	22.1	33.2	24.9	15.1	-42.7
Asian Students[a]	15.0	11.6	5.9	3.6	5.3	9.7	5.9	3.3	-11.7
Hispanic Students	49.9	37.8	21.7	20.9	14.0	23.2	15.1	10.6	-39.3
White Students	22.3	13.6	8.6	5.3	4.3	7.2	4.8	3.9	-18.4
All Students	47.4	38.1	22.0	22.3	15.8	24.6	17.3	11.2	-36.2
Black-White Difference	35.5	35.2	20.1	25.2	17.8	26.0	20.1	11.2	-24.3
Hispanic-White Difference	27.6	24.2	13.1	15.6	9.7	16.0	10.3	6.7	-20.9
Grade 5									
African American Students	52.6	45.7	31.9	22.5	16.1	25.0	16.1	6.8	-45.8
Asian Students[a]	15.7	7.2	5.6	2.5	3.9	6.2	4.0	1.4	-14.3
Hispanic Students	45.9	34.1	21.4	14.5	9.5	17.5	9.8	5.0	-40.9
White Students	17.0	10.8	7.0	4.8	3.1	5.3	3.3	1.9	-15.1
All Students	43.0	34.3	23.1	15.9	11.2	18.3	11.1	5.1	-37.9
Black-White Difference	35.6	34.9	24.9	17.7	13.0	19.7	12.8	4.9	-30.7
Hispanic-White Difference	28.9	23.3	14.4	9.7	6.4	12.2	6.5	3.1	-25.8

SOURCE: The Texas Education Agency website.

NOTES: The minimum passing score is a Texas Learning Index (TLI) of 70. TLI scores range from 0 to approximately 100 (the maximum score varies from test to test). A TLI of 70 is equivalent to answering approximately 70% of the test items correctly. This percentage varies depending on the difficulty of a particular test; for example, in 2000, this percentage ranged from 65-69% on the reading tests depending on the grade. The Black-White and Hispanic Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

[a] In 1994, this category also included Native Americans and students of unclassified ethnicity.

Table H. 5

Average SAT-9 NCE Reading Score of Houston Elementary School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 1					
African American Students	47.0	48.5	51.4	55.0	8.0
Asian Students	61.8	65.3	68.6	71.0	9.2
Hispanic Students	46.2	49.5	51.3	54.4	8.3
White Students	66.1	65.9	66.8	69.0	2.9
All Students	50.3	51.8	54.0	57.3	7.1
Black-White Difference	19.2	17.4	15.4	14.1	-5.1
Hispanic-White Difference	20.0	16.5	15.6	14.6	-5.4
Grade 2					
African American Students	41.7	44.5	46.7	47.4	5.7
Asian Students	54.4	59.0	61.8	62.5	8.1
Hispanic Students	41.8	46.6	47.7	48.4	6.7
White Students	57.6	61.7	63.4	64.4	6.8
All Students	44.8	48.3	50.0	50.7	5.9
Black-White Difference	15.9	17.2	16.7	17.0	1.1
Hispanic-White Difference	15.8	15.2	15.6	16.0	0.1
Grade 3					
African American Students	40.4	43.9	44.9	45.8	5.4
Asian Students	54.3	57.4	57.7	59.1	4.8
Hispanic Students	40.9	45.0	47.1	46.3	5.4
White Students	58.6	62.2	62.1	66.3	7.7
All Students	43.9	47.4	48.6	49.2	5.3
Black-White Difference	18.2	18.4	17.1	20.5	2.3
Hispanic-White Difference	17.7	17.2	15.0	20.0	2.3
Grade 4					
African American Students	36.7	39.9	42.8	44.2	7.6
Asian Students	51.9	56.4	55.1	60.1	8.3
Hispanic Students	35.3	41.4	44.0	45.5	10.3
White Students	55.6	62.9	63.1	65.6	10.1
All Students	39.3	44.1	46.6	48.1	8.8
Black-White Difference	18.9	23.0	20.3	21.4	2.5
Hispanic-White Difference	20.3	21.5	19.1	20.1	-0.2
Grade 5					
African American Students	36.4	40.2	41.3	44.4	8.0
Asian Students	50.9	57.8	56.2	58.4	7.5
Hispanic Students	33.8	39.0	40.6	42.3	8.5
White Students	60.7	61.4	63.0	64.4	3.7
All Students	38.7	42.7	44.0	46.1	7.4
Black-White Difference	24.2	21.2	21.7	20.0	-4.3
Hispanic-White Difference	26.9	22.4	22.4	22.1	-4.8

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 6

Average SAT-9 NCE Math Score of Houston Elementary School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 1					
African American Students	40.1	41.5	45.2	47.7	7.6
Asian Students	55.7	61.6	65.4	66.6	10.8
Hispanic Students	42.4	44.5	47.4	49.0	6.7
White Students	60.8	61.0	62.4	63.2	2.4
All Students	44.7	46.0	49.0	51.0	6.3
Black-White Difference	20.8	19.4	17.2	15.6	-5.2
Hispanic-White Difference	18.5	16.4	15.0	14.2	-4.3
Grade 2					
African American Students	38.8	41.2	44.5	46.6	7.7
Asian Students	56.8	64.1	67.6	71.0	14.2
Hispanic Students	41.1	46.1	48.1	50.7	9.6
White Students	57.5	62.0	65.6	67.3	9.8
All Students	43.3	46.8	49.6	51.8	8.5
Black-White Difference	18.7	20.8	21.1	20.7	2.1
Hispanic-White Difference	16.4	15.9	17.5	16.6	0.2
Grade 3					
African American Students	39.8	47.8	50.2	50.7	11.0
Asian Students	62.3	69.3	69.8	70.6	8.3
Hispanic Students	42.9	51.0	54.1	53.3	10.4
White Students	59.7	67.1	67.9	67.7	8.0
All Students	44.9	52.5	54.9	54.7	9.8
Black-White Difference	20.0	19.4	17.7	17.0	-3.0
Hispanic-White Difference	16.9	16.2	13.8	14.5	-2.4
Grade 4					
African American Students	43.4	45.7	49.7	50.2	6.8
Asian Students	66.7	69.4	69.5	71.4	4.7
Hispanic Students	46.2	50.7	54.0	54.9	8.7
White Students	62.6	66.6	67.5	68.6	6.0
All Students	48.2	51.3	54.7	55.3	7.1
Black-White Difference	19.3	20.9	17.8	18.4	-0.9
Hispanic-White Difference	16.5	15.8	13.5	13.7	-2.7
Grade 5					
African American Students	41.6	44.9	46.4	50.2	8.6
Asian Students	62.8	70.0	67.7	71.0	8.2
Hispanic Students	43.3	48.2	50.6	53.3	10.0
White Students	60.9	65.3	66.1	67.4	6.5
All Students	45.5	49.7	51.4	54.4	8.9
Black-White Difference	19.4	20.4	19.7	17.2	-2.1
Hispanic-White Difference	17.7	17.1	15.5	14.2	-3.5

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 7

Percentage of Houston Middle School Students in the First Quartile on the SAT-9 Reading by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6					
African American Students	52.2	49.0	46.1	36.8	-15.4
Asian Students	24.7	21.1	19.2	18.0	-6.7
Hispanic Students	60.3	54.5	53.2	43.2	-17.1
White Students	17.3	13.5	14.2	9.8	-7.5
All Students	51.1	47.7	46.0	37.0	-14.1
Black-White Difference	34.9	35.5	31.9	27.0	-7.9
Hispanic-White Difference	43.0	40.9	39.1	33.4	-9.6
Grade 7					
African American Students	54.2	49.2	48.9	39.3	-14.9
Asian Students	27.9	25.7	22.5	15.1	-12.8
Hispanic Students	59.1	55.6	54.7	43.5	-15.6
White Students	16.7	12.9	12.3	10.6	-6.1
All Students	51.9	47.9	48.0	38.2	-13.7
Black-White Difference	37.6	36.3	36.6	28.7	-8.9
Hispanic-White Difference	42.4	42.7	42.4	32.9	-9.6
Grade 8					
African American Students	51.9	42.5	42.5	37.9	-14.0
Asian Students	27.9	21.3	26.0	16.9	-11.0
Hispanic Students	57.8	50.4	49.1	41.0	-16.9
White Students	13.7	10.7	10.3	8.4	-5.3
All Students	49.9	42.4	41.9	36.1	-13.7
Black-White Difference	38.2	31.8	32.2	29.5	-8.7
Hispanic-White Difference	44.2	39.7	38.8	32.6	-11.6

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: National percentiles were used in this analysis. Students in the first quartile have average percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two groups.

Table H. 8

Percentage of Houston Middle School Students in the First Quartile on the SAT-9 Math by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6					
African American Students	40.3	38.5	34.0	28.8	-11.6
Asian Students	10.0	9.6	6.1	7.6	-2.3
Hispanic Students	37.9	34.9	33.3	24.3	-13.6
White Students	14.0	11.6	11.3	7.6	-6.4
All Students	34.8	33.2	30.6	23.6	-11.2
Black-White Difference	26.4	26.9	22.7	21.2	-5.2
Hispanic-White Difference	24.0	23.3	22.0	16.7	-7.3
Grade 7					
African American Students	48.3	48.9	50.4	40.8	-7.5
Asian Students	11.5	11.0	11.6	8.7	-2.8
Hispanic Students	45.2	47.9	47.2	37.9	-7.3
White Students	16.5	16.9	14.8	13.1	-3.4
All Students	42.1	43.8	44.3	35.6	-6.5
Black-White Difference	31.8	31.9	35.6	27.7	-4.1
Hispanic-White Difference	28.7	31.0	32.4	24.8	-4.0
Grade 8					
African American Students	55.9	50.2	50.6	46.7	-9.3
Asian Students	11.7	13.0	12.9	11.1	-0.6
Hispanic Students	51.5	49.0	47.6	41.0	-10.5
White Students	15.2	14.9	12.5	10.4	-4.8
All Students	47.5	44.5	43.7	39.1	-8.5
Black-White Difference	40.8	35.3	38.1	36.3	-4.5
Hispanic-White Difference	36.3	34.1	35.1	30.6	-5.7

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: National percentiles were used in this analysis. Students in the first quartile have average percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two groups.

Table H. 9

Percentage of Houston Middle and High School Students Not Passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in Reading

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6									
African American Students	44.7	35.6	33.9	24.6	20.9	27.5	21.5	22.2	-22.5
Asian Students[a]	15.8	13.2	13.5	10.5	9.6	13.3	10.4	9.5	-6.3
Hispanic Students	46.1	36.4	42.5	32.2	32.9	34.3	32.3	29.2	-16.9
White Students	14.4	7.2	7.9	6.1	3.6	8.1	6.9	5.2	-9.2
All Students	40.6	31.5	34.5	26.1	24.9	28.7	25.5	23.9	-16.7
Black-White Difference	30.3	28.4	26.0	18.5	17.3	19.4	14.6	17.0	-13.3
Hispanic-White Difference	31.7	29.2	34.6	26.1	29.3	26.2	25.4	24.0	-7.7
Grade 7									
African American Students	45.0	37.9	28.3	25.6	24.9	27.5	24.9	16.3	-28.7
Asian Students[a]	21.6	17.5	12.6	11.4	11.2	11.4	12.2	5.4	-16.2
Hispanic Students	47.2	40.4	33.0	30.2	29.8	33.4	33.2	22.5	-24.7
White Students	10.3	7.0	5.1	3.6	3.9	7.1	5.6	3.3	-7.0
All Students	40.9	34.7	27.5	25.1	24.8	27.8	27.1	18.1	-22.8
Black-White Difference	34.7	30.9	23.2	22.0	21.0	20.4	19.3	13.0	-21.7
Hispanic-White Difference	36.9	33.4	27.9	26.6	25.9	26.3	27.6	19.2	-17.7
Grade 8									
African American Students	42.9	40.2	35.0	25.0	23.1	20.3	14.1	10.5	-32.4
Asian Students[a]	17.7	22.4	21.8	10.1	12.0	10.8	8.3	4.6	-13.1
Hispanic Students	45.3	45.7	42.8	30.7	29.5	25.3	19.9	13.8	-31.5
White Students	10.7	7.9	5.8	4.4	3.7	4.6	2.9	1.5	-9.2
All Students	38.6	38.2	35.3	25.0	23.9	20.9	15.7	11.2	-27.4
Black-White Difference	32.2	32.3	29.2	20.6	19.4	15.7	11.2	9.0	-23.2
Hispanic-White Difference	34.6	37.8	37.0	26.3	25.8	20.7	17.0	12.3	-22.3
Grade 9									
African American Students	36.6	38.8	28.2	16.5	15.1	13.6	11.4	13.8	-22.8
Asian Students[a]	24.5	23.8	18.9	16.6	13.7	12.2	8.8	9.2	-15.3
Hispanic Students	42.8	45.9	37.6	28.4	25.0	23.9	20.5	19.3	-23.5
White Students	8.6	6.9	6.4	4.3	2.9	2.9	2.2	2.3	-6.3
All Students	34.3	36.1	28.9	20.3	18.5	17.2	14.1	14.4	-19.9
Black-White Difference	28.0	31.9	21.8	12.2	12.2	10.7	9.2	11.5	-16.5
Hispanic-White Difference	34.2	39.0	31.2	24.1	22.1	21.0	18.3	17.0	-17.2

SOURCE: The Texas Education Agency website.

NOTES: The minimum passing score is a Texas Learning Index (TLI) of 70. TLI scores range from 0 to approximately 100 (the maximum score varies from test to test). A TLI of 70 is equivalent to answering approximately 70% of the test items correctly. This percentage varies depending on the difficulty of a particular test; for example, in 2000, this percentage ranged from 65-69% on the reading tests depending on the grade. The Black-White and Hispanic Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

[a] In 1994, this category also included Native Americans and students of unclassified ethnicity.

Table H. 10

Percentage of Houston Middle and High School Students Not Passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills in Math

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6									
African American Students	62.1	58.5	38.4	34.3	26.7	33.0	25.5	18.5	-43.6
Asian Students[a]	17.7	18.8	8.6	8.2	6.4	6.9	5.8	4.9	-12.8
Hispanic Students	56.7	59.4	39.2	33.1	27.8	29.5	24.8	17.8	-38.9
White Students	22.2	17.5	8.8	9.1	5.4	8.5	8.3	4.5	-17.7
All Students	53.1	52.2	34.3	30.0	24.2	27.9	22.8	16.3	-36.8
Black-White Difference	39.9	41.0	29.6	25.2	21.3	24.5	17.2	14.0	-25.9
Hispanic-White Difference	34.5	41.9	30.4	24.0	22.4	21.0	16.5	13.3	-21.2
Grade 7									
African American Students	65.9	66.4	50.1	39.9	35.1	33.3	25.4	18.9	-47.0
Asian Students[a]	24.8	16.5	11.2	7.7	7.6	8.3	4.4	2.2	-22.6
Hispanic Students	63.5	64.6	49.4	35.5	29.5	30.1	22.9	18.5	-45.0
White Students	17.4	20.1	10.2	6.2	5.7	8.8	5.8	6.3	-11.1
All Students	57.3	58.3	43.9	32.9	28.2	28.1	21.5	16.9	-40.4
Black-White Difference	48.5	46.3	39.9	33.7	29.4	24.5	19.6	12.6	-35.9
Hispanic-White Difference	46.1	44.5	39.2	29.3	23.8	21.3	17.1	12.2	-33.9
Grade 8									
African American Students	69.8	71.6	53.0	41.2	31.7	30.7	20.2	14.5	-55.3
Asian Students[a]	21.7	25.9	12.2	8.2	6.6	5.9	4.0	3.1	-18.6
Hispanic Students	65.2	72.5	52.6	42.4	30.0	26.3	18.1	12.7	-52.5
White Students	21.9	21.4	13.1	9.0	7.4	6.7	4.9	2.7	-19.2
All Students	59.4	64.3	46.7	36.9	27.3	24.9	16.9	12.0	-47.4
Black-White Difference	47.9	50.2	39.9	32.2	24.3	24.0	15.3	11.8	-36.1
Hispanic-White Difference	43.3	51.1	39.5	33.4	22.6	19.6	13.2	10.0	-33.3
Grade 9									
African American Students	60.2	62.8	53.2	42.2	32.7	26.7	22.3	17.2	-43.0
Asian Students[a]	21.0	19.5	17.0	15.3	8.7	5.8	3.7	3.2	-17.8
Hispanic Students	60.3	64.8	53.9	48.4	36.4	28.3	20.1	17.9	-42.4
White Students	22.8	20.5	16.7	10.9	9.1	7.3	4.8	3.3	-19.5
All Students	52.4	54.9	46.7	39.3	30.4	24.0	17.7	14.7	-37.7
Black-White Difference	37.4	42.3	36.5	31.3	23.6	19.4	17.5	13.9	-23.5
Hispanic-White Difference	37.5	44.3	37.2	37.5	27.3	21.0	15.3	14.6	-22.9

SOURCE: The Texas Education Agency website.

NOTES: The minimum passing score is a Texas Learning Index (TLI) of 70. TLI scores range from 0 to approximately 100 (the maximum score varies from test to test). A TLI of 70 is equivalent to answering approximately 70% of the test items correctly. This percentage varies depending on the difficulty of a particular test; for example, in 2000, this percentage ranged from 65-69% on the reading tests depending on the grade. The Black-White and Hispanic Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

[a] In 1994, this category also included Native Americans and students of unclassified ethnicity.

Table H. 11

Average SAT-9 NCE Reading Score of Houston Middle School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6					
African American Students	36.0	37.8	39.2	42.5	6.5
Asian Students	53.0	57.5	58.2	58.4	5.4
Hispanic Students	32.0	35.5	35.9	39.9	7.9
White Students	59.4	64.2	61.9	65.1	5.8
All Students	37.4	39.7	40.2	43.8	6.4
Black-White Difference	23.3	26.4	22.8	22.6	-0.7
Hispanic-White Difference	27.4	28.7	26.1	25.3	-2.1
Grade 7					
African American Students	35.0	37.0	37.0	41.1	6.1
Asian Students	52.6	53.6	55.6	61.4	8.9
Hispanic Students	32.4	34.4	34.7	38.9	6.5
White Students	61.2	62.3	63.0	64.8	3.6
All Students	37.0	38.9	38.7	42.7	5.7
Black-White Difference	26.2	25.3	26.0	23.7	-2.5
Hispanic-White Difference	28.8	28.0	28.3	25.9	-2.9
Grade 8					
African American Students	35.6	39.9	40.1	41.7	6.2
Asian Students	53.2	55.2	54.2	57.7	4.6
Hispanic Students	33.0	37.1	37.4	40.1	7.1
White Students	61.8	63.8	63.7	64.5	2.7
All Students	37.8	41.6	41.7	43.5	5.7
Black-White Difference	26.2	23.9	23.7	22.7	-3.5
Hispanic-White Difference	28.8	26.8	26.3	24.4	-4.4

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 12

Average SAT-9 NCE Math Score of Houston Middle School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6					
African American Students	41.9	43.8	45.6	47.4	5.5
Asian Students	68.5	69.2	72.2	71.1	2.6
Hispanic Students	43.2	45.3	45.9	49.4	6.2
White Students	63.0	66.3	66.1	68.5	5.6
All Students	46.1	47.4	48.5	51.3	5.2
Black-White Difference	21.1	22.6	20.5	21.2	0.1
Hispanic-White Difference	19.7	21.0	20.1	19.1	-0.6
Grade 7					
African American Students	38.3	38.8	38.2	41.4	3.1
Asian Students	68.1	68.0	67.1	70.5	2.4
Hispanic Students	40.1	39.4	39.7	42.5	2.4
White Students	62.2	61.5	62.7	62.0	-0.2
All Students	42.7	42.5	42.1	44.8	2.1
Black-White Difference	24.0	22.7	24.5	20.6	-3.3
Hispanic-White Difference	22.2	22.1	23.1	19.5	-2.7
Grade 8					
African American Students	36.4	38.6	38.5	39.5	3.0
Asian Students	67.6	68.1	66.8	66.3	-1.3
Hispanic Students	38.6	38.9	39.5	41.3	2.7
White Students	62.1	61.5	62.0	63.1	1.1
All Students	41.5	42.2	42.5	43.5	2.0
Black-White Difference	25.6	22.9	23.6	23.7	-2.0
Hispanic-White Difference	23.4	22.6	22.5	21.9	-1.6

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 13

Percentage of Houston High School Students in the First Quartile on the SAT-9 Reading by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 9					
African American Students	47.6	50.1	48.4	52.3	4.7
Asian Students	29.5	26.3	28.9	30.0	0.5
Hispanic Students	56.0	53.0	52.5	57.8	1.9
White Students	11.6	14.0	12.0	14.5	2.9
All Students	47.6	46.8	46.0	50.2	2.6
Black-White Difference	36.0	36.1	36.4	37.8	1.9
Hispanic-White Difference	44.4	39.0	40.5	43.4	-1.0
Grade 10					
African American Students	41.1	46.1	44.1	54.8	13.7
Asian Students	25.5	29.5	21.7	25.1	-0.4
Hispanic Students	50.7	53.9	49.4	57.5	6.9
White Students	8.7	11.6	8.7	11.5	2.9
All Students	40.9	44.5	40.2	48.1	7.2
Black-White Difference	32.4	34.5	35.5	43.2	10.8
Hispanic-White Difference	42.0	42.4	40.8	46.0	4.0
Grade 11					
African American Students	38.7	40.3	41.9	47.9	9.1
Asian Students	24.4	21.0	19.9	24.6	0.2
Hispanic Students	49.0	46.9	44.9	50.2	1.2
White Students	9.8	9.5	9.3	10.6	0.9
All Students	38.2	37.9	37.4	41.6	3.5
Black-White Difference	29.0	30.8	32.6	37.2	8.3
Hispanic-White Difference	39.2	37.4	35.6	39.5	0.3

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: National percentile scores were used in this analysis. Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 14

Percentage of Houston High School Students in the First Quartile on the SAT-9 Math by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 9					
African American Students	59.8	45.3	41.8	40.2	-19.6
Asian Students	16.3	10.0	10.8	11.0	-5.2
Hispanic Students	60.9	39.0	37.0	35.6	-25.3
White Students	16.8	12.3	11.2	11.4	-5.4
All Students	54.4	37.4	34.9	33.5	-20.9
Black-White Difference	43.0	33.0	30.6	28.8	-14.3
Hispanic-White Difference	44.1	26.7	25.9	24.2	-19.9
Grade 10					
African American Students	41.3	49.3	44.4	45.1	3.8
Asian Students	12.3	13.8	7.3	9.8	-2.5
Hispanic Students	38.7	45.3	38.8	37.8	-0.9
White Students	12.1	12.9	9.8	9.8	-2.3
All Students	34.7	40.8	35.0	34.8	0.1
Black-White Difference	29.2	36.5	34.7	35.3	6.1
Hispanic-White Difference	26.6	32.4	29.0	28.0	1.5
Grade 11					
African American Students	41.1	49.4	49.2	43.1	2.0
Asian Students	11.0	11.8	11.0	7.5	-3.5
Hispanic Students	34.9	44.0	42.7	38.8	4.0
White Students	8.7	11.3	12.1	8.3	-0.4
All Students	32.0	39.4	38.9	33.7	1.8
Black-White Difference	32.4	38.1	37.1	34.8	2.4
Hispanic-White Difference	26.2	32.7	30.6	30.5	4.3

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: National percentile scores were used in this analysis. Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 15

Average SAT-9 NCE Reading Score of Houston High School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 9					
African American Students	38.4	36.8	37.5	35.5	-2.9
Asian Students	51.8	52.1	53.0	48.9	-2.9
Hispanic Students	34.5	35.2	35.7	33.4	-1.0
White Students	62.7	61.7	62.5	58.1	-4.7
All Students	39.3	39.2	39.8	37.4	-1.9
Black-White Difference	24.4	24.9	25.0	22.6	-1.8
Hispanic-White Difference	28.3	26.5	26.9	24.7	-3.6
Grade 10					
African American Students	41.2	39.5	40.2	35.5	-5.7
Asian Students	55.5	54.6	57.2	53.5	-2.0
Hispanic Students	37.2	35.6	37.9	34.0	-3.2
White Students	65.2	64.9	66.7	62.2	-3.0
All Students	43.1	41.7	43.9	39.7	-3.3
Black-White Difference	24.0	25.5	26.5	26.7	2.7
Hispanic-White Difference	28.1	29.3	28.8	28.3	0.2
Grade 11					
African American Students	42.5	41.9	42.3	37.5	-5.0
Asian Students	57.1	58.4	58.1	54.9	-2.2
Hispanic Students	38.8	40.0	40.3	36.5	-2.3
White Students	66.0	66.5	66.2	63.6	-2.4
All Students	45.2	45.5	45.7	42.2	-2.9
Black-White Difference	23.5	24.6	24.0	26.1	2.6
Hispanic-White Difference	27.2	26.4	26.0	27.1	-0.1

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table H. 16

Average SAT-9 NCE Math Score of Houston High School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 9					
African American Students	34.6	40.4	41.6	42.4	7.8
Asian Students	63.2	67.9	68.9	67.4	4.2
Hispanic Students	34.4	42.8	43.7	43.8	9.4
White Students	59.7	65.0	65.6	65.1	5.4
All Students	38.0	45.2	46.2	46.5	8.5
Black-White Difference	25.0	24.6	24.0	22.7	-2.4
Hispanic-White Difference	25.3	22.2	21.8	21.3	-4.0
Grade 10					
African American Students	40.4	39.5	42.2	40.2	-0.2
Asian Students	64.4	66.4	72.0	68.8	4.4
Hispanic Students	41.0	40.4	43.9	43.2	2.1
White Students	62.7	64.3	67.9	65.5	2.9
All Students	44.9	44.5	48.2	46.7	1.8
Black-White Difference	22.2	24.9	25.7	25.3	3.1
Hispanic-White Difference	21.6	23.9	24.0	22.4	0.7
Grade 11					
African American Students	41.1	38.3	39.6	41.5	0.4
Asian Students	65.7	63.8	66.5	71.8	6.1
Hispanic Students	43.3	40.4	41.0	43.0	-0.3
White Students	64.3	62.0	63.0	68.2	3.9
All Students	46.8	44.0	45.0	48.0	1.3
Black-White Difference	23.1	23.7	23.4	26.7	3.6
Hispanic-White Difference	21.0	21.6	22.0	25.2	4.2

SOURCES: These analyses were conducted using student level data provided by the Houston Independent School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

CASE STUDY

Sacramento City Unified School District

I. INTRODUCTION

On June 7–8, 2001, the research team from MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools visited the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) to gather information for this study of urban school reform. The team met with the superintendent, assistant superintendents, other central office personnel, school board members, representatives of employee unions, and members of the greater Sacramento community. The team returned to SCUSD on November 6–7, 2001 for follow-up interviews with the district's leadership and central office personnel. Additional interviews and focus groups were conducted with principals and teachers. This case study summarizes the information gathered from these interviews and from background materials and data provided by the district. The case study is divided into the following four sections:

- Context in Which the Reform Occurred.
- Political Preconditions for Reform.
- Educational Improvement Strategies.
- Achievement Trends.

II. CONTEXT

A. District Demographics

The Sacramento City Unified School District is the eighth largest school district in California. It enrolls some 52,000 students, employs 2,400 teachers, and operates 77 schools. The student body is 26% Hispanic, 25% white, 26% Asian or Pacific Islander, 22% African American, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan native. Approximately 29% of SCUSD students are English Language Learners (ELL), about one third of whom speak Spanish as their native language, one quarter are Hmong, and smaller percentages are Chinese, Mien, Vietnamese or Russian. About 60% of Sacramento's students are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch. The district's per pupil expenditures in 1999-2000 was $5,465.[9]

[9] SOURCE: Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 1999-2000. National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, October 2001.

B. Key Challenges at the Outset of Recent Reforms

- **Low student achievement, poor attendance, and high dropout rates**. Before the reforms, the current leadership of the Sacramento City Unified School District described the school system as failing to educate large numbers of its children. Average scores in reading and math were in the bottom third, and only half of the district's ninth graders were expected to graduate from high school.

- **Neglected infrastructure, deteriorated facilities and inadequate supplies.** The Sacramento school district was, for many years, plagued by leaking roofs, inadequate electrical wiring, and poor maintenance. Teachers, parents, and administrators were frustrated with the condition of the buildings and the inability of the central office to provide basic supplies and materials. The situation began to change in 1996 when the school board mandated that all students have textbooks. The district diverted money into ensuring basic classroom materials and a counselor for every school.

- **Problem filling teaching positions in the district.** The district's current leadership and many in the local press had described the district as having a "culture of despair." Teachers were sometimes ashamed to admit that they taught in SCUSD, and the district had a tremendous problem filling classroom positions.

C. Background

- **California's School Accountability System.** California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) was passed in 1999. The cornerstone of the Act was the Academic Performance Index (API), which measures academic performance and growth in the state's schools. Scores on the statewide Stanford 9 test form the basis of the API. Sacramento uses SAT-9 scores and API targets as part of its school rating system.[10]

- **Superintendent turnover and school board infighting.** The district hired five superintendents, including interim appointments, in the decade prior to the current administration. Most were interim appointments that lasted less than a year. Rudy Crew, who served from 1989-1993, had the longest tenure in the district's recent history. His tenure was marked, however, by a teachers' strike and large budget cuts. Superintendents over this ten-year period generally found little support from a school board that was often split over district priorities, personnel decisions, school construction, patronage, and racial politics. The current superintendent is in his sixth year in the district.

- **Cooperative relationship with the teachers union in recent years.** The relationship between SCUSD and its teachers union has had its ups and downs over the last ten years. A strike in the early 1990s marked the low point. The economic recovery in the mid-to-late 1990s, however, allowed the district to raise teacher salaries. One of these raises coincided with the beginning of the reform period. Union leaders were involved in developing the district's reform goals and publicly supported the new action plan, despite concerns over how it was to be implemented.

[10] California began SAT-9 testing in 1998, which served as baseline data for the API.

III. POLITICAL PRECONDITIONS FOR REFORM

The Sacramento City Unified School District changed management in 1996 after a major political shift in the city that significantly altered the composition of the school board. This shift created a more stable and united coalition on the board, with members eager to reform the system. The new school board chose the current superintendent, Jim Sweeney, who has actively pursued a cultural change in the district, a widely praised strategic plan, and higher student achievement.

A. Slate of New School Board Members Backed by a Popular Mayor

The previous seven-member school board had a history of infighting and a habit of letting personal agendas distract from student achievement. Often, the board was at odds with the city's mayor, Joe Serna Jr., over a variety of issues. A 1996 report by the Mayor's Commission on Education and the City's Future claimed that "a lack of accountability and deplorable building conditions in the district" were keeping the city's children from being properly educated.[11] The report spurred the mayor to back a slate of new school board candidates in the next election. Four new school board members were voted onto the board, creating a majority voting block aligned with the mayor. It is widely believed that this election is what made the subsequent reforms possible.

B. New School Board Hires a Superintendent Who Supports Reform

The new board sought new leadership for the district and bought out the contract of the former superintendent. The board appointed Jim Sweeney as its interim superintendent in February 1997. Sweeney, who had been marginalized by the previous administration, developed a cooperative and effective relationship with the new school board and was selected as permanent superintendent in October 1997.

Sweeney and the board developed a collegial and supportive relationship during his tenure as interim head of the district. That relationship continued after his selection as superintendent. The goals that the board and superintendent were jointly developing were built into Sweeney's contract. Sweeny did something else that was unusual; he asked that the buy-out clause in the contract be omitted and that he be held accountable for achieving the goals that the board had set. The board, for its part, entrusted the district and its operation to the new superintendent and has supported his leadership ever since. This relationship, of course, has been aided by a stable composition on the board, which has had only one turnover and two presidents in six years. Most board votes are by 7-0 margins.

C. Sweeney and the Board Worked to Create Consensus Around a Strategic Plan

Sweeney is a former education professor and deputy superintendent. He is also very familiar with Sacramento's schools. His philosophy is that it is not possible to fix things one problem at a time. One has to fix the system as a whole. He was also an expert in cultural change, something that

[11] Alan Richard, "Sacramento Mayor's Legacy: Improved Schools." *Education Week*, vol. XIX, no. 21, February 2, 2000.

he brought with him to the superintendency and to his goal of improving performance in the Sacramento public schools.

The board and the new superintendent began their work together by establishing a set of core beliefs. This preceded the development of the strategic plan. The core beliefs were what helped Sweeney drive the cultural change of the district. Part of that change involved convincing district staff that transformation and success were possible in school districts with significant challenges. To prove it, he arranged visits by up to 70 SCUSD staff and other city officials (and press) to the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas. Ysleta was pursuing many of the same kinds of reforms that Sweeney wanted and was, as a result, significantly improving student achievement. The Texas community became a well-spring of ideas, strategies, and inspiration for Sacramento, but, more importantly, it became the lever for attitudinal change.

These visits were occurring while the district was seeking the advice and buy-in of many stakeholders throughout Sacramento in a new action plan for the school system. The plan—*High Standards, Great Results*—was developed over a 10-month period and its chief architects were Sweeney, the board of education, and the cabinet. Union leaders, school administrators, and parent representatives also had early input.

The core group mapped out the draft action plan and seven *Vital Signs* of success during a three-day retreat in September 1997. Sweeney and the board spent the next several months refining the plan with key stakeholders, including principals, teachers, and community representatives. They are said to have met with literally thousands of people in a process that many people likened to a political campaign.

The final version of the action plan was adopted by the Board of Education in February 1998. A public signing of the compact by Sweeney and the board accompanied the board's formal approval.

Key elements of the plan were then introduced to SCUSD employees and the broader public at a kickoff rally attended by over 4,500 people. The rally was important because it signaled a break with the past and the dawn of a new era for the school district and its children. At the rally—

- SCUSD admitted failure in the past and held itself accountable for future student achievement in an extremely public way. The supporters of the plan wanted it taken seriously by SCUSD staff and the rest of the community.

- Sweeney stood on stage with the backing of the Board of Education, the leadership of the teachers' union, and service employees' union in a show of solidarity and collaboration.

- Core beliefs and goals were the focus of Sweeney's address. Specific aspects of the plan's implementation were rolled out in detail to teachers and their principals. Principals were charged with helping teachers buy into the district's plan for curriculum, professional development, use of data, and accountability.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

The district's reforms started by emphasizing instructional improvements in the early elementary grades. The district adopted a common reading program for elementary schools and provided intensive professional development to support the program. While some teachers were initially skeptical of its highly structured approach, most came to see it as a useful tool and were impressed by the results. Principals, as well, supported the district's goals and the curricular initiatives. Both principals and teachers received training in the use of test score data and were using it to make decisions about instruction. The district is now turning its attention to the middle and high schools.

A. Key Elements of the District Action Plan

High Standards, Great Results is a data-driven plan to improve Sacramento's student achievement over a five-year period. The key elements of the action plan included ambitious goals, *Vital Signs* for student achievement, and interlocking *Puzzle Pieces* that described the essential educational factors that had to be aligned in order to attain the goals. The plan was underscored by Sweeney's emphasis on staying focused on achievement goals, continuous monitoring of progress, and the celebration of improvement along the way. Sweeney also promised a central office that was more customer-oriented in its support of schools.

1. Vital Signs of student performance

- Readiness for kindergarten—all children entering kindergarten demonstrate 85 percent proficiency on readiness criteria.
- Attendance in school and class—at least 95 percent attendance in every school.
- Reading proficiency—at least 90 percent of Grades K-11 students meet reading proficiency standards.
- Mathematics proficiency—at least 90 percent of Grades K-11 students meet math proficiency standards.
- ELL redesignation and proficiency—at least 90 percent of ELLs redesignated within 5 years and at least 90 percent of ELLs proficient within 5 years.
- High school graduation rates—at least 90 percent of students in every ninth-grade class graduate.
- Successful post-high school transition—at least 90 percent of high school graduates elect productive life-choices within one year of graduation.

2. Puzzle Pieces needed to improve student performance

- Core beliefs and trust
- High standards
- Good instruction
- Staff development
- Site-based decision-making and budgeting
- Parent participation
- Community support
- Data-driven culture
- Accountability for results

B. Goals and Accountability

1. Leadership's "theory of change"

Sweeney heard from the schools that their biggest problems involved the district's lack of focus. Consequently, a great deal of work in the planning phase went into how to change the district's culture so everyone worked toward the same ends. Mutiu Fagbayi, an external consultant, was brought in as part of the central office team to help design the change process. According to Mutiu, the first step in the strategic planning process involved bringing a unity of purpose to the district and getting agreements on the broad goals. These became the *Vital Signs* listed above.

The second step focused on accountability. Once stakeholders supported the broad goals, specific goals for each school were defined. The schools developed plans to reach the goals. A system of accountability for results was then created. Recognition for progress and success was the main reward; the lack of recognition was the "punishment." A great deal of effort was then devoted to making sure that progress was recognized and celebrated, especially in historically low-performing schools.

The third step involved the actual implementation of the reform plan. The key assumption of the district's leaders was that most other districts failed by skipping step two and going straight from goals to program. District leadership, at this point, began holding individual schools accountable for progress, as student achievement data at each site was mapped against the goals.

2. Site-based decision-making and budgeting

While making schools more accountable, the district also gave schools more decision-making authority and greater discretion over how they used their funds. SCUSD shifted to a weighted student formula for school allocations and budgeting. Some 75 percent of all district funding goes out to the schools, while about 25 percent is held centrally for maintenance, testing, transportation, and the like. The district developed an in-service training program for schools on how to set up and run decision-making teams. Site-based teams are allowed to handle their resources in any way that does not conflict with collective bargaining agreements or federal, state, and local laws.

Site-based budgeting is seen as a way of helping principals think about and find solutions tailored to their schools. One principal, for instance, designed a position for a full-time substitute teacher. Some principals have extended the hours of their libraries, computer labs, and reading rooms. Decision-making involves principals, teachers, and others to help build ownership for their program and accountability for the results. One consultant who has worked closely with district's leadership indicates that the schools now have considerable latitude in planning how they will meet their achievement goals. Decisions about the district's reading and math curriculum, assessments, and professional development, on the other hand, are not open for debate. Instead, these features of the district's program are uniform citywide at the elementary school level.

Principals have given up considerable autonomy in the area of curriculum, but they have gained greater control of their budgets. They must develop plans for attaining their goals and are held accountable for doing so. Principals are reassigned by the district if they are unable to bring about gains.

3. School rating system

Sacramento's accountability measures have evolved over time and are now aligned with California's, but the district demands greater gains than the state. Sacramento has developed a rating system that designates schools as "exemplary," "achieving," "emerging low achieving," or in "achievement crisis." Some 70 percent of a school's rating is based on reading and math improvement and on attainment of the state's API targets. Attendance targets and parent and student surveys make up the rest of a school's score. Schools are ranked and those in the lower two categories receive special attention. (See focus of reform section below). Average reading and math test scores for each grade level, moreover, are color coded by quartile. The rankings and test score results are tracked over time and posted on wall charts in the superintendent's office. He can see at a glance which schools need attention.

4. Celebrate success and remove ineffective personnel

Schools that are rated as "exemplary" or "achieving" receive banners and are celebrated at district events and through the media. Early successes in previously low-performing schools enrolling disproportionately large numbers of disadvantaged students are given extra recognition and used to encourage all schools to embrace the district's reform goals and strategic plan. There have been some personnel changes in schools, but the district did not rely heavily on sanctions as part of the district's accountability program.

There was a period, however, early in Sweeney's administration when he felt that he needed to replace ineffective and uncooperative staff. The "May Massacre," as it is referred to, involved the removal of 15 principals and five central office staffers, many of whom were Hispanic. Sweeney was accused of racism. The school board, which was under tremendous political pressure from parts of the Hispanic community, supported Sweeney's decision. The board president attributes the board's decision to the confidence it had in Sweeney and his willingness to be held accountable for improving student achievement. It was also clear that Sweeney had followed the rules during the personnel actions (as evidenced by the district's winning all lawsuits related to the matter) and that he should be given the flexibility to pick his own team. The school board's decision may have been made somewhat easier by the fact that all members are elected "at large" and are not as vulnerable at the polls to retribution from any single group. Still, Sweeney and the board did not want to alienate any part of the community, so they worked hard to find qualified minority applicants to fill the vacancies. They succeeded.

C. Focus of Reform

The district's reform efforts, so far, have focused on the elementary schools. The district is just beginning to grapple with reform at the higher levels. Much of the effort in the elementary grades has been devoted to getting extra help and resources to schools that are failing. The district's leadership indicates that they have not focused their reforms explicitly on reducing the achievement gap but on improving schools that do not teach children. The results, district leaders believe, will be higher achievement for children, disproportionately minority, who attend these schools. The district's reforms have included the following components—

- **Common curriculum in early grades.** Sacramento adopted the *Open Court* reading program and the *Saxon Math* program for its elementary schools. A common curriculum enabled the district to develop intensive professional development and training for teaching reading. An outside grant also supported full-time reading coaches for each school who modeled lessons and supported teachers.

- **Low-performing schools.** "Focus" schools, schools designated by the district's rating system as "low achieving" or "in crisis," were coded red on wall charts. Focus schools have fewer than half of their students performing at grade level. These schools are given special attention with intensive technical assistance, first choice of new staff, and a higher funding allocation. A central office team—including the superintendent—spends six days (the superintendent spends less) at the school observing classrooms and developing a comprehensive plan for improving instruction.

- **Focus on "red folder" kids.** The district also administers reading assessments every six weeks in its elementary schools to identify specific students who need special assistance and what they need assistance in. The district has put together an "Intervention Package" composed of four levels of intervention tied to *Open Court* that indicates what principals and teachers should do with students who have been identified by the assessments as needing help. Students in danger of being retained at the middle or high school levels have additional reading or math blocks inserted into their schedules.

D. Curriculum and Instruction

Before the current reforms were put into place, the district provided little direction on curriculum or instruction. An "eclectic mix" of curricula was being used in schools across the system. One observer counted as many as 17 reading programs being used in the district. One of the most important features of the reform process in Sacramento was the adoption and implementation of a uniform reading and math curricula for the elementary schools. Principals report that this step was instrumental in improving instruction and in mitigating the effects of high student mobility. The district is now in the process of adopting a common middle school curriculum aligned to state standards.

1. Elementary reading

- The district's leadership decided they needed a uniform curriculum that was based on research principles and aligned with state standards if they were to have any chance of meeting the goals they had set. In 1997, the district adopted the *Open Court* reading curriculum for 55 of its 60 elementary schools. The district also received a grant from the Packard Foundation to support the implementation of *Open Court*. The first year of the adoption focused on grades K–3. The program for grades 4–6 began in the second year. The adoption, according to central office staff, did three things for the district: it created uniformity across schools; consistency within schools across grades; and a focus for teacher professional development.

- District personnel view the Packard grant as instrumental in the adoption and implementation of the reading program. It provided valuable resources for instructional materials and teacher coaches to support implementation and professional development. The grant specifically provided 28 teacher coaches during the first year of the adoption. The number of coaches declined in subsequent years, however, as the school system assumed a greater share of the cost. The district now employs 16 part-time coaches assigned to specific schools and eight full-time coaches working out of the Reading Support Center.

- The coaching program and how coaches are deployed has evolved over time. The program initially provided a half-time coach for every school but it has been adjusted so that Focus schools have coaches available to work intensely with individual teachers for up to three weeks. Starting this year, teachers can also apply for professional development in one of four *Open Court* areas. If selected, a teacher is provided with a coach for six days of observation, training, and modeling. The director of the Reading Support Center says this approach to staff development is very popular, serving some 90 teachers in 2000–2001. The demand for the program is strongest in Focus schools, but a wide variety of teachers have participated.

- *Open Court* is highly prescriptive and triggered some initial resistance among teachers. Over time, strategies have become somewhat more flexible, but some teachers still feel constrained. The district, moreover, used its Best Practices Center to fill in some gaps that teachers had identified in the *Open Court* curriculum.

- Elementary teachers noted that *Open Court* was implemented in a very professional way, a factor that helped gain it support from so many classroom teachers. Many teachers reported being thrilled to receive program materials and relieved to find that the district had linked the curriculum to the standards. Many agree that a more scripted curriculum was needed in a district with many new teachers and permanent substitute teachers.

- The *Hampton Brown* reading program was chosen for English Language Learners in the district, but it has been supplemented with other approaches to better align with state standards. The district has also added voluntary, paid staff development for teachers implementing *Open Court* and *Saxon Math* and for those working with ELL students. Some schools have also purchased additional materials, including *Santillana Intensive English*, to work with ELL students.

2. Elementary mathematics

All of the elementary schools adopted *Saxon* Math the year after *Open Court* was first implemented. *Saxon Math* is also a prescriptive program that the district leadership felt was a good fit for a school system with large numbers of new teachers. The district has also increased the amount of time that is devoted to math instruction each day and has supplemented *Saxon Math* to fill in gaps between the program and state standards.

3. Middle and high school efforts

Middle schools have recently adopted language arts programs intended to help students with reading difficulties. Three years ago, a few middle schools piloted two programs, *Corrective Reading*, a scripted approach, and *Language*, which is implemented in structured two-hour blocks. These programs went districtwide two years ago. Both programs require extensive training, including model or demonstration teaching as part of an in-class coaching process. Ongoing professional development is provided throughout the year. In one school, non-language arts teachers gave up seven minutes of class time, so students could have six periods of their language arts program per week.

Reform efforts in the high schools have begun to revolve around small learning communities. District staff and teachers are currently discussing the possibility of implementing common standards and curriculum at this level.

There have been some efforts at the high schools to work with students reading below grade level. Two reading teachers are now assigned to each high school. In addition, the middle school language arts programs are being tested at some high schools to support students not reading at grade level. Some resistance exists, however, among students who did not want to be singled out or to lose electives and from parents.

There has also been a recent shift in at least one high school toward college prep social science and English classes. In the past, there were two tracks—college prep and a general education track nicknamed disparagingly by some as "nothing prep."

4. Professional development

Professional development is tied to the curriculum and has moved toward emphasizing direct instruction. Teachers at all grade levels receive training from Ernie Stachowski, an expert in effective instruction. By contract, SCUSD teachers are required to participate in 18 hours of in-service training per year.

New teachers receive six full days of training in the fundamentals of effective instruction at the start of the year. They are also assigned a mentor who is an experienced teacher in their school. The district, moreover, has some teachers act as "instructional facilitators" and are trained to observe lessons, give feedback, and work with teachers to improve instruction.

Many teachers meet weekly in grade-level teams at their schools. Some schools have common prep times for grade level teams. The district expects teachers to work together as teams to develop lesson plans and discuss individual student needs, and allots time for this to happen.

Principals have also been in the classrooms much more often since the reforms began. They are expected to be instructional leaders and went through the same training on the use of data and teaching methods as the teachers. Changing the notion of teaching as an isolated task and working with teachers to accept coaching have been incorporated into the responsibilities of principals.

E. Use of Data

The use of data to direct the district's efforts, inform instruction, and track progress is central to Sacramento's action plan. The central office, and Superintendent Sweeney in particular, have maintained a persistent focus on the original *Vital Signs*, and uses them to monitor progress throughout the year. The district invested in a new computer system to track data at the school and student level in a timely manner.

1. Data help SCUSD focus on low-performing schools and students

School and student achievement is color coded by quartile. Schools with average scores at or below the 25th percentile were designated "focus schools" and marked in red on progress charts in the central office. Focus schools receive special attention from the district office, including a six-day on-site site visit that turns the schools "upside down" in assessing strengths and weaknesses. The teams develop action plans to improve student achievement based on the data. Individual students who were performing at or below the 25th percentile, referred to as "red folder" students, are also the focus of special district and school interventions.

2. Data direct instructional responses

Students in the past were tested once in January, but scores were not available until the following October. Now principals and teachers get annual reports on each student by content area and skill—including data comparing each teacher's class scores with another's; scores on the California API rating system; and score patterns on individual students over past years. Schools and teachers

are expected to use these data to plan instruction. The district also implemented a district-wide assessment program to monitor student progress after each unit of *Open Court*, roughly every six to eight weeks. All teachers use common, locally developed assessments that are formatted like the SAT-9. The district's research department confirmed that each assessment had a strong positive correlation with the SAT-9 except for the spelling assessment. Results of these assessments are used to develop specific instructional interventions for schools and students.

At each school, data are also made available at the teacher and student level. Teacher-level data are not typically used for evaluation but to refine instruction. The teachers union was not happy initially about disaggregating data at the teacher level. District leaders and principals worked hard, however, to present data as a resource rather than a threat.

Both *Open Court* and *Saxon Math* assessments, in addition, are used at grade level meetings of teachers that are scheduled at least every six weeks. The data not only help teachers adjust their teaching, but help teachers as they talk to parents. The data are also used to help principals and teachers map out instructional interventions (from the Intervention Package) for low-performing students.

3. Data training for assistant superintendents, principals, and teachers

Associate superintendents, principals, and lead teachers are trained to use data and to run effective meetings when discussing data. Principals and vice principals are trained to use data to monitor instruction and give feedback.

Teachers are still at varying levels of comfort using data, but they acknowledge that support for its use is available. Many teachers praised the training provided by Dr. David Ramirez, who has helped the district to match data on individual student skill deficits with specific intervention strategies. These kinds of data are not yet available in the middle and high schools, but staff is beginning to receive training on its value and use.

The key to the training that principals and teachers receive is apparently its ongoing nature. Those interviewed reported that Ramirez and Stachowski are invited back to the district year after year to update and strengthen staff skills.

Some teachers report being worried, however, that training sometimes focuses on how to get students who are closest to attaining proficiency on a test "over the bar."

F. Reform Press

The unity of the board and superintendent has been critical in convincing staff that the reform effort was not a fleeting matter. The ability of reluctant staff to think that "this too shall pass" was undercut by the fact that district leadership was of one mind. Leadership and stability at the district level has also helped teachers move from feeling jaded about reform to being hopeful and committed. Teachers reported that they have changed their attitude about "downtown" (the central office). The district is perceived as more likely to have "its act together" than before and more likely

to hire better teachers, support schools better, and have better relations with school personnel and unions. Teachers also agreed that investments in improving and maintaining facilities have built pride and ownership in the district.

Strong school leadership is also considered a key part of the puzzle. Teachers credit their principals with giving them the support and training they need, trusting their professionalism, and building their commitment and support of the reforms.

"Reform press" was strengthened by the fact that principals were involved in developing the district's strategic plan. Principals at all three levels—elementary, middle, and high school—were then charged with selling the ideas to building staff. Many principals were initially concerned that teachers and others would balk at the plan or would consider it unrealistic that all students could achieve at high levels. This uncertainty was particularly clear during the early development of the plan's vital signs, but the principals are widely credited with helping to make the plan work at the school level.

The principal's job, in fact, has shifted from "making sure the roof isn't leaking" to focusing on student achievement. Principals receive substantial in-service training on various aspects of their job and report receiving considerable support from Sweeney and other senior staff.

G. Efficient Business Operations

1. Customer service approach

In addition to driving the instructional reforms, Sweeney reorganized the business functions of the district about four years ago. A customer service focus is now part of the ethos in the central office. The district has developed "one-stop shopping" for principals who bring budget plans and staffing needs to joint meetings of central office personnel and finance staff.

The district also purchased a cell phone/radio system for central office staff, school leaders and school board members to respond to any problems or needs at the buildings. District leaders report that their phones are "on" all the time, including evenings and weekends, to ensure that they are always connected to the schools.

2. Human resources

District staff reported that the system's personnel office did not function well before the reforms—calls went unanswered, applicants were rebuffed, and school needs were left unaddressed. Under new leadership, the department's focus has shifted to serving schools—calls and emails are returned within 24 hours and job applicants can find employment information and applications on a rebuilt website. Teachers can apply for jobs online. The department also trains staff in customer service.

The district has quadrupled its teacher recruitment efforts. The 1997–1998 school year began with 375 teaching vacancies; the 1999–2000 school year began with none. The district has also

instituted a new six-day training program for new teachers in the fundamentals of instruction. The district recently hired seven new principals from a field of over 100 applicants.

3. Communications strategy

Communication is key to keeping the system focused on student achievement. The superintendent and school board model good communications by doing regular joint presentations for community groups; joint publications and documents; and regular formal and informal meetings.

Associate superintendents for elementary, middle, and high schools meet regularly with principals both one-on-one and in small groups. Superintendent Sweeney, moreover, hosts regular "fireside chats" with teachers. The district sends a monthly newsletter to parents and seeks media coverage for its plans and activities.

Finally, the district hired a public relations firm to work directly with teachers as union enthusiasm for the strategic plan waxed and waned. Union support for the plan was very fragile when the district held its citywide rally. Trust between the union and district leaders at the time was in short supply because of past dealings and ongoing contract negotiations. The district was able to secure a raise for teachers, but could not expand the number of professional development days.

H. Financial Resources

The district has become a magnet for both pubic and private grants. District leadership aggressively pursues state and private grants for low achieving schools. The first large donation came from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation in 1998. The $1.5 million grant helped Sacramento adopt its reading curriculum and provide reading coaches. State funds have helped to expand a teacher home visiting program.

Governor Gray Davis' accountability program has, moreover, helped create some new funding opportunities for SCUSD as it moves into alignment with state standards. The state's class size reduction program has also been credited with aiding Sacramento's reform plan in grades K–3.

I. Other Elements of Reform

Some of Sacramento's schools are affiliated with the *National University Center for Research and Teaching Excellence*, a university-union-school alliance. These "Best Practice" schools participate in programs sponsored and/or developed by the Center. The center facilitates grade level discussions for teachers, develops teacher trainers, and provides specialized professional development, lesson plans and other materials. Teachers in Sacramento have used the center to discuss curriculum implementation strategies; to identify gaps in *Open Court*; and to work on ways to use the reading curriculum with ELL students.

Nine SCUSD schools are "Best Practice" schools. A majority of teachers must vote for a school to become a Best Practice school in that it requires a significant commitment to staff development. Staff from these schools are used to help low-performing schools with large minority and ELL

populations. Some of these schools have now made significant improvements in student achievement.

J. Challenges

- Getting parents involved is still very difficult. Sacramento has had a home visiting program for five years that has made some difference.

- Elementary teachers are sometimes frustrated that there is little time for science and history in the school day because of the emphasis on reading and math.

- Teachers and students also report feeling much more stress to raise achievement levels. Some report being worried about focusing on "tail left" students—those whose scores suggest the potential for large gains or students who appear to be easier to get to the next proficiency level.

- The union's contract is seen by some teachers as an obstacle to change at the high school level. Issues include teacher assignments and block scheduling. The union would also like more "bottom up" decision-making about curriculum and its implementation.

V. ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS

- Achievement data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District show that elementary student achievement improved significantly between 1998 and 2000, and that the number of elementary school students performing below the 25th percentile on the SAT-9 declined during this period.

- The percentages of students scoring below the 25th percentile declined in every racial group between 1998 and 2000.

- Disparities in Hispanic-white achievement below the 25th percentile narrowed, but disparities in African American-white achievement narrowed by smaller and less consistent margins.

- The reductions in the percentages of students at the bottom of the test score distribution were larger and more consistent in math than in reading.

- There were positive trends in *average* achievement for all groups, but smaller and less consistent reductions in racial disparities in average scores when compared to changes in the *percentages* of students scoring below the 25th percentile.

- There were somewhat weaker improvements in average achievement and reductions in racial achievement gaps at the middle school level.

- There was no overall improvement in student performance or reduction in racial disparities at the high school level.

MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools obtained a variety of student level data from the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). The data included student level Stanford Achievement Test results for the 1997-1998 through 1999-2000 academic years.[12] Tables S.1 through S.12 summarize trends in student performance.

A. Elementary School Achievement

- The percentage of elementary school students performing below the 25th percentile declined significantly between 1998 and 2000.

- Racial disparities in the percentages of students who scored beneath this threshold narrowed during this period.

- The achievement gap appeared to narrow faster with Hispanic students than African American students, and gains were stronger in math than in reading.

Table S.1 shows the percentages of SCUSD elementary school students in each ethnic group who scored in the bottom 25th percentile on the reading portion of the SAT-9 between 1997-1998 and 1999-2000. The table is divided up into five sections, one for each grade one through five. The first row of each section shows the percentage of African American students who scored below the 25th percentile on the SAT-9 each year. The second row shows the percentage of Asian students in this category; the third row shows the percentage of Hispanic students; and the fourth row shows the percentages of white students below the 25th percentile. The next row shows the differences between the percentages of African American and white students who were below the 25th percentile. The last row of each section shows the difference between the percentages of Hispanic and white students who scored at this level.

The data in this table generally show that percentages of students in each ethnic group who scored in the bottom quartile declined during the study period. The data also indicate that racial disparities narrowed. The first section of Table S.1, for example, shows SAT-9 reading scores for first graders in Sacramento. In 1998, 29 percent of African American first-graders scored in the bottom 25th percentile in reading. The third row shows that the same could be said for 34 percent of Hispanic students in the district. Only 12 percent of white first grade students, on the other hand, scored below this threshold, meaning that in 1998 the African American-white gap in the percentage of students scoring in the bottom 25th percentile was approximately 17 percentage points and the Hispanic-white gap was approximately 22 percentage points.

By 2000, the percentages of African American and Hispanic first-graders scoring below the 25th percentile in reading had declined significantly. And the racial achievement gap narrowed substantially. The fourth column of the table shows that, by 2000, the percentage of African American and Hispanic first-graders scoring below the 25th percentile had declined to 25 percent and 19 percent, respectively. The African American-white gap on this metric declined to 14 percentage points and the

[12] California began administering the SAT-9 in the spring of 1997. Achievement data on a comparable metric are not available before then.

Hispanic-white gap had declined to 8 percentage points. In other words, approximately 16 percent of the original African American-white achievement gap was eliminated and about 66 percent of the Hispanic-white gap was eliminated. This same general pattern is seen in other grades.

Table S.2 shows a similar analysis of math achievement. The data indicate that in most grades the percentage of students scoring below the 25th percentile in math declined between 1998 and 2000. Reductions are more substantial for African American and Hispanic students, resulting in a narrower achievement gap in the percentages of students scoring below the 25th percentile. This was particularly true for Hispanic-white disparities.

Tables S.3 and S.4 show a different measure of achievement. Instead of showing *percentages* of students scoring above or below a given threshold, these tables show *average* achievement levels on the SAT-9 in 1998 through 2000. These data, in general, show that improvements in *average* student achievement and reductions in racial disparities were somewhat more modest than reductions in the *percentage* of students below the 25th percentile. The bottom row of the first section of Table S.3, for instance, shows that the Hispanic-white difference in *average* reading achievement among first graders declined by 26 percent of the original gap (10.2 normal curve equivalents compared to 13.8 normal curve equivalents).

B. Middle School and High School Achievement

- The data show progressively more modest gains in student achievement and reductions in racial disparities at higher grade levels.

- There were reductions in the percentage of middle students scoring at the bottom 25th percentile in both reading and math.

- Achievement gaps generally narrowed among African American and Hispanic students scoring in the lowest 25th percentile

- Improvements in *average* achievement at the middle school level are more modest, particularly in reading. Middle school math performance appears to be improving for most groups of students, but the racial achievement gaps have not narrowed.

- Academic improvements at the high school level were smaller and less consistent than at the elementary and middle school levels. There were some reductions in the percentages of students scoring below the 25th percentile, but little progress in terms of average achievement. There were no consistent reductions in racial gaps at the high school level.

Tables S.5 and S.6 show the percentages of sixth, seventh, and eighth-graders in each ethnic group scoring below the 25th percentile on the reading and math portions of the SAT-9. These data indicate declines in the percentages of African American and Hispanic students scoring at this level, although the declines are generally smaller than those seen at the elementary and middle school levels. Reductions in racial disparities on this metric vary by subject and grade. The first section of Table S.5 and S.6 shows some reductions in racial disparities among 6th graders scoring below the 25th

percentile in reading and math. The sixth row of Table S.5, in particular, suggests that the Hispanic-white gap in reading narrowed by 21 percent and Table S.6 suggests that the Hispanic-white gap in math narrowed by 44 percent. The African American-white gap appears to narrow more slowly.

Tables S.7 and S.8 show the *average* achievement levels of sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students from each ethnic group. These data show a similar pattern of improved achievement and narrowing achievement gaps, but the degree of change is more modest than when looking at changes in the percentages of students below the 25th percentile.

Tables S.9 and S.10 show the percentage of high school students from each ethnic group scoring below the 25th percentile in reading and math on the SAT-9. Tables S.11 and S.12 show changes in average achievement among high school students from each ethnic group. Neither metric shows consistent improvements in reading achievement or consistent reductions in racial disparities among high school students. The data in Tables S.10 and S.12 show slightly more positive trends, however, for high school math achievement. Racial disparities narrowed in terms of the *percentages* of students scoring in the bottom 25th percentile but there were no consistent improvements in racial disparities when one looked at *average* math scores.

In sum, achievement in reading and math on the SAT-9 improved significantly at the elementary grades. Racial gaps also narrowed. These improvements were more evident when looking at reductions in the percentages of students scoring below the 25th percentile than when looking at changes in average scores. Gains among Hispanic students may have been particularly strong. Improvements at the middle and high school levels were similar in pattern but more muted and less consistent, suggesting the possibility that reforms at the elementary school level had not yet been felt in the upper grades.

C. Achievement Trends Compared to the State

Finally, the Council of the Great City Schools looked at the performance of the district on the SAT-9 compared with the state. The reader is referred to tables published in the report *Beating the Odds II*, which shows the percentage of students in Sacramento who scored at or above the 50th percentile in reading and math on the SAT-9. It also shows trends in the percentages of students at or above the 50th percentile statewide.

The results show that Sacramento has increased the percentage of students scoring at or above the 50th percentile on the SAT-9 in almost every grade level faster than statewide averages. For instance, Sacramento improved the percentage of third grade students passing the reading portion of the state test by 4.3 percentage points a year between 1998 and 2001, compared with an average statewide improvement of 2.7 percentage points a year. The district improved the percentage of fourth-graders at or above this threshold by 3.3 percentage points a year over the same period, compared to an average statewide gain of 2.3 percentage points. This same pattern exists at the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and eleventh-grade levels. State and district improvements were identical in the ninth-grade. Sacramento declined slightly in tenth grade reading.

The data show the same trends in math, improving faster than state averages at every grade level between the third and the eleventh except the eighth (where state and city improved at identical rates) and the tenth.

Table S. 1

Percentage of Sacramento Elementary School Students in the First Quartile on the SAT-9 Reading by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 1				
African American Students	28.6	22.0	25.0	-3.6
Asian Students	26.3	18.9	16.8	-9.5
Hispanic Students	33.8	23.2	18.7	-15.2
White Students	12.1	10.8	11.2	-0.9
All Students	25.0	18.7	17.9	-7.1
Black-White Difference	16.5	11.3	13.8	-2.7
Hispanic-White Difference	21.7	12.5	7.5	-14.2
Grade 2				
African American Students	47.2	32.9	34.5	-12.7
Asian Students	40.4	26.0	24.2	-16.2
Hispanic Students	54.4	34.7	32.2	-22.2
White Students	27.2	15.2	14.8	-12.5
All Students	41.9	27.0	26.4	-15.5
Black-White Difference	20.0	17.7	19.7	-0.2
Hispanic-White Difference	27.2	19.6	17.5	-9.8
Grade 3				
African American Students	57.8	41.3	39.9	-18.0
Asian Students	54.1	41.7	40.5	-13.6
Hispanic Students	57.8	45.2	41.7	-16.1
White Students	29.2	21.4	18.0	-11.2
All Students	49.3	37.1	35.0	-14.4
Black-White Difference	28.7	20.0	21.9	-6.8
Hispanic-White Difference	28.7	23.8	23.7	-4.9
Grade 4				
African American Students	54.4	46.6	44.4	-10.0
Asian Students	51.5	40.8	37.4	-14.2
Hispanic Students	53.6	45.8	44.6	-9.0
White Students	27.4	21.1	21.7	-5.8
All Students	45.9	38.4	36.7	-9.3
Black-White Difference	27.0	25.5	22.7	-4.3
Hispanic-White Difference	26.2	24.7	22.9	-3.2
Grade 5				
African American Students	56.0	47.3	49.5	-6.5
Asian Students	51.9	43.9	45.5	-6.4
Hispanic Students	55.9	46.4	47.5	-8.4
White Students	26.8	21.5	24.8	-2.0
All Students	46.2	39.2	41.6	-4.7
Black-White Difference	29.2	25.8	24.7	-4.5
Hispanic-White Difference	29.1	24.9	22.7	-6.5

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 2

Percentage of Sacramento Elementary School Students in the First Quartile on the SAT-9 Math by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 1				
African American Students	50.1	40.2	40.9	-9.2
Asian Students	37.3	24.0	23.3	-14.0
Hispanic Students	48.2	31.2	30.2	-18.0
White Students	27.6	18.0	16.5	-11.1
All Students	40.9	28.2	27.7	-13.2
Black-White Difference	22.5	22.2	24.4	1.9
Hispanic-White Difference	20.6	13.3	13.7	-7.0
Grade 2				
African American Students	59.6	45.8	38.1	-21.5
Asian Students	40.7	25.9	17.8	-23.0
Hispanic Students	58.9	38.8	29.2	-29.7
White Students	33.2	20.0	14.7	-18.4
All Students	47.7	32.3	24.9	-22.8
Black-White Difference	26.4	25.8	23.4	-3.0
Hispanic-White Difference	25.8	18.8	14.5	-11.3
Grade 3				
African American Students	64.8	44.5	36.3	-28.6
Asian Students	42.2	24.8	20.3	-21.9
Hispanic Students	59.8	37.3	32.6	-27.2
White Students	32.1	18.6	14.2	-17.8
All Students	49.2	30.9	25.8	-23.4
Black-White Difference	32.8	25.9	22.1	-10.7
Hispanic-White Difference	27.7	18.7	18.4	-9.3
Grade 4				
African American Students	62.2	52.1	46.0	-16.2
Asian Students	38.7	30.6	20.8	-18.0
Hispanic Students	57.8	48.0	39.0	-18.9
White Students	31.4	25.6	20.2	-11.3
All Students	46.5	38.8	31.2	-15.4
Black-White Difference	30.8	26.5	25.8	-5.0
Hispanic-White Difference	26.4	22.4	18.8	-7.6
Grade 5				
African American Students	65.1	51.2	50.5	-14.6
Asian Students	38.1	29.7	25.7	-12.4
Hispanic Students	59.7	45.1	41.9	-17.7
White Students	33.3	23.7	20.5	-12.8
All Students	47.2	36.5	34.3	-12.9
Black-White Difference	31.8	27.6	30.0	-1.8
Hispanic-White Difference	26.4	21.4	21.4	-5.0

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 3

Average SAT-9 NCE Reading Score of Sacramento Elementary School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 1				
African American Students	49.3	52.0	51.9	2.6
Asian Students	49.8	56.0	57.5	7.7
Hispanic Students	46.7	52.3	53.3	6.6
White Students	60.4	63.6	63.5	3.1
All Students	51.8	56.0	56.5	4.8
Black-White Difference	11.1	11.6	11.7	0.5
Hispanic-White Difference	13.8	11.3	10.2	-3.6
Grade 2				
African American Students	38.6	46.2	45.6	7.1
Asian Students	42.1	50.0	51.3	9.2
Hispanic Students	36.3	44.5	46.1	9.8
White Students	49.9	58.7	58.9	9.0
All Students	42.0	50.0	50.5	8.5
Black-White Difference	11.3	12.4	13.3	2.0
Hispanic-White Difference	13.6	14.1	12.8	-0.8
Grade 3				
African American Students	33.4	40.2	41.5	8.1
Asian Students	35.1	40.6	42.2	7.2
Hispanic Students	33.6	38.9	39.9	6.2
White Students	49.2	52.8	55.6	6.5
All Students	38.1	43.3	44.8	6.8
Black-White Difference	15.7	12.6	14.1	-1.6
Hispanic-White Difference	15.5	13.9	15.8	0.2
Grade 4				
African American Students	35.4	38.8	39.7	4.3
Asian Students	38.4	42.3	43.3	4.8
Hispanic Students	34.5	39.1	39.3	4.8
White Students	50.6	54.5	53.9	3.2
All Students	40.3	43.8	44.2	4.0
Black-White Difference	15.2	15.7	14.1	-1.1
Hispanic-White Difference	16.1	15.4	14.5	-1.6
Grade 5				
African American Students	34.2	38.9	38.3	4.2
Asian Students	37.3	41.2	41.0	3.7
Hispanic Students	35.2	38.6	38.6	3.4
White Students	50.5	54.3	53.0	2.5
All Students	40.1	43.6	42.9	2.8
Black-White Difference	16.3	15.4	14.7	-1.6
Hispanic-White Difference	15.3	15.7	14.4	-0.9

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 4

Average SAT-9 NCE Math Score of Sacramento Elementary School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 1				
African American Students	38.9	43.5	42.9	3.9
Asian Students	44.8	52.3	53.8	9.0
Hispanic Students	39.4	47.3	48.2	8.8
White Students	51.5	56.4	58.6	7.1
All Students	43.6	49.9	50.9	7.2
Black-White Difference	12.6	12.9	15.8	3.2
Hispanic-White Difference	12.1	9.1	10.4	-1.7
Grade 2				
African American Students	32.7	40.5	43.2	10.5
Asian Students	42.4	52.3	56.5	14.1
Hispanic Students	33.5	42.8	47.8	14.3
White Students	46.6	56.0	59.1	12.6
All Students	39.0	48.1	51.7	12.7
Black-White Difference	13.9	15.5	16.0	2.1
Hispanic-White Difference	13.1	13.2	11.3	-1.7
Grade 3				
African American Students	31.2	41.2	44.3	13.0
Asian Students	42.4	51.8	55.5	13.2
Hispanic Students	33.3	43.8	47.1	13.8
White Students	47.4	56.7	61.9	14.5
All Students	38.8	48.7	52.3	13.5
Black-White Difference	16.2	15.5	17.7	1.5
Hispanic-White Difference	14.1	13.0	14.9	0.7
Grade 4				
African American Students	32.1	36.5	40.7	8.6
Asian Students	43.4	49.2	54.2	10.7
Hispanic Students	33.6	39.4	43.1	9.5
White Students	47.4	52.0	56.5	9.1
All Students	39.7	44.4	48.8	9.1
Black-White Difference	15.3	15.6	15.8	0.5
Hispanic-White Difference	13.8	12.6	13.4	-0.3
Grade 5				
African American Students	32.0	37.3	38.9	6.9
Asian Students	45.5	51.1	54.4	8.9
Hispanic Students	34.5	40.9	42.4	7.9
White Students	48.5	54.9	56.7	8.2
All Students	41.0	46.6	48.3	7.3
Black-White Difference	16.4	17.6	17.8	1.4
Hispanic-White Difference	14.0	14.0	14.3	0.3

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 5

Percentage of Sacramento Middle School Students in the First Quartile on SAT-9 Reading by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 6				
African American Students	48.6	41.0	43.9	-4.6
Asian Students	42.8	32.9	33.6	-9.1
Hispanic Students	47.4	41.8	39.4	-8.0
White Students	20.4	17.3	18.1	-2.3
All Students	38.9	32.1	33.1	-5.8
Black-White Difference	28.1	23.7	25.8	-2.3
Hispanic-White Difference	27.0	24.5	21.3	-5.7
Grade 7				
African American Students	54.5	43.2	47.8	-6.7
Asian Students	45.0	40.1	36.6	-8.4
Hispanic Students	50.3	44.3	47.0	-3.3
White Students	25.3	21.6	20.6	-4.8
All Students	42.4	36.5	36.8	-5.5
Black-White Difference	29.2	21.6	27.2	-1.9
Hispanic-White Difference	25.0	22.7	26.4	1.5
Grade 8				
African American Students	45.2	35.1	39.8	-5.3
Asian Students	43.2	34.3	34.5	-8.7
Hispanic Students	44.2	35.3	35.6	-8.6
White Students	18.6	18.8	16.4	-2.2
All Students	36.6	30.1	30.9	-5.7
Black-White Difference	26.6	16.3	23.4	-3.2
Hispanic-White Difference	25.6	16.5	19.2	-6.4

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 6

Percentage of Sacramento Middle School Students in the First Quartile on SAT-9 Math by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 6				
African American Students	54.6	42.3	40.0	-14.6
Asian Students	32.2	20.7	17.7	-14.5
Hispanic Students	50.9	38.5	32.6	-18.4
White Students	21.7	18.6	16.2	-5.5
All Students	38.4	28.6	25.9	-12.5
Black-White Difference	32.9	23.8	23.8	-9.1
Hispanic-White Difference	29.2	20.0	16.3	-12.9
Grade 7				
African American Students	61.4	52.5	50.0	-11.4
Asian Students	29.7	27.1	21.5	-8.2
Hispanic Students	52.0	48.4	48.9	-3.1
White Students	26.6	20.7	22.1	-4.5
All Students	40.1	35.1	33.8	-6.3
Black-White Difference	34.8	31.8	27.9	-6.9
Hispanic-White Difference	25.4	27.7	26.7	1.4
Grade 8				
African American Students	57.1	48.0	53.8	-3.3
Asian Students	33.6	27.0	26.9	-6.6
Hispanic Students	52.2	44.1	43.9	-8.4
White Students	24.0	23.6	18.8	-5.2
All Students	39.2	33.6	33.8	-5.4
Black-White Difference	33.1	24.4	35.0	1.9
Hispanic-White Difference	28.2	20.4	25.0	-3.2

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 7

Average SAT-9 NCE Reading Score of Sacramento Middle School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 6				
African American Students	38.2	41.6	40.6	2.4
Asian Students	41.4	46.6	46.8	5.4
Hispanic Students	38.6	41.2	41.4	2.8
White Students	53.6	55.4	56.1	2.5
All Students	43.4	46.8	46.6	3.2
Black-White Difference	15.4	13.8	15.5	0.2
Hispanic-White Difference	15.0	14.2	14.7	-0.2
Grade 7				
African American Students	34.9	39.0	38.7	3.8
Asian Students	39.4	41.7	44.0	4.5
Hispanic Students	37.3	38.4	38.1	0.9
White Students	50.2	53.3	53.4	3.2
All Students	41.2	43.7	44.2	3.0
Black-White Difference	15.3	14.3	14.7	-0.7
Hispanic-White Difference	12.9	14.9	15.3	2.3
Grade 8				
African American Students	39.4	43.2	40.9	1.5
Asian Students	41.7	44.0	43.8	2.1
Hispanic Students	39.6	42.7	42.5	2.8
White Students	54.5	53.5	55.6	1.1
All Students	44.6	46.4	46.1	1.5
Black-White Difference	15.1	10.3	14.7	-0.4
Hispanic-White Difference	14.9	10.8	13.1	-1.8

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 8

Average SAT-9 NCE Math Score of Sacramento Middle School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 6				
African American Students	37.6	43.0	44.4	6.8
Asian Students	49.9	57.5	60.7	10.8
Hispanic Students	38.9	44.5	48.0	9.1
White Students	55.6	57.8	62.5	6.9
All Students	46.3	51.7	54.5	8.2
Black-White Difference	18.0	14.8	18.0	0.0
Hispanic-White Difference	16.8	13.3	14.5	-2.2
Grade 7				
African American Students	34.7	38.8	38.8	4.0
Asian Students	50.8	51.7	54.6	3.8
Hispanic Students	38.5	39.8	40.3	1.8
White Students	51.9	55.7	55.2	3.3
All Students	45.2	47.6	48.2	3.1
Black-White Difference	17.1	16.9	16.4	-0.7
Hispanic-White Difference	13.4	15.9	14.9	1.5
Grade 8				
African American Students	36.3	40.4	39.4	3.0
Asian Students	49.4	52.6	52.2	2.8
Hispanic Students	39.1	42.4	42.3	3.3
White Students	53.8	53.4	57.7	3.9
All Students	46.0	48.3	49.0	2.9
Black-White Difference	17.5	12.9	18.4	0.9
Hispanic-White Difference	14.7	10.9	15.4	0.7

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 9

Percentage of Sacramento High School Students in the First Quartile on SAT-9 Reading by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 9				
African American Students	59.3	59.4	57.3	-2.0
Asian Students	53.1	51.9	51.0	-2.1
Hispanic Students	59.0	59.2	59.1	0.1
White Students	30.1	29.1	29.7	-0.4
All Students	49.9	49.3	48.9	-1.0
Black-White Difference	29.2	30.3	27.6	-1.6
Hispanic-White Difference	28.9	30.2	29.4	0.5
Grade 10				
African American Students	65.7	62.6	66.0	0.3
Asian Students	56.6	56.6	57.2	0.7
Hispanic Students	60.6	59.5	61.7	1.1
White Students	30.6	29.2	30.7	0.1
All Students	52.0	51.4	53.4	1.4
Black-White Difference	35.1	33.4	35.3	0.2
Hispanic-White Difference	30.0	30.3	31.0	1.0
Grade 11				
African American Students	54.7	52.2	50.5	-4.2
Asian Students	48.4	42.3	47.3	-1.1
Hispanic Students	51.7	49.6	53.2	1.4
White Students	23.1	22.5	28.0	5.0
All Students	42.9	39.2	43.8	0.9
Black-White Difference	31.6	29.6	22.5	-9.1
Hispanic-White Difference	28.7	27.1	25.1	-3.5

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 10

Percentage of Sacramento High School Students in the First Quartile on SAT-9 Math by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 9				
African American Students	52.7	49.0	46.9	-5.9
Asian Students	24.2	21.7	21.9	-2.3
Hispanic Students	44.1	43.3	41.0	-3.1
White Students	23.1	21.4	19.8	-3.3
All Students	34.1	31.9	31.1	-3.1
Black-White Difference	29.6	27.6	27.0	-2.6
Hispanic-White Difference	21.0	21.9	21.2	0.2
Grade 10				
African American Students	56.2	53.2	50.9	-5.3
Asian Students	26.0	23.8	24.5	-1.5
Hispanic Students	46.4	43.0	41.4	-5.0
White Students	22.6	25.6	22.3	-0.3
All Students	34.9	33.8	33.0	-2.0
Black-White Difference	33.7	27.6	28.6	-5.0
Hispanic-White Difference	23.8	17.3	19.1	-4.7
Grade 11				
African American Students	56.4	52.9	51.0	-5.4
Asian Students	26.6	22.4	21.0	-5.6
Hispanic Students	46.8	43.7	47.0	0.1
White Students	25.5	24.6	23.2	-2.3
All Students	35.2	31.7	31.4	-3.8
Black-White Difference	30.9	28.4	27.8	-3.1
Hispanic-White Difference	21.3	19.1	23.8	2.5

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: Students scoring in the first quartile have percentile scores ranging from 1 to 25. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 11

Average SAT-9 NCE Reading Score of Sacramento High School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 9				
African American Students	33.2	33.4	33.1	0.0
Asian Students	35.8	37.7	37.0	1.2
Hispanic Students	33.2	33.0	33.8	0.6
White Students	47.2	48.9	47.2	0.0
All Students	37.5	38.6	38.0	0.5
Black-White Difference	14.0	15.4	14.1	0.1
Hispanic-White Difference	14.0	15.9	13.4	-0.6
Grade 10				
African American Students	30.2	32.0	31.0	0.8
Asian Students	33.9	35.1	34.5	0.6
Hispanic Students	32.4	32.8	32.1	-0.3
White Students	47.5	47.0	47.5	0.0
All Students	36.6	37.1	36.5	-0.1
Black-White Difference	17.3	15.0	16.5	-0.8
Hispanic-White Difference	15.0	14.2	15.4	0.4
Grade 11				
African American Students	35.9	35.1	35.4	-0.5
Asian Students	38.0	39.8	38.8	0.8
Hispanic Students	36.5	37.6	35.6	-0.9
White Students	50.9	51.2	49.7	-1.3
All Students	41.0	42.1	40.5	-0.5
Black-White Difference	15.0	16.1	14.2	-0.8
Hispanic-White Difference	14.4	13.6	14.1	-0.3

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table S. 12

Average SAT-9 NCE Math Score of Sacramento High School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1998	1999	2000	Change
Grade 9				
African American Students	37.6	39.1	39.5	1.9
Asian Students	51.3	53.9	54.3	3.0
Hispanic Students	40.7	41.5	42.8	2.1
White Students	52.7	54.6	54.2	1.5
All Students	46.5	48.3	48.5	2.0
Black-White Difference	15.1	15.5	14.7	-0.4
Hispanic-White Difference	12.0	13.1	11.4	-0.6
Grade 10				
African American Students	34.4	36.3	36.3	1.9
Asian Students	48.4	51.2	51.2	2.9
Hispanic Students	37.9	38.9	40.1	2.2
White Students	50.3	51.0	52.2	1.9
All Students	44.1	45.8	46.0	1.9
Black-White Difference	15.9	14.7	15.9	0.0
Hispanic-White Difference	12.4	12.1	12.1	-0.3
Grade 11				
African American Students	36.5	36.6	38.7	2.2
Asian Students	50.5	53.8	54.4	4.0
Hispanic Students	39.3	40.7	40.5	1.3
White Students	51.5	53.7	55.1	3.6
All Students	46.3	48.7	49.4	3.2
Black-White Difference	15.0	17.1	16.4	1.4
Hispanic-White Difference	12.2	13.1	14.5	2.3

SOURCES: These analyses was conducted using student level data provided by the Sacramento City Unified School District.

NOTES: NCEs are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a range of 1 to 99. The Black-White and Hispanic-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

CASE STUDY

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS

I. INTRODUCTION

On May 29–30, 2001, the field research team from MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools visited the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) to gather information for this study of urban school districts. The team met with the superintendent, assistant superintendents, key central office personnel, school board members, and other members of the greater Charlotte community. The research team returned to CMS on December 5–6, 2001 for follow-up interviews with district leadership and central office personnel. Additional interviews and focus groups were also conducted with principals and teachers. This case study summarizes the information gathered from the interviews, as well as from background materials and data provided by the district. The case study is divided into the following four sections:

- Context in Which the Reform Occurred.
- Political Preconditions for Reform.
- Educational Improvement Strategies.
- Achievement Trends.

II. CONTEXT IN WHICH REFORM OCCURRED

A. District Demographics

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is the largest school system in North Carolina and the 26th largest in the United States. It enrolls approximately 100,000 students, employs about 6,400 teachers, and operates some 135 schools, The racial composition of the student body is 48% white, 43% African American, 4% Hispanic, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian/Alaska native. Students from over 100 countries, speaking 81 languages, attend CMS schools. About 4% of CMS students are English Language Learners and approximately 38% are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch. The district's per pupil expenditure in the 2000-2001 school year was $5,657.[13]

[13] SOURCE: Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 1999-2000. National Center for Education Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, October 2001.

B. Key Challenges at the Outset of Recent Reforms

- **Student achievement and equity**. When Eric Smith became superintendent of CMS in 1996–1997, about 63 percent of the district's third-graders met state reading standards and 65 percent met state math standards. These scores trailed state averages by only about five percent, but masked differences between racial subgroups—39 percent of African American students were at or above grade level in reading and 41 percent were in math. Only 12 percent of African American students, moreover, were enrolled in one or more advanced placement (AP) courses; were less likely to be in gifted and talented programs; and more likely to be in "exceptional children's" (special education) programs. Only 49 percent of African American graduates met University of North Carolina course requirements, compared with 78 percent of white and other CMS graduates.

- **Needed collaboration with the community**. Before the current reforms, CMS struggled to attract support from parents and the community. Much of the local news media was unsupportive, focusing instead on the district's desegregation plan and related court orders. Parents were often unhappy with forced busing, as well. The race-based student assignment plan intended to desegregate the schools was ultimately challenged in court. A white parent sued CMS in 1997 claiming that his daughter was denied enrollment at a magnet school because she was not African American. Litigation continued through the spring of the 2001–2002 school year. School safety has also been a major issue, following a string of school shootings in the late 1980s. Voters defeated a school bond issue in 1995. Although the margin of defeat was slim, the prior superintendent took it as a vote of no confidence.

- **Teacher shortages and many inexperienced teachers**. Principals in the district were also unhappy with teacher shortages and high teacher turnover rates. Some principals recruited from out of state. The recruiting and hiring process was cumbersome, and newly-hired teachers often required extensive support.

C. Background

- **History of racial desegregation is a central issue**. In 1969, a federal judge declared that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools were segregated and ordered the Board of Education to submit a desegregation plan. The *Swann* decision led to one of the largest and longest-running busing plans in the nation. Student assignments are still hotly debated in the district, and the *Swann* case was reactivated in 1997 when white parents sued to stop race-based policies. The district took the unusual step of declaring itself non-unitary in order to retain some race-based flexibility, but eventually lost the case and moved to a new student assignment plan that allowed greater parental choice.

- **City-county school system has diverse racial and economic population.** Some long-time observers of the district indicate that the decision in 1959 to consolidate the previously separate city and county school systems lessened the economic and racial segregation that might have otherwise occurred. Few, however, would argue that there was equity in the consolidated school system. A 1999 analysis of the district found that, despite busing, many of CMS schools were not racially balanced; African American students were not provided the

same educational opportunities as white students; teachers in schools with high percentages of African American students were less experienced than teachers in predominantly white schools; and facilities at predominantly African American schools were inferior to school facilities for other children.[14]

- **Dramatic growth in the city of Charlotte and the county of Mecklenburg.** There has also been dramatic growth over the last several years in both the city and county of Charlotte-Mecklenberg. The growth has sometimes exacerbated tensions over where to build new schools. District priorities have largely reflected growth patterns, rather than maintaining existing schools. As a result, investment in older inner city schools has often been inadequate, while funding flowed to new outer-ring schools. CMS has recently begun to reinvest in the inner city schools, a move that caused little resistance, in part because the reforms have helped build business and public confidence in the school district.

- **North Carolina's standards and accountability system drive CMS programs.** The state of North Carolina has curriculum standards with specific goals and objectives for most subjects in grades K–12, collectively called the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. In 1992–93, the state transitioned to new end-of-grade (for grades 3–8) and end-of-course (for high school and middle school) tests that measured objectives outlined in the Standard Course of Study. Scaled scores and achievement levels are reported on all tests. The ABCs of Public Education is the state's accountability model, approved legislatively in 1995, that sets both growth and performance standards for each elementary, middle and high school in the state. Teachers in schools that meet exemplary or expected growth targets receive financial incentives of up to $1,500. The state also requires schools to develop school improvement plans that tie into annual performance goals. The emergence of the state accountability system coincided with the start of reform efforts in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. CMS uses state test data in its own accountability system and has aligned its curriculum with state standards.

- **No teachers unions in North Carolina.** There is no union or collective bargaining power for North Carolina's teachers, although teachers and aides are generally considered to be a major political force. The district's leadership concedes that it is easier to transfer or remove ineffective school personnel when necessary.

III. Political Preconditions for Reform

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education appointed Eric Smith as superintendent in 1996. Smith brought a strong focus to the district on increasing student achievement, aligning curriculum with state standards, and providing rigorous coursework for all students. Smith's predecessor, John Murphy, had laid considerable groundwork for the standards and was considered a major change agent in implementing site-based management and school-level performance outcomes. Murphy ran into trouble, however, when he was perceived to have proposed differing academic goals for white and African American students. Smith, appointed after Murphy left, advocated for higher and equal standards for all groups and greater instructional authority at the central office level. Dr. Eric Smith led the district for the next six years before leaving for another superintendency in 2002.

[14] Eric J. Smith, "Achieving Equity: Why diversity and high expectations matter," in Achieving the Vision: Equity and Student Success, March 18, 1999.

John Murphy was a strong believer in site-based management and school-level control, advocating what he called "130 school districts." When he first came to the district in the early 1990s he was known as an innovator and strong proponent of the burgeoning standards movement. In one of his first moves as superintendent, Murphy assembled a roundtable of some of the nation's foremost school reform experts, including James Comer and Chester Finn, to help shape his strategic plan. Murphy put a strong focus on student achievement and test score data at the school level. He pushed for standards, measurable objectives, and accountability. Smith was able to build on this initial work when he took over in 1996. Smith was also a strong proponent of the standards movement but thought that it was unlikely that the district would find enough strong leaders to run all the schools. He was also troubled by the wide variation in curriculum and instructional approaches that schools used to meet the standards.

Murphy established a magnet school program before he left that became an alternative to the district's 22-year-old system of paired schools and cross-town busing. He was a strong advocate for equity, but his proposal of differentiated academic goals for minority students angered some community leaders.

CMS has enjoyed fairly stable leadership over the last decade, first under John Murphy, then under Eric Smith, and now led by James Pughsley. The community has focused on student achievement and accountability even while it grappled with one of the oldest and most complicated federal desegregation cases in the country.

A. The School Board Sought Community Input for the Superintendent Search Process

When Murphy resigned after the bond defeat in the spring of 1995, the school board went to the community for advice on the search for a new superintendent. The school board had several new members and had undergone a structural change that fall, adding three at-large members to six district representatives. With community input, the board was able to articulate three main priorities for the district: student achievement, safe schools, and community collaboration. Final candidates from the national superintendent search were asked to work with the board on these priorities and to propose specific strategies to meet them.

The board eventually chose Eric J. Smith in 1996. Smith not only agreed with the district's priorities but consented to building five-year performance measures into his contract and being evaluated annually on their attainment. The board was assured at that point that it could give Smith the latitude he needed to improve achievement, safety, and community collaboration without getting involved in day-to-day operations. Smith met with hundreds of people in the Charlotte community before taking his new post, and remained one of the most visible leaders in the community throughout his tenure.

B. Board, Superintendent, and Community are on the Same Page

The board began its search for a superintendent after consulting the community. The board chose a superintendent who shared its vision of high achievement and equity instead of seeking a

leader who came with a reform plan in hand. Smith and the board have tried to keep the community involved in school decisions ever since, establishing some 250 partnerships with businesses and faith-based organizations, and securing voter approval of every bond measure along the way.

The board has also established a Student Assignment Oversight Committee that gives the district advice on student assignments. A report on equity and student success and the use of the "Balanced Scorecard" (the district's management system) emerged from these community oversight activities. The school system has also worked hard to develop community input about the use and distribution of school resources, realizing that the community was willing to pay higher property taxes for schools, as long as revenues were equitably used and resulted in better outcomes for students.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Smith's 1999 action plan, *Achieving the CMS Vision: Equity and Student Success*, focuses aggressively on narrowing racially-identifiable achievement gaps and ensuring that African American students receive the same educational opportunities as white students. He writes, "this chronic gap is irrefutable proof that race must be a factor in any plan to address the future of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools."

CMS's reform efforts have focused on aligning district curriculum with state standards; adopting a uniform and prescriptive reading program for the early elementary grades; increasing minority participation in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses; and building an extensive preschool development program called *Bright Beginnings*.

A. Key Elements of the District's Action Plan

The district's reform plans from the beginning were designed to eliminate racial disparities and to increase student achievement across the board. *Achieving the CMS Vision: Equity and Student Success* focuses on:

1. Four key goals with corresponding measures of progress.

- Attain high academic achievement for all students.
- Create safe and orderly environments.
- Ensure community collaboration.
- Develop efficient and effective support operations.

2. Nine components of the plan.

- Educational Opportunities.
- Family and Community.

- Instructional Materials and Supplies, Media Centers and Technology.
- Faculty.
- Student sssignment.
- Instructional facilities.
- Organizational capacity.
- Accountability and bonus system.
- Plan management.

"Our Vision is to ensure that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System becomes the premier, urban integrated school system in the nation in which all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to live rich and full lives as productive and enlightened members of society."[15]

To Smith, this vision meant having all CMS graduates take at least one International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement (AP) course, and ensuring that course-taking reflected the district's demographic characteristics. He then had the district and its staff work backwards to design the academic components that needed to be in place to meet the goal.

B. Goals and Accountability

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board and its new superintendent established a five-year plan in 1996 to meet the district's broad goals. The district also developed some 70 objectives in key areas of student achievement, safe schools, community collaboration, and efficient business operations. Approximately half of the objectives related to academic achievement, including explicit goals for student sub-group progress. One academic objective, for example, was that 85 percent of students in all racial and economic groups will read at or above grade level by the end of third grade.

School level goals were then developed that were aligned with the district's goals including student achievement growth, student participation in higher level courses, reduction of achievement disparities among subgroups, student perceptions about safety and discipline in school, and family satisfaction. These measures were then incorporated into the district's accountability system and aligned with the state's performance and growth targets.

1. Accountability and bonus systems

North Carolina's accountability system—ABCs of Public Education—has been in place throughout Charlotte-Mecklenburg's most recent reform efforts. The system grew out of state legislation passed in 1995 that sets both growth and performance standards for each elementary, middle,

[15] *Achieving the CMS Vision: Equity and Student Success*, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. March 1999.

and high school in the state. Performance standards are defined around absolute achievement levels or percentages of students scoring at or above grade level in each school. Growth standards are defined around specific benchmarks set annually to assess a school's progress. Teachers in schools that meet exemplary or expected growth targets receive financial incentives of up to $1,500. Schools that are designated as excellent or distinctive receive banners, plaques, and public recognition. Low-performing schools, those that fail to meet their growth targets and have significantly fewer than 50 percent of their students at grade level, are visited by state technical assistance teams.

CMS has its own accountability system that complements the state's and uses it to provide additional monetary bonuses to school staff who have met targets. The CMS system is compatible with the state's ABC system and uses the same test scores to measure progress and achievement, but includes student and family surveys that measure perceptions of "safe and orderly environments" and "community collaboration." The locally-funded bonus system differs from the state's system in that it factors in the reduction of achievement gaps among subgroups and perceptions about school safety and family involvement.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg is participating this year in North Carolina's ABC Pilot, which will test statewide use of the district's system of measuring growth and disaggregated student results by racial and SES subgroups. School bonuses under this pilot program will be contingent on raising achievement for all sub-groups, not just school-wide averages.

2. Pay for performance

The district has also implemented a principal evaluation system based on the district's performance goals. Principals' pay under the system is tied to school performance on a school-specific accountability matrix. This "schoolhouse bonus" was in place when Smith arrived, but it now includes an achievement gap component.

All principals we spoke with supported the goals of the district and believed strongly in accountability, but some expressed frustration in not being able to lead their schools as they want. Principals have site-based budgeting authority, which has given them flexibility over spending and staffing. Principals lack autonomy, however, on instructional programs, which are selected at the district level. Some school leaders would have selected other instructional programs for their schools. Principals are "at will" employees of the district and have turned over rapidly in the last few years.

C. Focus of Reform

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools have pursued a reform strategy that focuses on specific schools and groups of students in order to raise districtwide performance. The reforms include—

- CMS targets low-performing schools by providing greater resources to what are called *Equity-Plus* and *A-Plus* schools (described in a later section). These schools receive funds to reduce class sizes and focus on classroom training and support. Some *Equity-Plus* schools have hired additional personnel to work with children in small groups or have provided after-school tutoring with certified teachers. Site-based budgeting has allowed some schools to hire part-time literacy staff to work with students who are below grade level.

- The CMS budget is built around reducing inequities in these schools, and the district works to enhance and stabilize the teaching staff. Specific initiatives to attract teachers to targeted schools began in the 1998–99 school year. *Equity-Plus* teachers receive a $2,500 salary bonus at the end of their third year. Teachers in critical areas and those with greater experience, master's degrees or National Board certification may, also have their base salaries increased. There are also special bonuses for teachers in these low-performing schools if the school makes its performance targets.

- Low-achieving students receive extra attention and resources. Students who are below grade level, scoring at Level I or II on the North Carolina End-of-Grade test, may be reassigned to smaller classes, receive tutoring after school, or work with a teacher's aide. The district's "Instructional Preventions and Interventions" project provides a compendium of interventions available to all students who are not performing at grade level. Interventions in grades pre-K to 5 include individualized accelerated growth plans; interventions in grades 6–8 include extended day programs or double blocks of math and reading instruction; and interventions in grades 9–12 include summer school and additional periods in core subjects.

D. Curriculum and Instruction

Charlotte-Mecklenburg has set a goal for ensuring that all students take at least one AP or IB course. The district has mapped backwards from this goal to determine how the district needs to align and arrange its programming. CMS focused, in addition, on preschool in an effort to improve the basic foundation from which all students begin kindergarten. The district uses its preschool program and its AP emphasis as bookends to reform its instructional offerings. The district also actively pursues a goal of having all students at grade level or above by the end of the third grade.

1. Uniform curriculum aligned with state standards

The foundation for CMS's curriculum is the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. The district convened a systemwide conference in the summer of 1997 to review the curriculum, align it with state standards, and train teachers on what to do and how to do it. The district discovered that many teachers did not know what was expected of them or what to teach. An examination of teaching practices in low-performing schools revealed, moreover, that some teachers were teaching from a pamphlet, while the official state curriculum sat in its original shrink-wrap on the shelf. It seemed that few in the district had actually seen the state curriculum.

- An important change for teachers was having clearly defined standards and knowing what they needed to teach. The district has worked hard to define the structure of the curriculum and to align materials and assessments with the curriculum to ensure that everyone knows what is expected and what they will be held accountable for achieving. In the lower grades this has meant less teacher subjectivity regarding what students are taught.

- CMS also found that many elementary schools were using different strategies to teach reading, yet were feeding into the same middle schools. This led to the decision to adopt a districtwide approach to reading. CMS chose *Open Court*. The decision met with some resis-

tance initially, but teachers generally see it as a useful tool to define what is expected of them and to get results. The district provides three full days of training in the program each summer. Most teachers have received in-service training and demonstration lessons at the school site on *Open Court*.

- The curriculum has evolved over time from general standards to include pacing guides, quarterly assessments, and even daily lesson plans. CMS leaders insist that the structure had become necessary to compensate for limited teacher experience and varying skills, but some teachers still give the pacing guides mixed reviews. Some teachers apparently feel forever behind—although some principals allow flexibility and permit teachers to catch up in the fourth quarter. Other teachers expressed the sentiment that they had to keep moving through the curriculum even if it meant that they could not teach for mastery or had to leave out important material. Teachers find the quarterly assessments to provide helpful feedback, however.

- New teachers reported liking the structure of *Open Court* because it clarified what they had to teach and when. Many reported feeling the same way about the state's Standard Course of Study. Other teachers, however, felt that the more prescriptive curriculum took away creativity and a sense of classroom community.

2. Common planning time

Principals are required to provide joint planning periods for teachers to work on implementing the curriculum and lesson planning. Some schools require teachers to use a six-point lesson plan, including objectives, focus and review, check for understanding, and guided practice. Lead teachers are assigned at each grade level to lead planning sessions, which usually run 90 minutes each week. Planning time may also include specialists and an assistant principal. Team teaching is also common in the middle schools.

3. Professional development

The district has developed systemwide professional development around its chosen curriculum. Elementary teachers received three days of training each summer on *Open Court*. Teachers praised the language arts workshops provided by the district. Teachers are also supported by "Math Champions," teachers at each grade who have received special training from the central office on math pacing guides and lessons plans. New elementary school teachers also have mentors.

The district also provides significant support for AP teachers. Fees and expenses are paid by the district for a one- week summer workshop at University of North Carolina - Charlotte (UNCC). This is followed by one-and two-day in-service opportunities during the school year. The district is also very supportive of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which provides support groups and readers. The district provides financial incentives for National Board certification, while the state pays the application fee for teachers seeking board certification. CMS is second only to Los Angeles in the number of National Board Certified teachers it has working in its schools.

Finally, CMS's Leadership Academy for principals sponsors a three-day retreat in late summer and arranges mentors for new principals. Mentors are usually retired principals who work with one or two new principals a year. CMS has six to ten new principals each year. Last year, three principals were removed for low performance.

4. A-Plus schools

The *A-Plus* program began as a pilot initiative in 15 volunteer schools and was designed to ensure that students in low-performing schools had mastered basic skills and had access to rigorous academic standards. The district offers these schools intensive monitoring and support. *A-Plus* schools are more regimented than other schools in curriculum and instruction. *A-Plus* schools have an additional 10-minute "focus lesson" each day that is aligned with *Open Court* and other district curricula. Detailed instructional plans are developed where academic performance problems persist. Schools also develop individualized instructional plans for each child.

A-Plus schools also employ mini-assessments, short six-item tests given every five to seven days, that are designed to strengthen individualized instruction. These mini-assessments are relatively new and some teachers report that they are out of sequence with the curriculum, but many teachers also describe them as useful ways of staying focused on daily lessons.

E. Use of Data

CMS has been disaggregating student achievement data for many years. The data are used to identify weaknesses at the school and district level and to plan intervention strategies and programs. Principals are required to use the data to identify students who are falling behind and to prepare strategies with their teachers on raising performance.

1. CMS has built is own capacity to collect and use data

The district's Instructional Accountability Department develops local assessments, prints and distributes them, scores both local and state tests, and provides analysis of the results by school, teacher, student, and subgroup. The district has the capacity to turn around achievement data quickly and provide it to schools for timely interventions. The district also administers diagnostic tests to students at most grade levels, and results are provided to teachers with the expectation that they will be used to modify instruction.

The district developed elementary, middle and high school quarterly exams, as well. These "quarterlies" are used to assess student progress over the course of the school year so teachers do not have to wait until the end to discover that someone is behind. Principals say that quarterly test data are used to support teacher performance and to guide decisions about resources. A teacher, for instance, may discover—based on the quarterly test results—that some of her students need more practice with decoding. Her principal may arrange staffing to allow for small group work on that specific skill. This type of data are now used at all school levels by principals, teachers, and grade level teams at elementary and middle schools—and the department level in high schools—to strengthen instructional practice.

School-level interventions based on test score data may include modifying the school's instructional focus, supplementing staff development, or providing additional resources. Changes in school leadership may also occur.

2. Data are used to assure equity

CMS pays for all students in grades 9, 10, and 11 to take the PSAT. The district has created a database with the results and correlates them with course-taking patterns. The district's research discovered that many low-income and minority students with PSAT scores that suggested that they would do reasonably well in AP courses were not taking them. The district then instituted a program to spur AP enrollment using more aggressive placement strategies, letters to parents, and counseling.

The district also looks at data to ensure equal access by race to quality teachers (level of education and experience) and resources (instructional materials, supplies and technology). The district uses a staffing formula, for instance, that lowers the student-teacher ratio in schools with high numbers of students who are eligible for a free or reduced lunch.

F. Reform Press

Until his recent departure, Eric Smith had been a formidable presence in the schools. He was clear and consistent with his message that every child can learn, and principals report that he was closely listened to by school staff. Many of the teachers participating in the focus groups report having their classrooms visited by Smith, who they describe as encouraging, supportive—and relentless.

A striking example of "reform press" involved Smith's reassignment of middle school students when he discovered racial disparities in course placements among students with the same PSAT math scores. The reshuffling, which occurred five weeks into the school year, caused a considerable ruckus. In the end, teachers reported being pleasantly surprised by how well students performed in the more challenging classes. The result was that students landed on a course-taking path that included eighth-grade algebra, and greater opportunities for more advanced courses in high school.

G. Efficient Business Operations

1. Balanced Scorecard

Smith brought the "Balanced Scorecard" approach to the central office in the 1999–2000 school year. This management system is designed to help an organization clarify its vision and translate it into action. The district develops metrics, and collects and analyzes data to keep all functions focused on its student achievement goals. Raises for principals and central office staff above the director level are affected by performance on the scorecard.

The central office under Smith's administration assumes much of the district's management responsibilities. The central office is expected to support schools rather than having schools support the central office. The culture change has been a major component of the district's reform efforts.

2. Communications strategy

CMS has been very frank about the fact that the district has not achieved equity and excellence for all students. The district's leadership has appointed numerous community committees to review district programs and policies. Smith and the board are frequently seen in the community, where they are trusted and have the support of business groups, churches, neighborhood associations and the like.

The district has also taken pains to tell its story to the media and is now working to strengthen its internal communications with staff and teachers.

Finally, principals report that they are working more with families now that the district incorporates family and student surveys on school rating. Recent school assignment changes have meant that principals must now market their schools to parents and students.

H. Financial Resources

CMS receives most of its funding from the state, but property taxes comprise most of the district's remaining revenues. The school board does not have independent taxing or bonding authority and must work with the county commission on bond issues and tax increases.

Equity Plus schools receive additional services based upon need in four areas: student achievement (performance and growth on North Carolina End of Grade tests), characteristics of licensed staff (teacher turnover, advanced degrees, teacher experience, etc.), student characteristics (lower SES, student mobility rate, and LEP), and other factors that shape the overall leaning environment (school climate, parent involvement, materials, etc.). Extra support for these schools ranges from additional classroom supplies and materials to salary incentives for teachers. There are 49 *Equity Plus* schools in the district. CMS has differential staffing for all elementary and middle schools that have free and reduced lunch rates above 20 percent. Student-teacher ratios in a school decrease as the percentage of free and reduced lunch students increase.

The district also openly works to ensure that there is racial equity in the distribution of and access to the system's resources, particularly facilities, teaching staff, equipment, and supplies. Resources are closely targeted on high-need schools to ensure that all students can meet the standards. Principals report that resource decisions are data-driven, fair, and focused on the goal of higher student achievement for all.

I. Other Elements of Reform

- In 1997, CMS introduced the *AVID* (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, which identifies students who are college material, but who are not on a college track. The program is now in place in every middle school and is moving into the high schools. AVID's goal is "to prepare middle achieving students in grades six through twelve who have not been previously enrolled in a college preparatory path, for eligibility and success in four-year colleges and universities." *AVID* provides peer support, builds note-taking and other academic skills, and encourages aspirations for college.

- The district's early childhood program is critical to the long-range vision of closing the achievement gap. CMS has a home visitation program for children newly born through age three. It also employs a number of early childhood counselors and participates in the city's Head Start program. Smith initiated *Bright Beginnings*, using funds from the Title I program, to boost preschool literacy skills. The goal of these initiatives is to have at least 35% of African American students at grade level when they start school, and to have all children at grade level by the end of the third grade.

- CMS also has 35 *School Development Program* schools (Comer). The district has worked with Comer for over 10 years.

- There are 60 schools in the district that offer alternatives to parents as they choose the appropriate educational settings for their children.

- Before-and after-school programs, which are in place in all but 15 schools, have increased the focus on student achievement in the last three years.

J. Challenges

CMS continues to experience significant challenges in the process of implementing reform. The accountability system and the new curriculum, in particular, face barriers and some negative consequences.

- The district's use of monetary rewards doesn't sit well with many teachers. Some argue that school morale sinks when significant efforts do not result in higher test scores.

- The focus on reading and math has meant that schools have backed away from teaching science and social studies. Some elementary teachers report that science kits sometimes don't get opened. Middle school science and social studies teachers have seen some of their positions cut. Some principals fear that eliminating these subjects will create other problems in the long run.

- Some teachers indicate that the number of instructional days lost to testing at the high school level is disruptive.

- Schools that are not part of the *Equity Plus* program report that they have seen class sizes creep up. The district's focus on students below grade level (Level I and II) has meant smaller classers for these students, but larger classes for others. Increasing AP enrollments in many high schools, moreover, is creating problems with where to recruit enough qualified teachers to teach these courses. In some cases, AP class sizes have increased substantially.

- Site-based budgeting has meant that some principals have less time for classroom observations and less time to nurture new teachers. Principals struggle to balance the managerial and instructional sides of their jobs.

- Principals report having to make greater efforts to raise teacher morale and promote the new curriculum. Increasing student achievement levels have helped, however, especially in schools without extra resources.

V. ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS

- Achievement data provided by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district show that elementary student achievement on the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) tests improved significantly between 1995 and 2000.

- The percentages of students scoring below grade level declined among both African American and white students.

- There were significant reductions in the percentages of African American students scoring below grade level and a substantial narrowing of the achievement gap in the elementary grades.

- The reductions in the percentages of students at the bottom of the test score distribution were similar in math and reading.

- There were also positive trends in student performance and racial disparities when measured by average achievement.

- There were smaller and less consistent improvements in student performance and achievement gaps at the middle school level. There were no standardized achievement data on high schools.

MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools obtained school level data from Charlotte-Mecklenburg for student performance on the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) tests. The data included test scores in reading and math by race for grades three through eight. Data were available for 1994–1995 through 1999–2000. Tables C.1 through C.8 summarize the trends. The data are based on *school* level averages rather than *student* averages. There were no standardized achievement data available at the high school level since the EOG is given only in grades three through eight.

A. Elementary School Achievement

- The percentage of elementary school students performing below grade level declined significantly.

- Racial differences in the percentages of students who scored below grade level declined substantially.

Table C.1 shows school-level averages for the percentage of CMS elementary school students in each ethnic group who scored below grade level on the reading portion of the EOG test in

1994–1995 through 1999–2001.[16] The table is divided into three sections, one each for grades three through five. The first row of each section shows the percentage of African American students at the average school who scored below grade level during each year. The second row shows the percentage of white students at the average school who fell below this threshold.

The data show that the percentages of African American and white students who scored below grade level on the EOG have been declining during the study period. Racial differences on this measure have been declining as well. The first row of Table C. 1, for example, presents the EOG reading scores for third-graders. The first row of the table shows that, in 1995, 63 percent of African American third-graders at the average school in CMS scored below grade level, compared to 24 percent of white students. The resulting African American-white difference equaled 39 percentage points. By the end of the 2000–2001 school year, the percentage of African American students performing below grade level had declined to 40 percent, a reduction of 23 percentage points or over one-third of the 1995 level. The average percentage of white students performing below grade level declined to 10 percent during the same period. As a result, the African American-white difference in passing rates in 2000-2001 was 30 percentage points. This represents a reduction of 9 percentage points, or 23 percent of the original disparity. A similar pattern can be found across other grade levels.

Table C. 2 shows a similar analysis of math achievement. The table indicates a pattern of scores that are similar to that seen in reading, i.e., the percentage of students who scored below grade level declined and the racial differences narrowed.

Tables C. 3 and C. 4 use a different metric for assessing achievement trends in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Rather than *percentages* of students scoring above or below grade level, the tables report *average* achievement scores between 1995 and 2001. These data show significant improvements in average achievement for most groups and grades. The data do not show, however, the same reductions in racial gaps as that shown when using percentages of students at or above grade level. One might expect changes in average scores to be more modest than changes in passing rates. It is also possible that a ceiling effect on the state test is masking gains at the upper levels of performance.

B. Middle School Achievement

- Achievement data from Charlotte-Mecklenburg show more modest gains in student achievement and reductions in racial differences at the middle school level.

- There were modest reductions in the percentage of CMS middle school students scoring below grade level in both reading and math.

- These changes were smaller than the changes observed at the elementary school level, and result in smaller and less consistent reductions in racial differences in achievement.

[16]The North Carolina State End of Grade test classifies students who score at levels one or two out of a possible 4 as below grade level.

Tables C. 5 and C. 6 show the percentages of sixth, seventh, and eighth-graders scoring below grade level on the reading and math portions of the EOG. These data indicate that the numbers of African American students in this category has declined over the study period, although the rates of decline appear to be somewhat slower than the rates in the elementary grades. Reductions in racial disparities vary by subject and grade, narrowing in most grades and subjects but increasing slightly in seventh-grade reading and eighth-grade math.

Tables C. 7 and C. 8 show the average achievement levels among sixth, seventh and eighth grade students from each ethnic group. These data show that average middle school test scores have remained relatively flat, and changes in racial differences have not been consistent across subjects or grades.

In sum, the trends in achievement on the EOG in Charlotte-Mecklenburg suggest significant improvements at the elementary school level across all ethnic groups. These improvements are reflected in both average scores and percentages of students at or above grade level. Achievement gaps between African American and white students have also narrowed appreciably in the elementary grades. Trends in middle school performance, on the other hand, were more modest. The positive changes that existed were smaller, and changes in racial differences were less consistent.

C. Achievement Trends Compared to the State

Finally, the Council of the Great City Schools looked at the performance of the district compared with its state. The reader is referred to tables published in the report *Beating the Odds II*, which shows the percentage of students in Charlotte-Mecklenberg who were at or above grade level on the North Carolina End-of-Grade tests in reading and math. It also shows trends in the percentages of students passing the test statewide.

The results show that CMS has increased the percentage of students at or above grade level on the EOG in almost every grade level faster than statewide averages. For instance, CMS improved the percentage of third-graders at or above grade level on the reading portion of the EOG by 3.0 percentage points a year between 1997 and 2001, compared with an average statewide improvement of 2.5 percentage points a year. The district improved the percentage of fourth graders at or above grade level in reading by 2.5 percentage points a year over the same period, compared to an average statewide gain of 1.4 percentage points. This same pattern exists at the fifth, seventh, and eighth-grade levels. The state and the district improved by identical rates in the sixth grade.

The data show the same trends in math. CMS improved its math performance in the third, fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth grades faster than statewide averages. Charlotte's sixth-grade math gains were slightly slower than the state's, however.

Table C. 1

Percentage of Charlotte Elementary School Students at Level 1 or 2 on the EOG Reading Test by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 3								
African American Students	63	61	61	48	45	43	40	-23
White Students	24	22	19	15	12	13	10	-14
All Students	40	39	37	30	28	28	25	-15
Black-White Difference	39	39	42	33	33	30	30	-9
Grade 4								
African American Students	68	61	60	54	51	50	46	-22
White Students	27	20	21	15	16	14	12	-15
All Students	43	36	38	32	32	31	28	-15
Black-White Difference	41	41	39	39	35	36	34	-7
Grade 5								
African American Students	62	65	57	48	46	41	30	-32
White Students	20	24	18	15	13	11	6	-14
All Students	37	41	34	29	28	25	18	-19
Black-White Difference	42	41	39	33	33	30	24	-18

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) data were analyzed. EOG has four achievement levels. Students scoring at level 3 or level 4 are considered to be at or above grade level. The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table C. 2

Percentage of Charlotte Elementary School Students at Level 1 or 2 on the EOG Math Test by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 3								
African American Students	62	58	59	58	53	51	47	-15
White Students	20	19	16	18	14	14	10	-10
All Students	36	36	35	36	32	31	28	-8
Black-White Difference	42	39	43	40	39	37	37	-5
Grade 4								
African American Students	59	56	53	45	39	35	28	-31
White Students	19	17	15	10	9	7	5	-14
All Students	35	32	31	25	23	20	16	-19
Black-White Difference	40	39	38	35	30	28	23	-17
Grade 5								
African American Students	58	56	54	47	39	35	27	-31
White Students	18	19	17	13	9	9	5	-13
All Students	34	34	32	27	22	21	15	-19
Black-White Difference	40	37	37	34	30	26	22	-18

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) data were analyzed. EOG has four achievement levels. Students scoring at level 3 or level 4 are considered to be at or above grade level. The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table C. 3

Average EOG Reading Score of Charlotte Elementary School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 3								
African American Students	137.1	137.8	138.0	140.6	141.4	141.8	142.5	5.4
White Students	147.0	147.6	148.4	150.0	151.4	151.0	152.0	5.0
All Students	143.0	143.4	143.7	145.7	146.7	146.5	147.1	4.1
Black-White Difference	9.9	9.8	10.4	9.4	10.0	9.2	9.5	-0.4
Grade 4								
African American Students	140.7	142.0	142.0	143.3	144.1	144.4	145.3	4.6
White Students	150.2	151.6	151.9	153.7	153.6	154.5	154.8	4.6
All Students	146.4	147.7	147.6	149.0	149.2	149.7	150.1	3.7
Black-White Difference	9.5	9.6	9.9	10.4	9.5	10.1	9.5	0.0
Grade 5								
African American Students	146.0	145.5	146.8	148.7	148.9	150.4	151.9	5.9
White Students	155.4	154.6	156.1	157.8	158.0	158.9	160.2	4.8
All Students	151.4	150.9	152.2	153.8	153.8	154.9	156.2	4.8
Black-White Difference	9.4	9.1	9.3	9.1	9.1	8.5	8.3	-1.1

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: Charlotte North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) developmental scaled scores were analyzed. Developmental Scale Scores are designed to measure growth in student knowledge from grades 3-8, with a range from about 100 (lower end of third grade) to 200 (upper end of eighth grade). The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table C. 4

Average EOG Math Score of Charlotte Elementary School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 3								
African American Students	133.7	134.5	134.4	135.1	136.1	137.0	137.2	3.5
White Students	146.2	146.5	147.5	147.0	148.6	148.9	150.0	3.8
All Students	141.2	141.5	141.7	141.6	142.8	143.2	143.6	2.4
Black-White Difference	12.5	12.0	13.1	11.9	12.5	11.9	12.8	0.3
Grade 4								
African American Students	140.5	141.0	141.6	144.0	145.0	146.1	147.5	7.0
White Students	152.1	152.6	153.4	156.0	156.4	157.3	157.7	5.6
All Students	147.5	147.9	148.3	150.7	151.2	152.2	152.7	5.2
Black-White Difference	11.6	11.6	11.8	12.0	11.4	11.2	10.2	-1.4
Grade 5								
African American Students	148.3	148.5	149.1	150.5	152.4	153.4	154.7	6.4
White Students	159.0	159.0	159.6	161.0	163.2	163.6	164.1	5.1
All Students	154.6	154.7	155.3	156.4	158.3	158.9	159.6	5.0
Black-White Difference	10.7	10.5	10.5	10.5	10.8	10.2	9.4	-1.3

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: Charlotte North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) developmental scaled scores were analyzed. Developmental Scale Scores are designed to measure growth in student knowledge from grades 3-8, with a range from about 100 (lower end of third grade) to 200 (upper end of eighth grade). The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table C. 5

Percentage of Charlotte Middle School Students at Level 1 or 2 on the EOG Reading Test by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6								
African American Students	62	59	61	59	54	58	54	-8
White Students	22	18	22	17	17	17	14	-8
All Students	39	35	38	35	34	36	34	-5
Black-White Difference	40	41	39	42	37	41	40	0
Grade 7								
African American Students	56	64	61	56	49	51	49	-7
White Students	21	22	18	18	13	13	11	-10
All Students	36	41	37	35	29	31	29	-7
Black-White Difference	35	42	43	38	36	38	38	3
Grade 8								
African American Students	52	53	54	46	44	40	37	-15
White Students	17	18	16	9	9	9	7	-10
All Students	31	32	33	26	25	23	22	-9
Black-White Difference	35	35	38	37	35	31	30	-5

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) data were analyzed. EOG has four achievement levels. Students scoring at level 3 or level 4 are considered to be at or above grade level. The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table C. 6

Percentage of Charlotte Middle School Students at Level 1 or 2 on the EOG Math Test by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6								
African American Students	54	51	53	51	44	45	37	-17
White Students	17	13	15	13	12	12	8	-9
All Students	33	29	31	30	27	27	22	-11
Black-White Difference	37	38	38	38	32	33	29	-8
Grade 7								
African American Students	57	59	59	51	44	46	40	-17
White Students	18	16	16	15	10	11	8	-10
All Students	34	35	35	30	24	27	24	-10
Black-White Difference	39	43	43	36	34	35	32	-7
Grade 8								
African American Students	58	60	65	55	52	49	44	-14
White Students	19	20	20	14	14	11	10	-9
All Students	35	36	40	32	31	28	26	-9
Black-White Difference	39	40	45	41	38	38	34	-5

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) data were analyzed. EOG has four achievement levels. Students scoring at level 3 or level 4 are considered to be at or above grade level. The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table C. 7

Average EOG Reading Score of Charlotte Middle School Students by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6								
African American Students	148.8	149.1	148.9	149.3	150.3	149.6	150.8	2.0
White Students	157.6	159.0	158.9	159.6	160.3	160.5	161.3	3.7
All Students	153.8	154.8	154.6	155.1	155.6	155.3	156.0	2.2
Black-White Difference	8.8	9.9	10.0	10.3	10.0	10.9	10.5	1.7
Grade 7								
African American Students	152.7	151.4	151.6	153.0	154.0	153.9	154.6	1.9
White Students	160.9	160.9	161.8	162.1	163.2	163.2	164.1	3.2
All Students	157.4	156.7	157.2	158.1	159.1	158.8	159.3	1.9
Black-White Difference	8.2	9.5	10.2	9.1	9.2	9.3	9.5	1.3
Grade 8								
African American Students	154.7	154.3	154.2	155.8	156.5	157.0	157.8	3.1
White Students	162.8	162.7	163.7	165.1	165.7	166.0	166.7	3.9
All Students	159.3	159.2	159.5	160.9	161.6	161.9	162.3	3.0
Black-White Difference	8.1	8.4	9.5	9.3	9.2	9.0	8.9	0.8

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: Charlotte North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) developmental scaled scores were analyzed. Developmental Scale Scores are designed to measure growth in student knowledge from grades 3-8, with a range from about 100 (lower end of third grade) to 200 (upper end of eighth grade). The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Table C. 8

Achievement in Math Across District
Average Score of Charlotte Middle School Students
Over Time, by Year and Ethnicity

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Change
Grade 6								
African American Students	154.6	155.1	154.7	155.1	156.5	156.7	158.9	4.3
White Students	165.4	166.6	166.2	166.9	168.4	168.8	171.6	6.2
All Students	160.8	161.9	161.4	161.8	162.9	163.1	165.3	4.5
Black-White Difference	10.8	11.5	11.5	11.8	11.9	12.1	12.7	1.9
Grade 7								
African American Students	159.9	159.5	159.3	161.0	162.4	162.5	165.0	5.1
White Students	170.8	171.3	172.1	172.4	174.2	175.3	176.5	5.7
All Students	166.3	166.2	166.4	167.5	169.1	169.3	170.9	4.6
Black-White Difference	10.9	11.8	12.8	11.4	11.8	12.8	11.5	0.6
Grade 8								
African American Students	163.5	162.9	161.9	164.5	164.7	165.6	166.1	2.6
White Students	174.8	175.0	175.1	177.4	177.6	178.7	178.3	3.5
All Students	170.0	170.1	169.3	171.7	172.0	173.0	172.5	2.5
Black-White Difference	11.3	12.1	13.2	12.9	12.9	13.1	12.2	0.9

SOURCES: These data were provided by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

NOTES: Charlotte North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) developmental scaled scores were analyzed. Developmental Scale Scores are designed to measure growth in student knowledge from grades 3-8, with a range from about 100 (lower end of third grade) to 200 (upper end of eighth grade). The Black-White Differences are calculated as the absolute value of the difference between the two subgroups.

Appendix B: New York City Chancellor's District

CASE STUDY

NEW YORK CITY CHANCELLOR'S DISTRICT

I. INTRODUCTION

On October 29–30, 2001, the research team from MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools visited the Chancellor's District in New York City to gather information for this achievement gaps study. The Chancellor's District is a special administrative unit of the New York City Public Schools that includes approximately fifty schools that have been identified as low performing or are under "registration review" by the state. The research team met with the supervising superintendent, deputy and instructional superintendents, curricular specialists and other key district personnel. This abbreviated case study summarizes the key themes from the interviews conducted during this visit and from other information and data provided by the district.

The Chancellor's District may not be completely comparable to the other case study districts or to the comparison districts in this study for a number of reasons. First, the Chancellor's District is not an actual school system; it is a relatively small part of a very large school district. As such, the systemic issues that apply to urban school districts in general may not apply to the Chancellor's District. Second, the composition of the Chancellor's District changes over time. Schools may leave the Chancellor's District when they meet specified academic criteria and when their home district has the capacity to support their continued improvement. Third, the district does not have a governing structure *per se* and does not have to bargain independently with various labor unions. The district presents, therefore, a different set of challenges and characteristics than other districts in this study.

Nevertheless, the experiences of the Chancellor's District may provide powerful lessons on how urban school systems can raise the academic performance of students and schools that are furthest away from meeting state standards. The research team has included an abbreviated case study of this district because it appears to meet the initial criteria for selecting case study districts, although the data cannot confirm this point, and because it represents the kind of district not otherwise included in this study, i.e., an urban school district in a large northeastern city serving extremely poor students and having a strong union.

This case study is not as detailed as the case studies for Houston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Sacramento. The research team visited it only once and did not interview principals and teachers. The case study consists of a brief description of the context in which reforms occurred and specific educational improvement strategies currently used in the Chancellor's District.

II. Context

A. District Demographics

Over one million students attend the nearly 1,200 public schools of New York City school system, which is organized into nearly 40 community or special districts. The Chancellor's District serves about 25,000 students in 47 elementary, middle and high schools. A higher percentage of minority students, English Language Learners (ELL), and students eligible for a free or reduced price lunch attend schools in the Chancellor's District than schools citywide. About 15 percent of New York City's public school students are white, but less than one percent of the Chancellor's District is white. Hispanic students comprise about 55% of the Chancellor's District's enrollment; African American students make up about 43% of the district's enrollment; and Asian/Pacific Islanders comprise about 2% of the Chancellor's District. Approximately 18% of the students in the Chancellor's District are ELL and 91% are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch. Total per student spending for general education students in the Chancellor's District is $12,166 at elementary and middle schools and $13,417 at high schools, compared with the New York City systemwide average of $8,944.[1]

B. Key Challenges at the Outset of Recent Reforms

- **Low student achievement and failing schools.** By definition, schools in the Chancellor's District are low-performing, generally among the lowest performing in New York City. Schools that enter the district are "Schools Under Registration Review" (SURR)—a status established by the state department of education to indicate that the school is in danger of having its registration (certification) revoked. Not all SURR schools are in the Chancellor's District, but the district takes in the most challenged schools on the SURR list.

- **Pattern of deficiencies in schools**. When the Chancellor's District began in 1996 it consisted of only nine schools. Chancellor's District staff began their work at this point by making a thorough assessment of these schools including their staff, curriculum, and professional development plans. District staff found similar patterns of deficiencies in nearly all the schools no matter where they were located in the city. The schools offered a great variety of curriculum, lacked professional development, had weak leadership and staff, were located in rundown facilities, experienced serious discipline problems, and had almost no functioning parent associations.

C. Background

New York City Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew formed the Chancellor's District in 1996 in response to the state's threat of "corrective action" in nine city schools under registration review (SURR). The new unit was approved by the NYC Board of Education, enabling the Chancellor to

[1] Demographic information for the Chancellor's District is from The New York City Board of Education website (http://www.nycenet.edu/dist_sch/dist/default.asp?Dist=85). Student demographic information is from the current school year, 2001-2002 and expenditure information is from the 2000-2001 school year. (Per-pupil expenditures for New York City were listed as $8,106 for fiscal year 1998 in the NCES data source cited in the other case studies. No information for the Chancellor's District was available from this source.)

intervene directly in schools where community districts had "failed to demonstrate the capacity to redesign the failing organizations."[2] The Chancellor placed six elementary schools and three middle schools into the district in the first year. All of the original elementary schools have since been removed from the SURR list, but some remain part of the Chancellor's District because their community districts could not sustain or support their improvements. Two of the three original middle schools have been shut down and one has been redesigned.

The Chancellor's District initially had a small staff that worked closely with each school to assess current practices and help implement new strategies. The first supervising superintendent, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, developed an initial mission statement and goals for the district. District documents from the time indicate that the district's main function was "to develop, expand, support, and monitor the design and implementation of the instructional redesign process of the schools in its jurisdiction."[3] The district remained small until its fourth year, 1999–2000, when it took on 35 more schools, growing to a total of 47 schools. The supervising superintendent at the time was Arnold Santandreu. He had a brief tenure in the district, less than one year, but brought a renewed emphasis on using data to drive instruction and make decisions.

In March 2000, Sandra Kase took over as the district's supervising superintendent. She and her staff developed a new instructional plan, *A Model of Excellence*; intensified professional development efforts; and strengthened the finances and operations of the district. The district now includes students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade, having recently moved to include high schools, and with 47 schools is now larger than many community districts in New York City.

The district is now organized into four geographical regions, each with an instructional superintendent and a team of specialists. The district provides comprehensive support and additional resources to its schools, including curricula, professional development, and supplemental staffing. Currently, instructional programs, professional development, and staffing remain in place for two years after a school moves out of the Chancellor's District and back into its community district. At the end of the two-year transitional period, the school is re-evaluated to determine if it needs additional time or support.

III. Political Preconditions for Reform

One district leader we interviewed said that the main role of the Chancellor's District was to provide external support to failing schools that were not otherwise getting the help they needed from their community districts.

When schools are placed into the Chancellor's District, they are removed from the jurisdiction of their community school boards. This enables the schools to shift their focus away from political problems that are often common in the community districts to an agenda that is more focused on raising student achievement.

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[2] Corrective Action Plan: A city-wide implementation framework for redesigning schools, New York City Board of Education, 1996.

[3] *Corrective Action Schools: A progress report*. The Chancellor's District, New York City Board of Education, 9 January 1997.

The Chancellor's District has good relations with the teachers union, although the district does not have to bargain with it. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) appears to be thoroughly committed to making sure the district works, according to all school officials interviewed. The union has a teacher center in each school and supports the instructional approaches implemented by the district. A contractual agreement with the union—developed when the district was first formed—allows extended time for instruction, a feature that was renewed in the latest bargaining agreement. District leaders also note that the Council of Supervisors and Administrators has been very supportive of the Chancellor's District.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

A Model of Excellence is the instructional plan of the Chancellor's District. Introduced in the 1999–2000 school year, the plan has been refined and expanded with new leadership and as the district has grown to include high schools.[4]

A. Key Elements of the District Action Plan

- Smaller class sizes (20 students in K–3; 25 students in grades 4–8).
- Uniform, highly structured reading and mathematics programs.
- Blocks of time designated for literacy and math instruction.
- On-site, targeted staff development at the district, regional, and school levels.
- Extended time for students learning and teacher training.
- Effective ongoing assessment/evaluation of students.

B. Goals and Accountability

Schools in the Chancellor's District must improve student achievement within a three-year period or face state action. Three of the district's original middle schools were eventually closed or redesigned under this accountability requirement.

C. Focus of Reform

- **Start with elementary and middle schools.** The instructional focus of the Chancellor's District from the beginning has been on elementary schools, although the unit has now evolved to include high schools.
- **Emphasize a prescriptive instructional approach.** The district also uses highly prescriptive programs in reading and mathematics to improve basic skills for students who often

[4] *A Model of Excellence*, Chancellor's District, New York City Board of Education, 2001–2002. Please see forthcoming district documents for further details on the instructional plan in the Chancellor's District.

come from families with very few resources. The district is now taking the same prescriptive approach to its middle and high schools. Block scheduling is being implemented in the high schools and efforts are currently underway to restructure high schools into smaller learning communities.

D. Curriculum and Instruction

The Chancellor's District adopted *Success for All* (SFA) as its reading program in 1997–98, the second year of the district's operations. This reading program was chosen in part because many teachers in these schools were extremely inexperienced. SFA is highly prescriptive and provides specific directions for teachers. District leaders also realized that staff development had been in short supply in these schools. A uniform and highly structured program allowed district organizers to provide training most effectively. SFA's eight-week assessments also helped guide student instruction and teacher training. The teachers' union supported the adoption, a position that is resisted in some cities as undercutting teacher creativity and discretion. Both management and labor came to agree, however, that a structured program was most likely to be most effective.

1. Additional literacy block and skills building

Elementary and middle schools in the Chancellor's District have two 90-minute blocks devoted to literacy, one using SFA. This system was put into place for grades K–8 last year when district leaders wanted to supplement SFA with additional guided reading and writing interventions. The district has written its own curriculum for this second literacy block. The district has also made sure that each classroom has its own library with at least 100 titles, including books appropriate for special education and bilingual students. Time is built into the instructional day for activities that promote critical skills development in language acquisition and processing.

2. Structured mathematics program

Elementary schools in the Chancellor's District began to use a uniform math program, *Math Trailblazers*, three years ago. Curriculum leaders in the district say that the National Science Foundation-recommended program requires block scheduling, 60 minutes daily of math instruction, and a commitment to a specific number of instructional blocks per week. *Math Trailblazers* is not as scripted as the reading program, but curriculum specialists in the district have developed a specific pacing guide for teachers. Teachers have some flexibility to move topics around as long as all necessary topics are covered by the April state exam. The district also provides supplementary materials to align the overall program with New York State standards. Three math assessments are given districtwide each school year. Item analysis of test results identifies where students need extra help and teachers need additional support. The district also uses *Mathematics-in-Context* for grades 6–8. The program is aligned with the New York State Learning Standards and New York City performance standards. There is a recommended teaching sequence at each grade level. Both formal and informal assessments are imbedded into the curriculum allowing ongoing feedback for teachers on how their student are doing.

3. Extended time for students

The vast majority of schools in the Chancellor's District are "extended time" schools (ETS). The extended time is scheduled from 2:20 to 3:00 p.m. in elementary schools and from 8:00 to 8:40 a.m. in middle schools. During this time, teachers work with students in small groups on specific strategies from either the SFA or the district's literacy block. This added time fulfills much of the tutoring requirements under SFA. Schools in the Chancellor's District also have an after school program that focuses on literacy two days per week and mathematics three days per week.

4. High quality and quantity of professional development

Schools in the Chancellor's District are also provided intensive professional development organized by the central office. Originally, curriculum vendors, like SFA, were responsible for much of the professional development in the Chancellor's District. Eventually, the district developed its own capacity to conduct professional development. Curriculum leaders in the district train six curriculum specialists in each regional office, who in turn train specialists at schools all over the city.

Each school has a team of at least five people, in addition to assistant principals, who play a role in providing professional development. Assistant principals are required to be instructional leaders in their schools and are charged with working closely with curriculum specialists. There are three curriculum specialists in each school who focus on literacy, math, and either technology or bilingual education; an SFA coordinator; and a UFT teacher center specialist. The team provides a two-tiered approach to staff development, strengthening both content knowledge and developing effective instructional practices. Most professional development is delivered in the teacher's classroom. It is curriculum-driven and ongoing. Each school's professional development team meets once a week, on-site, and once a month with the regional instructional superintendent. The director of professional development for the Chancellor's District coordinates all districtwide professional development activities.

All teachers, guidance counselors, and paraprofessionals in extended time schools are required to participate in one week of professional development before the start of each school year. These days are used for intensive training in SFA, the use of extended literacy blocks, and mathematics instruction. A second SFA training session is conducted in November for teachers who were hired late. School facilitators also train staff who come into schools off-cycle. Professional development takes place two periods per week during the school's extended time period throughout the school year. Again, the focus is on implementing SFA and on the second literacy block and on the math block.

The district also invests in the professional development of principals and assistant principals. District leaders recognize the need to build capacity in these schools, since they will eventually return to their community districts, which are often unable to provide such intensive support. Regional superintendents see part of their jobs as building the capacity of principals to serve as instructional leaders. The central office supports this effort by holding districtwide monthly principals' meetings and providing professional development opportunities at the regional level.

E. Use of Data

The second supervising superintendent of the Chancellor's District, Arnold Santandreu, focused relentlessly on improving the use of data in the district. He developed and provided data to drive decision-making at both the district and school levels. The walls in principals' offices often include color-coded charts listing scores on various classes of assessments. Even during Byrd Bennett's term, the Chancellor's District began using benchmark assessments throughout the school year. The use of data has grown with increasing technological capacity. The district, now under Sandra Kase, disaggregates data by student sub-groups and provides professional development on its use.

Benchmark tests are used in SFA, mathematics, and other subjects. The tests serve diagnostic purposes and are used in test preparation for students. Results from the benchmark assessments go to instructional superintendents who then work with principals to develop instructional responses. In extended time schools, benchmark data are used to target instructional inventions for students working in small groups on the same skills. Regional staff also use data in planning professional development with school staff. Each school's professional development team is required to submit specific professional development plans every eight weeks using assessment data generated by SFA.

F. Reform Press

The primary focus of the Chancellor's District is on raising student achievement. Nearly every minute in the school day is scheduled with the goal of boosting students' literacy and math skills. The site-visit team did not interview school staff, however, to determine how the district's reforms are pressed into the classroom. It is clear, however, that such pressure is exerted on the schools.

G. Efficient Business Operations

1. Support to schools

Operations personnel in the Chancellor's District believe that one of their goals is to reduce the time principals and other school leaders spend on administrative issues. They have prepared administrative manuals and mini-guides that are intended to be quick references for building staff. Operations personnel are also part of the strategic planning process in these schools and help school leadership teams plan for resource control and school-based budgeting within the rules imposed by the district. Most funds are used to support the staffing model and instructional programs chosen by the district, but schools have some discretionary spending.

2. Human resources

The Chancellor's District has its own personnel department that works closely with the central office of the NYC Board of Education. The unit conducts its own recruiting and training, however. The department begins recruitment in November for the following school year and usually continues through October. This year schools in the district opened with only 12 vacancies. Teachers

and supervisors in Chancellor's District schools have the option of transferring out of the district. When the Chancellor's District increased to 47 schools in 1997, many teachers opted out and the personnel department recruited certified teachers citywide. All SURR schools must be staffed by fully certified teachers by 2003 according to state law. This year 94 percent of the teaching staff in the Chancellor's District is fully certified.

H. Resources

The Chancellor's District has a higher per pupil expenditure than other districts in New York City. It is able to offer salary incentives to teachers, to increase instructional staff to bring class sizes to fewer than 25 students, fund extended school hours and after school programs, purchase curriculum programs and materials for all of its schools, and offer comprehensive professional development on-site to all of its teachers.

V. Achievement Trends

Schools move continuously in and out of the Chancellor's District, making it difficult to assess overall achievement trends. The Council of the Great City Schools did obtain data on the performance of schools assigned to the Chancellor's District to get a rudimentary look at achievement trends. The data show that the percentage of students at or above proficiency levels (Levels 3 and 4) on the state's English Language Arts assessment increased among fourth-graders from 14.0% in 1999, to 18.8% in 2000, to 24.4% in 2001, to 26.9% in 2002. The percentage of third-graders scoring in Levels 3 and 4 on math increased from 16.6% in 1999, to 16.7% in 2000, to 18.7% in 2001, to 26.3% in 2002. The percentages of fifth-graders scoring at this level increased 9.5% in 1999, to 13.6% in 2000, then declined to 12.9% in 2002. The schools and students that comprise these statistics, however, are not the same from year to year -- suggesting extreme caution in the use of the numbers. The fact that schools move out of the Chancellor's District and of the state's SURR list is an indication that they are improving, however. No additional analyses were done on this district.

Appendix C: Comparison Districts

CASE STUDY

COMPARISON DISTRICTS

I. INTRODUCTION

In January and February of 2002, the field research team from MDRC and the Council of the Great City Schools visited two comparison districts that were included in this study of urban school districts. These districts were chosen by the Council's Research Advisory Group after staff had sought volunteers from the membership. These districts were thought to be similar in many respects to the case study districts, except that they have yet to improve overall student achievement or to narrow racially-identifiable achievement gaps. These districts will not be mentioned by name, but will be referred to here as Comparison District 1 and Comparison District 2. The purpose of visiting these comparison districts was to gather information about the historical and administrative context of each district, the key reform strategies being used in each district, and the relationship between these district level strategies and changes in teaching and learning in the classroom.

During the two-day visit to each comparison district, the research team interviewed the superintendent, key central office personnel, school board members, members of the greater community. The team also conducted focus groups of principals and teachers. This case study summarizes the key themes from the interviews and from background materials and data supplied by the districts. The case study is organized around three sections, including the context in which reforms are occurring, the political preconditions for reform, and the educational improvement strategies used by the districts.[1]

The reader should note that both of these comparison districts have undertaken substantial reforms over the 2001-2002 school year. There are new superintendents in both districts working to turn around the situations they found. Much of what is described in this chapter pre-dates both leaders. It is too early to tell whether the new reforms instituted by the districts will improve student achievement or narrow achievement gaps. Both districts are hopeful.

II. CONTEXT

A. District Demographics

Comparison District 1 is a large northern district, which, despite declining enrollment over the past few years, has over 100,000 students. As is true of Houston and the Chancellor's District, the vast majority of students in Comparison District 1 are from minority groups. White students make up less than 10% of the student body. The majority of students of color in this district are African American. Over two-thirds of the students in Comparison District 1 are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch and fewer than 10% are English Language Learners.

[1] As the specifics of achievement trends in each district might jeopardize the anonymity of these comparison districts, a detailed analysis of student achievement trends in these districts is not included.

Comparison District 2 falls between Charlotte and Sacramento in size. It enrolls between 50,000 and 100,000 students. It is also similar to Charlotte in terms of student ethnicity. Approximately half of the students in Comparison District 2 are white and half are African American. Fewer than 10% of its students are English Language Learners, but about half are eligible for a free or reduced price lunch.

B. Key Challenges

Like many urban school systems, the comparison districts face many of the same challenges as the case study districts. These included low student achievement, shortages of qualified teachers and/or high teacher turnover, poor business systems, and insufficient funding. A few specific examples from each district are described briefly below.

Comparison District 1

- **Student achievement.** Only a third of the students in Comparison District 1 are performing at grade level on a nationally norm-referenced test of reading, math, and science.[2] About half of the district's first-grade students perform at or above grade level in reading, but scores decline rapidly as grade levels increase. Fewer than 20 percent of tenth-graders read at grade level. The majority of students also fail to meet "satisfactory" standards on the state's criterion referenced test. Scores in both reading and math have declined over the last three years.

- **Teacher supply and turnover.** Comparison District 1 suffers from a substantial shortage of certified teachers. There have been up to 1,000 teacher vacancies at the start of recent school years. Substitutes are filling some vacancies. The district has established financial incentives for permanent substitutes to get certified and has begun an accelerated licensure program for mid-career professionals. Teacher retention, however, is almost as big a problem as recruitment. Teachers are lured away to other districts where both salaries and working conditions are better. The district's facilities are old, and many are in serious need of major renovations. Teachers do not feel safe on some campuses and class sizes have crept up despite federal class size reduction grants. Surrounding districts have boomed with "white flight" out of the urban area.

- **Principal turnover.** Another major problem in Comparison District 1 is principal turnover. In the last several years, the district converted interim principals to permanent positions and hired new principals in about a quarter of its schools. The district has lost principals to both retirement and reconstitution. A principal academy was established recently, but many principals indicated that training was insufficient to help them become instructional leaders. This situation may contribute to teacher shortages and turnover as well. A recent survey of teachers who leave found that the number one reason for departure was lack of administrative support at the school level.

[2] With respect to nationally norm-referenced tests, performing at grade level is interpreted as performing at or above the 50th percentile of the national distribution.

- **Central office systems.** The current leadership in Comparison District 1 maintains that its current electronic information and data processing systems have severely limited the district's ability to manage and implement accountability measures. Staff believe that the district's information systems will need to be thoroughly redesigned to support both business operations and central office efforts to monitor student progress. A senior administrator observed that the human resources department was never structured to support schools. The district is now centralizing the hiring process and trying to conduct background checks more efficiently. Many other basic operating systems are not automated or are just being automated. The district's teacher seniority list, for example, consisting of thousands of names was recently assembled by hand; the research department does not have sufficient staff to extract or analyze teacher or student attendance data; and test score results are not disaggregated at the school level.

- **Budget and funding.** The budget is a consistent problem for Comparison District 1. It faces budget shortfalls due both to the economic downturn and to declining enrollments. Budget cuts also closed the professional development unit and curtailed regional superintendents who once provided support teams to schools. Regional superintendents used to serve 25 to 30 schools with 20 or more support staff, but the executive directors that replaced them serve 20 or more schools without staff. Getting textbooks into the schools and fixing facilities has been a major priority for the district over the last two years.

Comparison District 2

- **Student achievement.** Student achievement in Comparison District 2 is not as low as Comparison District 1. Nevertheless, trends in achievement through spring 2001 have been stagnant, and racial differences have remained large. Reading achievement at approximately half of the elementary schools in Comparison District 2 is below the national average. State test scores in both reading and math through 2001 have been relatively flat. Median national percentiles hover around 45 in both reading and math.

- **Teacher turnover and recruitment.** Like Comparison District 1, Comparison District 2 has high teacher turnover and poor recruitment. The district usually begins the school year fully staffed, due in part to the high concentration of colleges in the area. But, turnover is high with some teachers only lasting a matter of weeks or months. There were approximately 600 (out of approximately 4,500) new teachers last year. Low salaries mean that teachers are often working two jobs to make ends meet. According to some senior staff, the district hires too many uncertified teachers and has a relatively weak recruitment program, often waiting until spring before beginning to recruit. The district has recently begun its search process earlier, and has begun to look across state lines. Principals choose who they hire but indicate that they often have few teachers from which to select.

- **Budget and funding.** Comparison District 2 does not suffer from the same levels of funding difficulties as District 1. In the opinion of the district's new leadership, however, the central office is overstaffed and administrative salaries draw funds away from the schools. Schools

also appear to lack good equipment, libraries are inadequate, appropriate textbooks are not always available, science labs are out of date and poorly stocked, and some schools raise money for copiers and to pay phone bills.

C. Background

Comparison District 1

A highly politicized and micromanaging board was recently replaced in a state takeover of the district. The takeover fueled substantial local dissent and political acrimony. The district has had numerous superintendents over the last 10 years, adding to the system's instability and inability to get traction under its reforms. The situation has been complicated by a strong union with an historically contentious relationship with the central office.

1. State ousts local school board perceived as ineffective

The belief that past school boards in Comparison District 1 micromanaged the district is widely held. Some observers claim that the board's decisions were often politically motivated. One education reporter asserted that the old school board was "rife with corruption." Human resources staff confirm that before the state takeover, many new hires were politically connected.

Recently, a new board was appointed as part of the state takeover and is expected to lead the district for at least two more years. This board is not involved in day-to-day operations, as the superintendent has many of the powers traditionally held by the board. The current board's main goal was to hire the superintendent and hold him accountable for implementing the district's improvement plan. Benchmark goals are included in the superintendent's contract.

Many members of the community were, and still are, opposed to the state takeover, claiming that the community's voting rights were violated. Some community members felt that race was at the heart of the takeover, pointing out that their schools were not the worst in the state. Many of those who opposed the state takeover are the first to admit, however, that the pace of reform was slow before the state intervened. Many of the district's new staff indicate that the most recent reforms would have been impossible under the old board.

2. District has experienced frequent leadership turnover

Comparison District 1 has had multiple superintendents in the last 10 years. Each brought a new set of priorities and goals. Two were hired to tend to specific financial or organizational problems and had short terms. The others were hired and fired by a school board with much turnover of its own. The current superintendent brought many new faces to the central office and has pushed an agenda of customer-oriented and data-driven operations to improve efficiency and raise student achievement. His immediate predecessor served briefly, but focused on cutting the budget and successfully lobbied the state legislature to bar principals and assistant principals in the district from membership in the local union.

3. Strong teachers unions and other employee groups

The local teachers' union represents the vast majority of staff in the district's schools. Several different bargaining units represent district staff. Fewer than 10 percent of the district employees are non-union. One observer indicated that there is not much disagreement between management and labor about district goals, but that there is plenty of disagreement over how to best reach them. The union's approach is described by the central office staff as traditional and management's attitude about labor is described as arrogant and disrespectful. It has been difficult for the two sides to agree over much for any length of time. The two sides did come together during the summer of 2002, however, to ratify a new contract.

Moving principals out of their union has changed the dynamic between them and the central office in many respects. Principals are now "at will" employees and have been subjected to extensive turnover during the last few years. The new principals and those who have been retained appear to be more focused on the superintendent's goals.

Comparison District 2

Much like Charlotte, Comparison District 2 wrestled with a court-ordered desegregation plan for many years. Unlike Charlotte, the district has been unable to simultaneously develop a new student assignment plan and boost student achievement. Until recently, the school board focused on individual schools rather than on districtwide achievement. The community is very concerned about the quality of its schools but has not pursued reform in a systematic way. The district receives little support from the state, which has only recently adopted meaningful curriculum standards and assessments.

1. Desegregation case distracts from instructional priorities

The school desegregation case has been an important driver of local priorities in Comparison District 2 for many years. The district began to aggressively pursue a resolution to the court-ordered desegregation plan some 10 years ago. The school board proposed a new plan that addresses the plaintiff's concerns and reorganizes the school system so that students will go to schools closer to home and parents will have more choices. The board, with agreement from the plaintiffs, was able to persuade the courts to declare the school system unitary and is in the final stages of its student assignment/school construction plan. Over $200 million will be spent to implement the capital program, but the funding package apparently contains little for instructional improvement.

Many local observers describe the district as having a culture that is driven by compliance rather than achievement, and where priorities are set for the convenience of adults rather than for the good of students. The desegregation litigation, no doubt, exacerbated this atmosphere but so has the district's insularity. The research team was told that few in the central office attend conferences or visit other school districts. Many teachers are products of the school system. The district rarely recruits out of state and has only recently hired a principal from outside its ranks.

Desegregation policies in the district have also aggravated student mobility problems. Inner city and suburban schools were paired in the original desegregation plan. Students in the early grades were taught at the suburban schools, students in upper elementary were taught at inner-city schools, and there was a neighborhood option for kindergarten. In addition, many elementary schools were reconfigured into irregular grade levels to meet the requirements of the desegregation order. Students could be in three different schools before reaching junior high.

The district also saw extensive white flight in the 1960s and 1970s. There are numerous private schools in the area, which are the choice for many families. The city/county public school system holds on to some students with selective magnet programs.

2. The district has experienced frequent changes in leadership and priorities

Comparison District 2 has had three superintendents in recent years, all of whom have had very different priorities. Two previous superintendents focused on resolving the ongoing desegregation case and did not make instructional improvement a priority. The immediate predecessor to the current superintendent was a long-time district leader who was selected for his familiarity with and expertise in school operations and local politics. He largely left instructional issues to others on staff. An earlier superintendent tried to push accountability by reconstituting failing schools, but was described as unfocused, and the district seemed unready for the real consequences of low performance.

3. Strong community support for education, but efforts are sometimes unfocused

The community in Comparison District 2 appears to be very concerned about the state of the schools. The new superintendent says he fields calls everyday from newspapers and hears concerns from every civic group imaginable. There was a time, however, when the community was more concerned with "where" kids were going to school rather than the "how and what" they were learning. Settling the desegregation case and developing the student assignment plan have finally cleared the way for focusing on student achievement.

Displeased with the instructional plans of past superintendents, a recent city mayor took things into his own hands and proposed his own improvement plan for the school district. His plan forced a curriculum on the schools that they were not ready to accept but included funds for music, art and physical education and additional supplies as incentive.

There are over 20 colleges and universities in and around the city. It is also a community with many wealthy families, business leaders and foundations eager to improve education. There has been little faith, however, in the school district's capacity to improve itself, so the district is often left out of community planning and omitted from local grants. Initiatives have sometimes been foisted on the schools, which are desperate for resources, without a systemic strategy.

4. School board focused on individual schools rather than districtwide achievement

In the past, local leaders perceived the school board as attending to the interests of individual schools as opposed to the district as a whole. The board often was drawn into specific details of

desegregation planning, for instance, especially when constituents wanted exceptions made. A local business group wanted the board to take a broader perspective, and began in the early 1990s to back new candidates for the board. This effort has resulted in a new board majority in the last couple of years. New members included more business people, who were less focused on compliance than results. A veteran board member says the board has evolved into a policymaking group over the last year or so and focused more on student learning. The board hired a new superintendent in June 2001 who has rapidly completed a strategic plan to raise student achievement.

The school board is not completely independent. It relies on the city council for its overall budget, so must attend to their concerns. The school board is often viewed as a stepping-stone for city council candidates. The mayor also has substantial influence on the schools. In recent years he provided significant funds to build new schools.

5. Teachers work hard but evaluation procedures slow removal of ineffective staff

Teachers in Comparison District 2 are perceived to be hard workers who have not been given the necessary tools or resources to be effective. It is difficult to remove ineffective teachers, however, because the tenure system is so strong. Tenured teachers are usually evaluated only twice over a 10-year period. They may be evaluated every year if put on probation or when a principal deems it necessary. Last year, 40 teacher contracts (out of about 4,500 teachers) were recommended for termination—19 of which were not "reelected." The others resigned. Although the district may choose not to renew the contract of an ineffective principal, fear of litigation makes demotion the tool of choice. Patronage has historically played a role in principal appointments.

6. State Department of Education seen as traditional, weak and ineffectual

The state department of education has not provided much meaningful support for the district in general or for low-performing schools in particular. According to one leader, the state has only recently adopted real curriculum standards and only for elementary and middle schools. The previous test used by the state was not aligned to their own standards. The curriculum in Comparison District 2 has not been aligned with any version of the state standards or with the state assessment. Approximately 8 percent of the district's schools are "on notice" by the state for low performance. A principal from an "on-notice" school said that technical assistance from the state consisted of sending an "exemplary educator" to help write the school improvement plan. The educator was unfamiliar with urban schools and expressed the opinion, to staff as well as to students, that the students' family backgrounds were responsible for low test scores. Principals indicate that the district also has not done much for "on notice" schools. The district has recently had a state department of education audit, which consisted of one person spending a day with school files, producing no written report.

III. Political Preconditions for Reform

School boards in both comparison districts have in the past had great difficulty reaching consensus around district priorities and have spent little time developing a shared vision for their school system and its performance. Student achievement competed with other priorities pushed by individual board members or new superintendents. Both districts have new boards focused on a

common goal of student achievement and have hired superintendents who are pushing for high achievement for all students. One district reached this focus after a state takeover. The other district had to move past its focus on desegregation and needed the fresh perspective of new school board members.

Comparison District 1

There was no evidence that the old board was ever able to achieve consensus around either broad or specific goals for student achievement in Comparison District 1. School board elections often brought new members, changing coalitions and the hiring of a new superintendent. Superintendents came in with their own priorities and plans. Some focused attention on district finances and physical plant and others on specific grade levels or categories of students (e.g., middle schools, at-risk students, transition years, etc.). Recent superintendents were often not in office long enough to develop and implement a comprehensive strategic plan. They also had to contend with what many observers describe as board micromanagement. The frequent dismissal of superintendents suggests that the board and superintendent failed to share a common vision and that a superintendent could not count on consistent board support when making changes in policy or practice.

The current board is appointed and made up of diverse members of the community—business leaders, as well as community activists. Initially, the board worked with a state-appointed interim superintendent. During this period, they began to develop goals for the district — the first goal was to improve student achievement. The new goals helped to guide their search for a new superintendent. As a condition of the state takeover, the board's main role was to appoint the superintendent and hold him accountable for meeting specific goals. Observers say that so far the appointed board, though distant from the details, has been supportive of the new superintendent and his plan.

Comparison District 2

The school board in Comparison District 2 has also undergone a transformation but it has been self-initiated rather than state imposed. Prior school boards appear to have "worked under siege" and dealt primarily with desegregation problems and issues of individual schools. These issues set the tone and directions for the board. Observers say that members of earlier boards often seemed obsessed with hidden agendas and had trouble trusting one another. This period, ironically, brought a new sense of accountability but it was apparently never coupled with a strategic plan.

About 10 years ago, a local business group tried to broaden the perspective of the school board and developed a school system report card that evaluated both student achievement and equity. It served to raise expectations in the community and involve business leaders in education matters. More recently, as the court moved to settle the desegregation case and the superintendent planned to retire, this business group supported several new candidates for school board—most won. A board with a majority of new members was poised to choose a new superintendent. A local foundation funded a national search. The consultant directing the search realized, however, that the board had little idea about what kind of leadership it wanted. A retreat that focused on strategic planning and standards brought the board to consensus about priorities for the district. The search process itself prompted debate about the nature and role of the board but an agreement to get serious about student achievement.

The board recently hired a superintendent with a history of success in raising academic performance. They have worked together to develop a strategic plan and have supported unpopular decisions to remove some principals. Board members realize the difficulty of retaining their role as a policy governance board as local politics intrude and the teachers union considers running candidates in the next school board election.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

A. Key Elements of the District Action Plan

Both comparison districts have recently written new mission and goal statements for their school systems. The goals for Comparison District 1 are fairly broad but clearer than they used to be. Comparison District 1 has begun to lay the groundwork to meet its goals with a new curriculum and a commitment to use data to inform instruction. The district has also aggressively reformed many of its business operations. A clear implementation plan connecting goals to classrooms does not exist yet, however. Comparison District 2 has developed a strategic plan that outlines action steps to meet specific district goals, but it has yet to be fully implemented. The district, in the meantime, has begun to restructure central office to shift greater resources to the schools.

Comparison District 1

At this stage, Comparison District 1 has developed broad goals but has just finished developing specific benchmarks for student achievement districtwide. There were no individual school goals and no detailed time frame for meeting districtwide goals when the research team visited the district. There was, moreover, no detailed action plan for implementing the goals. There was considerable willingness—even eagerness—to develop such detailed goals and an action plan to match. The district has recently completed its districtwide school improvement plan to considerable fanfare, in that it was the first such plan prepared by the district in recent memory.

Central office leadership in Comparison District 1 has expressed concern about the district's site-based decision-making model, which apparently allows considerable variation in instructional approaches from school to school. Principals we spoke with agreed that there was tremendous variation, but were reluctant to lose their autonomy. Many wanted to retain various programs or comprehensive school reform models that were everywhere in the district.

Comparison District 2

Comparison District 2 has had several false starts in their reform efforts—a strategic plan without funding, goals without a strategic plan, and a new curriculum without support. None brought about improved student achievement. The current superintendent has moved to align goals, develop a strategic plan, and secure funding, but the plan is in the early stages of implementation.

About five years ago a prior superintendent produced an ambitious strategic plan that proposed upgraded facilities as well as strategies and programs to improve student achievement. He tried to sell the plan by explaining that the district was under-funded and needed numerous changes to serve the needs of a growing at-risk student population. The high cost of the program met with considerable resistance in the community and was not funded.

The next superintendent developed an accountability framework that included measurable student achievement goals for the district. There was no comprehensive plan for meeting the goals or improving instruction, however. Most funding increases ended up being earmarked for capital projects. This was about the time the city's mayor urged the district's adoption of E.D.Hirsch's core curriculum. The district reluctantly offered voluntary staff development on use of the curriculum, but few in the central office attended training and teachers were left to "layer it over" other programs. Some principals indicated that they simply worked around the curriculum.

The current superintendent began to restructure the central office as soon as he was hired. He and his cabinet have worked closely with the school board to set measurable goals for the system and to develop a strategic plan. The plan outlines specific action steps, the person or persons who are responsible for each step, and how success will be measured. The plan is in the early stages of implementation and has yet to include an accountability framework for ensuring that the plan is carried forward and goals are met.

B. Goals and Accountability

Comparison District 1

- **Central office accountability.** The current superintendent is held accountable by the board of education for specific district goals. He in turn holds central office staff accountable, but during our visit there was no reference to or evidence of a formal system of accountability for central office staff. Most of the staff we spoke with were familiar with the district's goals but did not have specific department or individual goals. No one in the central office appeared to be on a performance contract or were evaluated based on the attainment of district goals.

- **School and student accountability.** Comparison District 1 has recently created a "director of accountability" position charged with creating an accountability system for all schools. The district has in the past identified low-performing schools using test score data. Low-performing schools are required to develop and submit a school improvement plan. Plans can lack detail, however, and are often developed with little guidance from the central or regional offices. The district does not have specific or measurable student achievement goals for its individual schools or consequences if districtwide goals are not met. The district was revamping its principal evaluation forms and procedures when the site visit team was in the district. New procedures will include student achievement as one of the areas on which principals will be evaluated. The district does have a policy, however, for ending social promotions.

- **Low-performing schools.** Regional superintendents in Comparison District 1 worked with low-performing schools in years past. They were responsible for about 25 to 30 schools each and had a staff for curriculum, housing, Title I, and attendance to work with schools. This regional superintendent structure was discontinued a few years ago. A new administrative position, Executive Director, was created to fill the void but the directors do not have staff, are responsible for 20 or more schools, and have responsibility for a variety of duties ranging from approving field trips to filling our medicaid reimbursement forms.

  There are no awards or incentives for staff to work in low-performing schools—the union is against differentiated pay. The district has recently, however, initiated a Chancellor's district-type unit to focus on the district's lowest performing schools. The unit is in the formative stages. There was no mechanism yet for intervening in low-performing schools.

Comparison District 2

- **Central office accountability.** Beginning about five years ago, the superintendent began reporting the school system's annual progress to the school board and community. Each year this report showed little or no progress, and some indicators got worse. Such news did not result in reprimands or terminations in the central office. There were no tangible consequences for those running the district and no apparent changes in the way they did business.

- **School and student accountability.** Documents from Comparison District 2 indicate that schools are supposed to monitor progress toward district goals and to revise multi-year school improvement plans accordingly. Newcomers to the district who have experience in other states indicate that there is very little accountability and almost no consistency or focus. School improvement plans are often done and redone several times without consequence.

  Ninth grade is the first place in Comparison District 2 where there are academic consequences for students. Students in the district must earn five credits in the ninth grade before they can move onto tenth grade. High school principals expect students who are poor readers in ninth grade to drop out. Most students who finish ninth grade will graduate. The ones who do not earn enough credits but stay in school are placed in a tenth grade transition program. One principal says this group is bigger than the senior class and most eventually drop out as well.

  The new district superintendent believes the district is retaining too many students and has many repeat retentions. They are seeing 16 year olds in 8th grade and 12 year olds in 4th grade, but do not have an alternative school for these overage students or an instruction plan for improving their performance. Teachers feel that summer school is ineffective and students are simply promoted if they attend, regardless of their progress. The district's suspension policy contributes to failures. Out-of-school suspensions remove students from school for 10 days at a time, and some students are not allowed to make up work.

- **Low-performing schools.** A previous superintendent in Comparison District 2 reconstituted some low-performing schools. He had developed an accountability framework that included achievement and attendance. Schools were given two years to get off his "list." His successor continued to define district goals as part of an accountability system without any threat of reconstitution or other consequences for not meeting targets. Principals indicated that the district did not have plan for dealing with low-performing schools.

C. Focus of Reform

At this stage, neither comparison district has a well-articulated reform strategy nor have they decided where they would begin the reform process. Neither district appears to have thought through a general theory of action to drive their reforms as they started. Comparison District 1's primary goal when the research team visited was to "improve student achievement." The strategy for doing so at that point was relatively vague and lacked detail. One planned reform involved periodic local assessments to inform teachers and principals of student progress at more frequent intervals than could be obtained from state tests. It was not clear, however, how well the assessment was linked to state standards, how teachers would be trained on it, or who would develop intervention strategies for students identified as not making adequate progress. The district had also not thought through how it would aggregate and disseminate the results, ensure quality control and security, or a host of other issues. Comparison District 2 was just beginning its reform efforts when the research team visited the city.

D. Curriculum and Instruction

Both comparison districts indicated that they have common curriculum for all schools in reading and mathematics in grades K–8. Principals, teachers, and district administrators indicated, however, that implementation was often weak to nonexistent. There was apparently considerable variation at the school level in both districts on how, and even if, teachers used the district's curricula. Administrators in both districts say that budget constraints have prevented intensive or ongoing training for teachers. Most professional development in these districts is voluntary and entails one-shot workshops after school or in the summer. Neither district has an organized, coherent professional development strategy focused around the implementation of a common curriculum.

Comparison District 1

- **Core curriculum not used consistently in schools.** Comparison District 1 put staff and financial resources into developing a comprehensive curriculum some years ago, but it was not consistently implemented at the school level. The district also worked with a school reform group, received an Urban Systemic Initiative grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF), and involved teachers and administrators in the development of a curriculum in language arts, math, science and social studies.

  Curriculum leaders in the central office indicated that their basal reading and math texts provided consistency across the district, but the district had no way of monitoring whether the text or anything else was followed in the classroom. The principals and teachers we spoke

with described a wide variety of instructional approaches and materials. Most did have a copy of the district's curricula and materials. Some say there is so much that it is overwhelming. Many schools have adopted a variety of reform models, including Comer Schools, Success for All, and others around which they have built their individual programs and improvement efforts. A recent evaluation of the models, however, showed that student achievement had dropped in schools that used them.

- **Reading curriculum.** Comparison District 1 has a language arts program that is not well articulated from grade to grade and does not reflect much of the latest research on effective reading. The district supplies basal materials, but schools have adopted a variety of supplementary or replacement programs on their own to support students below grade level. The district adopted a text at the elementary school level that some teachers and principals feel is inappropriate. Others like it. Principals say their inexperienced teaching staffs cannot implement the material on their own. The district only provides a non-mandatory half-day of training at the start of the year for language arts. The district has, very recently, however, decided to replace its language arts basal series with *Open Court*. Training on the program began during the summer of 2002 and will be implemented during the 2002-2003 school year.

- **Math curriculum.** Comparison District 1 has received Urban Systemic Initiative grants from the National Science Foundation since the mid-1990s that have helped reform the mathematics curriculum in the district. The office of mathematics along with a committee of teachers and administrators developed the curriculum and aligned it with state standards, including performance standards at every grade level. Support materials include a basal text for grades 1–5 and a specific math program for middle school. Teachers also receive the curriculum and instructional guides that connect it to the texts and materials. This curriculum has been in use for several years, but the level of implementation varies with the experience and expertise of the teachers and the organization of the school. The materials also reflect a range of math teaching philosophies rather than a single approach. One district leader sees the district as having regressed into self-contained school models rather than following any unified approach to math instruction. The district plans to revamp its math program for the 2003-2004 school year.

- **Curriculum implementation and training.** Curriculum training and implementation in Comparison District 1 is mostly voluntary and varies by school. The curriculum office employs a "train-the-trainer" model to implement professional development but most of it is arranged by individual schools to compliment various school reform demonstration models. The district's professional development center was closed because of budget cutbacks. Most of the district's professional development is voluntary, paying small stipends, and conducted after school. Teachers indicate that there is even considerable variation in how the curriculum is implemented within the same grade level of a single school.

  Comparison District 1 also does not have a teacher mentoring program of any size. New teachers receive an orientation from the human resources department on district policies. Other supports vary by school.

Comparison District 2

- **Curriculum layers unaligned with state standards overwhelm teachers.** Comparison District 2 has inconsistent layers of curricular efforts, initiated both internally and externally, that have been revised and appended without systemic review over the years. None of the curricula are aligned with state standards or state assessments, nor have teachers received sufficient training from the central office on how to use the various curricula. Both central office staff and school personnel note that money for staff development was always the first thing cut when budgets got tight.

  The city's mayor decided several years ago that he wanted a particular curriculum implemented to improve the quality of the schools. He essentially forced the adoption of E.D. Hirsch's core curriculum through a combination of threats to withhold funds and lures of extra money for music and arts instruction. The school system was apparently never really committed to the curriculum and was unwilling to remove parts of the existing curriculum. The new program was implemented over six weekends and layered over existing reading and math programs.

  This year the new administration is working on a vertically integrated curriculum in reading and writing aligned with state standards. They hope to have this completed by the end of the year and begin working on math and science next year, followed by social studies. This will be the districts first comprehensive K-12 curriculum in may years.

- **Reading curriculum.** The reading program in Comparison District 2 was developed by central office staff more than 10 years ago. As mandates from the state department of education changed, the curriculum was modified or supplemented. The state, for example, required schools to specify skills taught at each grade level, so the district devised skills checklists to guide instruction in six-week segments. Teachers were required to follow the six-week schedule, but the exercise evolved into a "check-off" process enforced for a time by what teachers and principals call the "curriculum police." The checklists have endured, however, and effective strategies for reading instruction appear to be lacking. Principals indicate that they have to work around the district's curriculum to find programs that work and to develop the skills of new teachers.

- **Math curriculum.** Comparison District 2 developed its K–8 mathematics curriculum in-house. Like its reading program, the district's math program has been revised eight to nine times to reflect new standards or state curriculum changes. A high school curriculum was developed for the first time six years ago.

- **Curriculum implementation and training.** A recently appointed curriculum director in Comparison District 2 was surprised to find little differentiated instruction in classrooms. What the district interpreted as "tracking" has been forbidden because of the district's desegregation order. The result has been that students lacking similar skills could not be grouped to work together on them. The new director instead found extensive large group instruction and workbook driven lessons. Teachers were simply not trained to teach reading.

The reading department in Comparison District 2 has tried to employ a train-the-trainer model to implement curriculum. The central office has trained a teacher at each school, but has found that principals do not allot the time to let the trainer work with teachers. The district has one night of curriculum training for new teachers. Fewer than 10 full-time mentors are assigned to work with up to 600 new teachers. The goal of on-site visits every two weeks has not been effectively met.

Staff development in mathematics in the past has involved one day at the start of the year, after which teachers were left alone. A recently ended grant provided eighth grade and high school math teachers with 10 days of summer training. The mathematics coordinator says that the curriculum is well designed, but she readily admits that implementation is spotty, monitoring is weak, and support is nonexistent

E. Use of Data

The comparison districts have student performance data but the data are often not provided in a timely fashion or are not analyzed or reported in a way that would drive or inform instruction. Both districts have workshops for principals on using data but the test results are often from the previous year and are not used to hold anyone accountable. Data can be used or not used at the discretion of the principal and teacher. Their was no pressure in either district to use data to modify instruction.

Comparison District 1

- **Use of data by central office.** Comparison District 1 uses test score data sporadically, usually when state assessment results are posted, but there is little ongoing emphasis at the central office to analyze data to understand performance patterns or to decide on needed interventions. No analysis, for instance, had been done on what a large number of elementary schools in the district are doing instructionally to attain scores above statewide averages. Little analysis has been conducted, as well, on why test scores have been dropping. The district also uses an out-of-date nationally-normed test. Much of the research staff in the central office is deployed to do program survey work for other units, including health care and school safety. There was little evidence that performance data were reviewed regularly or requested by district leadership.

- **Use of data at the school level.** Principals we spoke with in Comparison District 1 indicated that they use data from a district-developed test to modify instruction. Results are provided to the schools twice a year by teacher, student and test item. State test results are not provided until the subsequent school year and are not regularly used by the schools. Some principals meet with their teachers on the results of the locally-developed test to discuss strategy but the practice appears to be at the discretion of the individual schools.

- **Capacity.** Comparison District 1 does not have the same capacity to collect and analyze data as the case study districts. One district leader in Comparison District 1 readily admits that many of the district's reports on student outcomes are not what they would like. The district has begun to build capacity by moving testing and assessment functions out of the research department and into a division of its own. The system is also looking to boost staff and has purchased its own scanning equipment to turn around test data as quickly as possible.

- **Training.** Teachers in Comparison District 1 have had opportunities to receive training in the use of test score data. Teachers receive reports on the previous year's state test battery annually. The research department gives voluntary workshops for teachers to help them understand and use these data. This department teams with the curriculum department to give half-day presentations to large groups and to individual schools. The head of research indicated that most principals probably review the data, but that most teachers do not use it deeply to inform instruction.

Comparison District 2

- **Use of data by central office.** Comparison District 2 relies on annual state tests for its data. These data in the past have not been disaggregated by subgroup, and the district has not it to identify instructional problems or inequities. The district did try in one instance to evaluate the effectiveness of its reading program, but was unable to act on what it had learned. The reading department conducted observations and surveys in over 20 schools. They found that fewer than 10 percent of teachers were spending the recommended 90 minutes a day on reading. There was also little in the way of small group work. The district did not, unfortunately, have the resources to rectify the situation.

- **Use of data at the school level.** Teachers in Comparison District 2 indicated that the use of test score data depends on the school principal. Some principals use data to make decisions about school priorities or to help teachers focus on specific content objectives. Research staff say there was never a mandate for principals to follow through.

- **Capacity.** Newcomers to Comparison District 2 characterize the student database as antiquated. The ELL coordinator keeps her own database because the district's files are so unreliable. The new head of human resources has similar problems with employee records, as they are still tracking employees manually with cards.

- **Training.** Comparison District 2 does offer training to its principals on the meaning and use of test score data through its research department. This training usually consisted of one-shot clinics for principals who were given the option to attend but often did not. The general idea was to have principals work together within their feeder patterns to analyze data and then train their teachers. The results were mixed, however. A few clusters did some analysis, mastering the process well enough to bring the results to their schools and modifying some practices. There was not a mandate, however, from the central office for principals to follow through.

F. Reform Press

The current reform efforts in the comparison districts are at varying levels of implementation. Comparison District 1 has moved aggressively over the last school year to upgrade its previously disjointed reading curriculum and to train principals and teachers on a new reading program. The district is just thinking, however, about how it will "press" the reforms into the classroom and monitor implementation. Comparison District 2 has, until recently, lacked a strategic plan for its reforms. The new planning process is generating considerable interest in the community and caused some anxiety among district staff.

G. Business Operations

The new leadership in both comparison districts have had to devote considerable time to their operating and business systems. This was particularly true of Comparison District 1. District leaders found that there were significant problems in operating buildings and grounds crews, school lunch, custodial services, budgeting and finances, use of funds at the building level, transportation and other operations. The district is also spending out the proceeds from a construction bond approved some years ago to build new schools and repair others. The data systems in both districts were generally antiquated and could not produce timely and accurate data for policy makers at the central office. Human resource departments in both districts are also being restructured to recruit, hire, and support new staff in a more timely fashion. Neither has a fully automated application process. Comparison District 1 has outsourced some non-instructional functions. Comparison District 2 has begun to cut central office staff who perform overlapping functions. Both districts are changing their business operations but admit that considerable progress is still needed.

H. Financial Resources

Comparison District 1

The budget is a consistent problem for Comparison District 1, despite the fact that the district appears to have a per pupil expenditure that is higher than many other urban school systems. The district faces budget shortfalls due to both recent economic downturns and declining enrollments. Hundreds of central office staff have been cut over the last year; professional development has been curtailed; regional staffing has been limited; and outsourcing has been necessary to create additional efficiencies. Additional cuts appear inevitable during the next school year.

The district has received considerable funding from outside sources, however, to support one initiative or another. It receives extensive grant support from local foundations and the state to implement comprehensive school reform demonstration models, in use now in nearly one third of the district's schools. Not all foundations appear to be funding the same models. The district also receives extensive funding from the National Science Foundation to support reforms in the math program.

Comparison District 2

Comparison District 2 does not suffer from the same level of funding difficulties as District 1, but the district could not be considered to be well funded. Schools lack good equipment, libraries are inadequate, appropriate texts are not always available, science labs are out of date and poorly stocked, and schools have to raise money for basic supplies. Principals spoke of having fund-raisers to purchase copying machines and to pay phone bills. The city government has supplied significant funds to build new schools and make capital improvements as the district moved out from under court order, but relatively little has been appropriated to improve instruction and student achievement. The new superintendent has been working to tap into a relatively affluent community to develop additional resources for school improvement.

Appendix D: References

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APPENDIX E: COMMITTEES & ORGANIZATIONS

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ABOUT THE COUNCIL OF THE GREAT CITY SCHOOLS

The Council of the Great City Schools is a coalition of nearly 60 of the nation's largest urban public school systems.

Founded in 1956 and incorporated in 1961, the Council is located in Washington D.C., where it works to promote urban education through legislation, research, media relations, instruction, management, technology, and other special projects designed to improve the quality of urban education.

The Council serves as the national voice for urban educators, providing ways to share promising practices and address common concerns.

The organization is served by a staff of about 20 professionals who coordinate the work of the Council, arrange conferences, conduct studies, and collaborate with other national organizations, government agencies, and corporations.

Characteristics of the Great City Schools

- Total student enrollment: 6.8 million
- African American: 38.9%
- Hispanic: 31.2%
- White: 22.8%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 6.4%
- Alaskan/Native American: 0.7%
- Eligible for free/reduced price lunch: 62.4%
- English Language Learners: 18.1%
- Students with Individualized Education Programs: 12.5%
- Number of languages spoken: 120
- Number of Teachers: 408,766
- Total Revenue: $40 billion
- Local: 43.0%
- State: 47.3%
- Federal: 9.7%
- Number of Schools: 9,446

Eligibility for Membership in the Council of the Great City Schools

School districts are eligible for membership in the Council of the Great City Schools if they are located in cities with populations over 250,000 and student enrollments over 35,000. School districts with general urban characteristics located in the largest city of any state are also eligible for membership regardless of size.

About MDRC

MDRC

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization. We are dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research and the active communication of our findings, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and programs. MDRC was founded in 1974 and is located in New York City and Oakland, California.

MDRC's current projects focus on welfare and economic security, education, and employment and community initiatives. Complementing our evaluations of a wide range of welfare reforms are new studies of supports for the working poor and emerging analyses of how programs affect children's development and their families' well-being. In the field of education, we are testing reforms aimed at improving the performance of public schools, especially in urban areas. Finally, our community projects are using innovative approaches to increase employment in low-income neighborhoods.

Our projects are a mix of demonstrations - field tests of promising program models - and evaluations of government and community initiatives, and we employ a wide range of methods to determine a program's effects, including large-scale studies, surveys, case studies, and ethnographies of individuals and families. We share the findings and lessons from our work - including best practices for program operators - with a broad audience within the policy and practitioner community, as well as the general public and the media.

Over the past quarter century, MDRC has worked in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada. We conduct our projects in partnership with state and local governments, the federal government, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

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