

# **Characteristics of Improved School Districts**

**Themes from Research**



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**October 2004**

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# **Characteristics of Improved School Districts Themes from Research**

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October 2004



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## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of Kathy Budge and Bill Keim at Educational Service District 113 in Olympia, Mike Knapp at the University of Washington in Seattle, Gretta Merwin at the Ellensburg School District, Jill Jacoby at the Washington Association of School Administrators, and Cathy Fromme and Rob MacGregor at OSPI for their insights about effective districts and valuable comments when reviewing drafts of this document. In addition, Sue Cohn and Sandi McCord provided helpful advice on this project, and Adrienne Gardner provided technical support in preparing the document for publication.

## **Suggested Citation**

Shannon, G.S. & Bylsma, P. (2004). *Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes from Research*. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Olympia, WA.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many studies have documented the characteristics of improved schools, but relatively little is known about districts that have shown significant improvement. Research on school districts has been conducted largely within the past 10–15 years and is primarily descriptive based on case studies. To provide a better understanding of improved school districts and their characteristics and actions, the Research and Evaluation Office at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction collected and analyzed more than 80 research reports and articles.

The studies shed light on the relationship between school district policy, programs, and practices and the improvement of student learning. The studies focused primarily on districts that have shown improvement at the elementary level, and all the schools in the districts may not be high performing. In most districts, secondary schools (especially high schools) continue to present challenges. Moreover, these reports provide examples of school districts that are making substantial progress in improving student learning at one point in time. Because school districts are complex systems within the contexts of states and communities, the strategies discussed in these studies may not be applicable in other settings. Therefore, they should not be considered prescriptions to follow but rather ideas to consider.

An analysis of the studies identified 13 common themes, which have been clustered into four broad categories: *Effective Leadership*, *Quality Teaching and Learning*, *Support for Systemwide Improvement*, and *Clear and Collaborative Relationships*. The themes should be viewed as integrated and interrelated—they are important to district effectiveness but not sufficient in isolation. Although they are treated discretely in the synthesis of research, they are connected, impact one another, and infuse the organization. A conceptual framework illustrates the relationships among these 13 themes and four categories.

Each of the themes is briefly defined and described below. Following the definitions and descriptions for each, several questions are posed to help districts and schools reflect on how a district is implementing educational reform. The body of this document provides examples from the research in order to discuss each theme in more detail. A matrix in Appendix B shows the extent to which the common themes are included in 23 of selected studies.

### ***EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP***

Effective leadership that focuses on all students learning is at the core of improved school districts. Leadership is committed, persistent, proactive, and distributed through the system. The two themes *focus on all students learning* and *dynamic and distributed leadership* are at the center in the conceptual model to illustrate their importance throughout the system as they connect and inform personnel, policy, programs, and practices in the district. A third theme—*sustained improvement over time*—indicates the forward and upward direction the district must take to have all students meet high expectations. These three themes are defined below.

### **Focus on All Students Learning**

Improved districts focus on student learning and embrace the twin goals of excellence and equity—high expectations for all students. Student learning is the concern and responsibility of everyone. Districts reflect shared beliefs and values, have clear and meaningful goals, and a clear vision of change. Districts focus on their student learning goals, build consensus, and remove distractions and competing programs that may interfere with reaching the goals.

- *How does a district develop and share its focus on improving student learning?*
- *How does a district know that its focus and mission are shared?*

### **Dynamic and Distributed Leadership**

Leaders in improved school districts are described as dynamic, united in purpose, involved, visible in schools, and interested in instruction. Leaders provide encouragement, recognition, and support for improving student learning. Instructional leadership is expanded to encompass the superintendent, principals, teacher leaders, and other administrators at district and school levels. The ethical and moral nature of effective leadership is demonstrated when leaders move beyond talking about the belief that students can learn to taking concrete action to change instruction so students do learn.

- *What is the central focus of senior administrators and other leaders in the district?*
- *How do leaders demonstrate their commitment to student learning and improved instruction?*
- *How do leaders create political will and moral responsibility in districts and communities to take the actions necessary to provide equity and excellence in learning for all students?*

### **Sustained Improvement Efforts Over Time**

Improved districts sustain engagement in educational reform over time; district commitment to improvement efforts helps staff internalize the changes. District stability helps schools “stay the course” of school improvement, to persevere and persist. Change is seen as a long-term multi-stage process to attain high standards for all students.

- *How does the district communicate its commitment to school improvement?*
- *How does the district demonstrate persistent and continuous improvement?*
- *How does the district maintain stability of leadership, vision, and concerted improvement efforts in a climate of political and social change?*



## ***QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING***

The focus on all students learning to high standards requires quality teaching and learning. Thus, improved districts need to have *high expectations and accountability for adults* in the system. District leadership *coordinates and aligns curriculum and assessment* and ensures alignment with state and district learning standards. In addition, *coordinated and embedded professional development* is provided continually to prepare teachers to meet high expectations for their performance. These three characteristics help ensure that *quality classroom instruction* takes place, and districts help schools develop a shared understanding of good instruction. These themes, which are defined below, lead to improved student learning.

### **High Expectations and Accountability for Adults**

Improved districts hold all adults in the system accountable for student learning, beginning with the superintendent, senior staff, and principals. The districts have clear expectations for instruction and apply consistent pressure on schools for improved outcomes for students. The superintendent expects excellence by all, monitors performance, and provides feedback. High expectations influence hiring decisions and prompt districts and schools to address issues regarding ineffective teachers.

- *How does the district communicate high expectations for adult performance?*
- *What processes are used in the district for accountability and to provide feedback to staff?*
- *How does the district monitor reform and change to maintain pressure for improved learning?*

### **Coordinated and Aligned Curriculum and Assessment**

In improved districts, curriculum is aligned with standards, assessment, and policies. The districts have a centralized and coordinated approach to curriculum, which is adopted district-wide. Some districts use multiple measures to assess learning.

- *Are district learning standards aligned with state standards and assessments?*
- *Are district policies aligned with curriculum and assessment?*
- *What are district processes for coordinating curriculum district-wide?*

### **Coordinated and Embedded Professional Development**

Improved districts are providers or brokers of high quality professional development programs that are intensive, ongoing, focused on classroom practice, and include on-site coaching. Districts focus their support for professional development based on the teaching and learning needs of the school. Professional learning communities are developed and supported to build teacher knowledge and skills and to change instruction across the system. Central offices also develop as professional learning communities.

- *How does the district build capacity in the district and the school to improve instruction and student learning?*
- *How does the district reflect research-based professional development practices?*
- *How does the district ensure coherence across professional development, policies, and teaching and learning practices?*

### **Quality Classroom Instruction**

Improved districts pay close attention to classroom practice and provide guidance and oversight for improving teaching and learning. Districts emphasize principles of good instruction and communicate clear expectations for what to teach. Districts develop a common vision and understanding of quality teaching and learning. They monitor instruction, curriculum, and changes in instructional practice. Their guidance and improvement efforts require actions such as systemwide approval, interventions and corrective instruction, tutoring, and alignment.

- *What is the district-wide vision for “good” instruction?*
- *How do teachers develop the knowledge and skills described by the vision?*
- *How are principles of learning implemented in classrooms?*
- *What guidance for instruction does the district provide to schools?*

## ***SUPPORT FOR SYSTEMWIDE IMPROVEMENT***

Improved districts serve and support student learning by *using data effectively, strategically allocating resources, and ensuring policy and program coherence*. The themes of support affect all parts of the organization; in improving districts, they clearly support the central focus on student learning. Leadership uses data to make decisions regarding instruction and equitable resource allocation. Improved districts also develop and revise policies and programs to ensure coherence with the central focus on all students learning and to support quality teaching and learning. These three themes are defined below.

### **Effective Use of Data**

Improved districts use data as evidence to monitor results, for making instructional and resource allocation decisions, and for accountability. District staff provides time and training in the use of data and helps schools in gathering and interpreting data. The evidence is used to monitor equity, make decisions about alignment, and target professional development efforts.

- *How does the district make data available for use in schools?*
- *How are school leaders trained to use multiple measures and analyze data?*
- *How does the district support classroom teachers’ use of data in making instructional decisions about individual students?*

### **Strategic Allocation of Resources**

Improved districts provide, allocate, reallocate, and find resources to ensure quality instruction. Districts provide additional resources—financial as well as human and social capital—to support low performers. Districts give schools some autonomy over staffing, schedules, and budgets within parameters that establish their roles and responsibilities.

- *How do resource allocations reflect district policies?*
- *How are human, social, physical, and financial resources developed, managed, and allocated across the district?*
- *How does the district determine the adequacy of resources needed and provided to improve student learning?*
- *How does the district ensure equity in allocating resources to close the achievement gap?*

### **Policy and Program Coherence**

Improved districts develop and implement policies and strategies that promote equity and excellence, and they review and revise those policies and strategies to ensure coherence among programs and practices linked to district goals. Student learning is central to roles, budget, operating procedures, and personnel practices—all are redefined as needed. All district systems are explicitly included in reinforcing common goals and efforts to attain the goals. The central office monitors coherence of actions and programs to the focus and vision of the district.

- *How does the district ensure coherence in policy across district programs and operations?*
- *How does district policy reflect the goals of equitable and excellent learning?*
- *How do operational systems in the district reinforce learning goals?*

## ***CLEAR AND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS***

Improved school districts have relationships that are collaborative and reflect the needs and strengths of the district, schools, and community stakeholders. Educators in the system develop and nurture a *professional culture and collaborative relationships*. Improved districts also develop a *clear understanding of district and school roles and responsibilities*. Finally, these districts *interpret and manage the external environment* to invite stakeholder participation as well as to buffer the classrooms from disruption and distractions. These last three themes are defined below.

### **Professional Culture and Collaborative Relationships**

Improved districts build a culture of commitment, collegiality, mutual respect, and stability. Professional norms include peer support, collaboration, trust, shared responsibility, and continuous learning for the adults in the system. Districts support

school communities of practice and also develop central offices as professional learning communities.

- *How is the district building a professional culture that supports high standards for students and adults in the system?*
- *How does the district build trust, mutual respect, and competence among stakeholders in the system?*
- *How does the district provide opportunities for peer support and collaboration and develop professional learning communities?*

### **Clear Understanding of School and District Roles and Responsibilities**

Improved districts set expectations, decentralize responsibility and support to schools, and serve as change agents enabling schools to improve. Districts restructure central offices to support learning, serve critical roles as mentors, and help seek solutions. Districts balance district authority and school autonomy; they simultaneously empower and control. The central office has responsibility for defining goals and standards; schools have latitude in the use of resources and influence over issues important to school staff.

- *How does the district balance district authority and school autonomy?*
- *What are district responsibilities and prerogatives and how are they determined?*
- *What are parameters for school-level decision making and how are they determined?*
- *How are different roles for central office and schools developed, communicated, and monitored?*

### **Interpreting and Managing the External Environment**

Improved districts access, analyze, interpret, and mediate state and federal policy with local policy. Districts buffer schools against external disturbances and distractions, mobilize and manage community and business support, and involve family and community as partners.

- *How does the district interpret state and federal policy to schools and assist with implementation?*
- *How does the district enlist the involvement and support of all stakeholders including staff members, union leadership, business leaders, families and community in implementing reform initiatives?*
- *How does district mobilize community support?*
- *How does the district involve family and community in school district affairs?*
- *How does the district balance the need to buffer schools from external distractions while opening schools for family and community involvement?*

## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

The challenges of meeting the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and closing the achievement gap require rethinking the roles, responsibilities, and relationships within school districts and among schools within a district. School districts need effective and rigorous strategies to achieve the goals of excellence and equity—high expectations for all students. The *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools*, based on the research of effective schools and school improvement, have provided a sound foundation for improving schools and increasing the achievement of all students (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). To “scale up” educational reform, however, system-wide changes must be made.

In recent years educators and researchers have begun to examine school districts as the unit of analysis and change. Districts are seen as “potent sites and sources of educational reform” (Hightower et al., 2003, p. 1). Research has been conducted in a number of districts across the nation where student achievement, in elementary schools at least, is increasing in an effort to identify policies, programs, and practices that appear to benefit students.

A number of common themes emerge from the review and synthesis of this research literature that has looked at school systems over the past 10–15 years. We reviewed more than 80 reports and articles, and 23 were ultimately analyzed in more detail to identify their common themes. These studies are largely descriptive and based on case studies. The research has not demonstrated causal links between specific strategies and student test scores. Certainly, more research is required to determine more definitively the characteristics of effective districts. However, the studies are useful because they shed light on systems and operations in improved districts and suggest strategies that seem to produce better student learning outcomes.

These reports provide examples of school districts that are making substantial progress in improving student learning at one point in time; local conditions often change quickly and reforms may be adversely affected. The study districts do not claim to have all of the answers for improving student achievement across all grade levels and among all groups of students. The studies focused primarily on districts that have shown improvement at the elementary level, and all the schools in the districts may not be high performing. In most districts, secondary schools (especially high schools) continue to present challenges. Because school districts are complex systems within the contexts of states and communities, the strategies discussed in these studies may not be applicable in other settings. Therefore, they should not be considered prescriptions to follow but rather ideas to consider.

Although the themes differ depending upon the context, they can help educators better understand effective school systems. The themes are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, no one characteristic is sufficient by itself to improve student learning and close academic achievement gaps. Although there may be some benefit

to districts and schools if a few themes are implemented, there is considerably more power when they are implemented together. Therefore, districts need to pay attention to all aspects of the organization.

This document has been prepared to help educators and other school district stakeholders build a common understanding about school districts as the focus of analysis and improvement. The conceptual framework described below organizes the themes and their relationships. The report can help school districts review and revise their current policies, programs, and practices to strengthen their efforts to improve student learning.

The report does not suggest a formula for school districts to adopt. Each district is at its own point in its journey of educational reform. In addition, each district has its unique geographical location, demographic characteristics, history, and other features such as personnel and programs. Thus, there is no single path to follow to achieve an equitable and excellent education for all students. Nevertheless, understanding and discussing the themes can be a starting point for districts that are committed to continuous improvement of student learning. This report can also be used by districts that have not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required by NCLB. Districts in Washington state that have not made AYP in two consecutive years in the same content area and grade level are required to develop and implement a district improvement plan.

### **Emerging Themes**

Thirteen common themes surfaced across the research studies. Each theme is noted below and discussed in this document. Although the studies we examined may describe the themes somewhat differently, the terms selected for use in this document are found frequently in the studies. The themes are grouped into four categories for presentation. Conceptually some themes, such as leadership, are threaded throughout others. Although the themes are closely connected, they are presented here in somewhat discrete fashion.

The themes are grouped into four general categories: (1) *Effective Leadership*, (2) *Quality Teaching and Learning*, (3) *Support for Systemwide Improvement*, and (4) *Clear and Collaborative Relationships*. A conceptual framework shown and described below represents the themes and categories and the relationships among them. The themes in each category are as follows:

#### ***Effective Leadership***

- Focus on all students learning
- Dynamic and distributed leadership
- Sustained improvement efforts over time

***Quality Teaching and Learning***

- High expectations and accountability for adults
- Coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment
- Coordinated and embedded professional development
- Quality classroom instruction

***Support for Systemwide Improvement***

- Effective use of data
- Strategic allocation of resources
- Policy and program coherence

***Clear and Collaborative Relationships***

- Professional culture and collaborative relationships
- Clear understanding of school and district roles and responsibilities
- Interpreting and managing the external environment

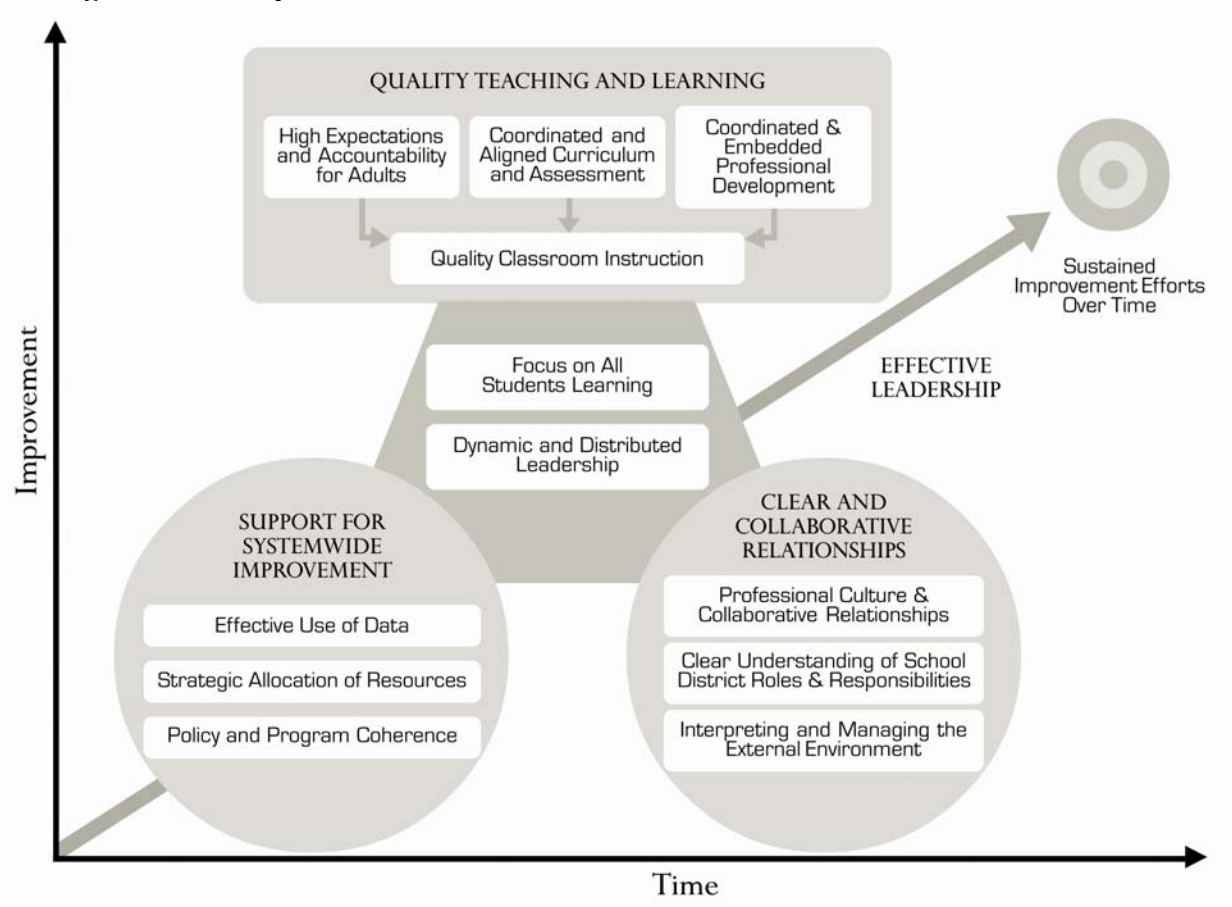
**Conceptual Framework**

We have developed a conceptual framework to illustrate the relationships and interactions of the 13 themes within the four categories (see Figure 1). The oval at the top represents the central focus on *quality teaching and learning*. The goal is to provide quality classroom instruction where student learning occurs. Supporting the oval are two circles: *support for systemwide improvement* and *clear and collaborative relationships*. These two circles act as wheels that provide support as well as traction as the model moves through time. The themes in the *effective leadership* category are in the middle because they are central to the model and connect all the themes to one another. Thus each part of the model is connected to the others in an integrated whole. The model is framed by a vertical axis representing improvement and a horizontal axis representing time. The model depicts a district moving continually onward and upward, improving over time and leading to better student outcomes.

A different metaphor could be used to illustrate the model—that of a symphonic orchestra. Knowledgeable and skilled musicians focus on a common purpose (working together to produce beautiful music) under the leadership of a master conductor who provides vision, unites and blends diverse members, monitors performance, ensures coherence, and inspires members to do their best on a stage in front of the community.

Hence, the themes are integrated and interrelated—they are important to district effectiveness but not sufficient in isolation. Although they are treated discretely in the synthesis of research, they are connected, impact one another, and infuse the organization. Certainly, improved districts have all of the 13 themes in place to some degree.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**



**Methodology**

Although the framework of the *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools* (Shannon & Bylsma, 2003) reflects most of the themes identified in this analysis, there are substantial differences in the roles and responsibilities of school districts and those of individual schools. These differences are legal, contractual, structural, and historical; differences also arise from the contexts of schools as they are “nested” within specific school districts and communities. Hence, rather than use the Nine Characteristics as a starting point, we analyzed the studies with a “blank slate” to see what themes would emerge.

An iterative process was used to identify and synthesize the research literature on improved school districts. Initially, more than 80 research reports and articles were compiled and their content analyzed. From these studies, a representative set of core studies was analyzed to determine the themes that emerged most consistently. To ensure a broad but relatively balanced set of studies, we placed an emphasis on analyzing studies that

- Focused on districts rather than schools;
- Are relatively recent, generally conducted in the past 10-15 years; and
- Investigated multiple districts.



The same districts (e.g., New York City District #2, San Diego) are often the subject of different studies. Hence, we limited the number of studies we analyzed that looked at the same districts in order to reduce the influence of just a few districts on the analysis. Of course, some studies kept district identities confidential, so some of the same districts may be represented several times. Only one literature review was included in this core set of reports.

After the core set studies were analyzed, the themes of each were plotted on a matrix to determine how consistently they appeared across all the studies. To confirm the list of themes, other studies were added to the matrix, although the selection criteria were relaxed somewhat. For example, some studies of single districts were included. A total of 23 studies were plotted. The final step was to develop the conceptual framework to organize the themes and to illustrate the relationships among them.

### **Contents of This Document**

The themes discussed in this document are defined using the concepts that emerged from the studies. Each theme is discussed using relevant details from selected studies that develop and help explain the concepts. Reflective questions are provided to assist district stakeholders in analyzing their own organizations. Each section concludes with a list of sources cited in the discussion.

The chapters of this report are organized by category and briefly explain each of the themes found in the research literature.

- Chapter Two examines the three Effective Leadership themes.
- Chapter Three examines the four Quality Teaching and Learning themes.
- Chapter Four examines the three Support for Systemwide Improvement themes.
- Chapter Five examines the remaining three themes in the Clear and Collaborative Relationships category.
- Chapter Six provides a summary and discusses implications for educators.

The bibliography following Chapter 6 lists all the studies examined when preparing this document. Appendix A provides more information about the methodology. Appendix B shows a matrix for both the core and confirming studies. Appendix C provides an annotated bibliography of 10 studies we selected to help introduce readers to the various themes found among improved school districts.

### **Additional Resources**

This document does not suggest a process for district leaders to use in their improvement efforts. A number of resources are available to provide districts and leaders some guidance, however. A few of these resources are listed below:

- *School System Improvement Resource Guide* (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and Washington Association of School Administrators).

## Characteristics of Improved School Districts

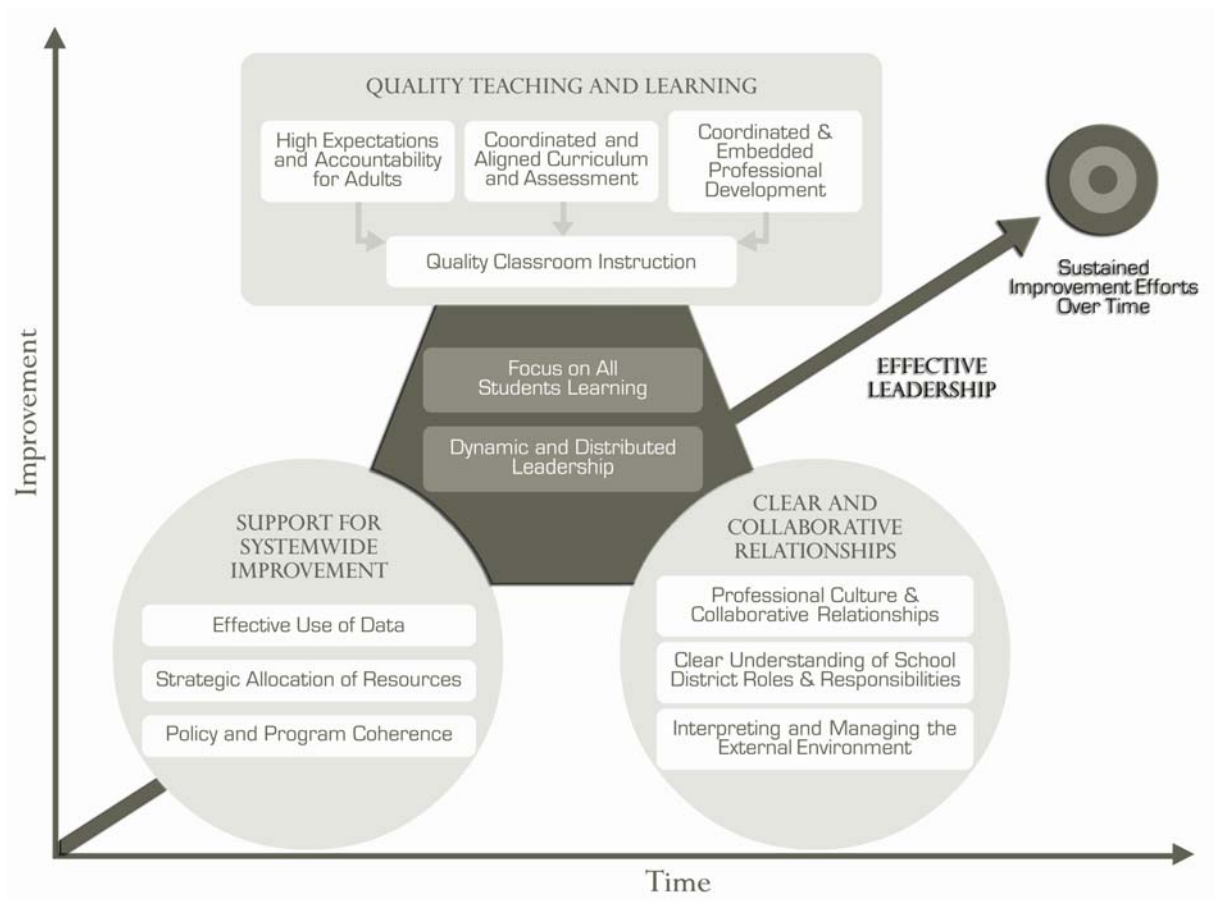
- *Leading for Learning: Reflective Tools for School and District Leaders* and *Leading for Learning Sourcebook: Concepts and Examples* (Center for Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington).
- *Strategies for School System Leaders on District-Level Change* (Panasonic Foundation with the American Association of School Administrators).
- *School Communities that Work* (Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University).

## CHAPTER 2

# EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Effective leadership that focuses on all students learning is at the core of improved school districts. Leadership is committed, persistent, proactive, and distributed through the system. The two themes *focus on all students learning* and *dynamic and distributed leadership* are at the center in the conceptual model to illustrate their importance throughout the system as they connect and inform personnel, policy, programs, and practices in the district. District staff and organizational components are focused first on student learning; leadership conveys the importance of the focus and takes action to implement strategies to improve learning. A third theme—*sustained improvement over time*—indicates the forward and upward direction that leaders must take the district to have all students meet high expectations. District and school improvement takes time, and district vision and strategies must be sustained by educational leaders for significant change to occur.

The three themes are defined and discussed below using details from the research literature that support the concepts. Each is followed by questions for reflection.



## **FOCUS ON ALL STUDENTS LEARNING**

Definition Improved districts focus on student learning and embrace the twin goals of excellence and equity—high expectations for all students. Student learning is the concern and responsibility of everyone. Districts reflect shared beliefs and values, have clear and meaningful goals, and a clear vision of change. Districts focus on their student learning goals, build consensus, and remove distractions and competing programs that may interfere with reaching the goals.

Discussion Research studies suggest the importance of a strong focus on student learning through a variety of school district characteristics and actions. The studies describe and explain this focus using various terms, such as high expectations for student learning, values, district “will,” and commitment to all students. Focus is often reflected in the district goals. Districts use different approaches to develop goals. In some districts the school board developed goals and then selected superintendents who shared them; in other districts, superintendents and school boards jointly developed goals and shared beliefs. In one study, the superintendents and other district leaders “developed and nurtured” widely shared beliefs about learning and high expectations and were strongly focused on results (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001, p. 98). Not only was the focus made clear, in many districts there was a sense of urgency about the goals and the importance of district initiatives to reach the goals. District leaders also expressed a sense of moral responsibility for the learning of all students. This moral sense became a foundation for other components or strategies for educational reform (Skrla et al., 2000).

The reports emphasize the role of superintendents in setting the stage and tone for school district improvement. Superintendents described their role as keeping the focus of the district on “equitable and excellent learning” (Skrla et al.). One superintendent described his primary focus by saying “the main thing is the main thing, and that’s student performance” (p. 16). Other central office leaders also play an active role in communicating the vision in the schools and community. Firestone describes the function of “providing and selling a vision of what the change is about” as a task for district leadership (1989, p. 158).

Improved districts developed visions focused on student learning and instructional improvement. Four main goals emerged across districts studied by the Learning First Alliance that illustrate the nature of school district focus. These goals include:

- “Increasing achievement for all students
- Improving instruction
- Creating a safe and supportive environment for students
- Involving parents and the community” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 12).

These improved districts emphasized the link between the district focus and classroom instruction. In some instances, the vision was internalized by stakeholders so it became part of their view of the district’s operations. In many past reform efforts, the changes may not have permeated the classroom door or did not make a lasting impact. School districts studied in this research recognized that the focus on

student learning involved changing instruction. As Togneri and Anderson write, “It is basic: Students learn what they are taught, students will learn more if they are taught well. Yet so often reform efforts look at everything except how to help teachers help their students learn. In these districts, reforms focused on improving instruction, and this approach is paying off” (p. 49).

Knapp et al. (2003) include focus on learning as one of five areas of action for school and district leaders in the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy publication, *Leading for Learning Sourcebook*. Drawing from research, theory, and craft knowledge, the authors suggest that leaders “persistently and publicly [focus] their own attention and that of others on learning and teaching.” They identify some essential tasks for leaders such as:

- “Making learning central to their own work.
- Consistently communicating the centrality of student learning.
- Articulating core values that support a focus on powerful, equitable learning.
- Paying public attention to efforts to support learning” (p. 21).

### Questions for reflection

- *How does a district develop and share its focus on improving student learning?*
- *How does a district know that its focus and mission are shared?*

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## **DYNAMIC AND DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

Definition Leaders in improved school districts are described as dynamic, united in purpose, involved, visible in schools, and interested in instruction. Leaders provide encouragement, recognition, and support for improving student learning. Instructional leadership is expanded to encompass the superintendent, principals, teacher leaders, and other administrators at district and school levels. The ethical and moral nature of effective leadership is demonstrated when leaders move beyond talking about the belief that students can learn to taking concrete action to change instruction so students do learn.

Discussion In the studies of improved school districts, leadership is seen as dynamic and distributed across central office and schools. Leadership can be viewed in terms of actions and functions as well as individual traits and qualities; both aspects are found in these studies.

Many studies demonstrate the importance of the role of superintendents in leading educational reform. Strong district leaders establish and communicate focus, parameters, priorities, and expectations. Superintendents in one study are described as willing to be held accountable for district goals (Snipes et al., 2002). The focus of a superintendent's attention communicates commitment and signals the level of its importance. Superintendents who focus on instruction send a significant message to central office staff and schools. The superintendent's theory of action tends to influence and provide a foundation for a shared central office theory of action. As the superintendent and central office develop a shared understanding of the district's goals, the likelihood increases that structures will be designed to support continuous improvement (McLaughlin et al., 2004).

According to a study of districts in Texas, superintendents "moved the districts from a collection of loosely coupled, individual campuses to coherent, focused districtwide organizations, a change that was almost as revolutionary as their stance against the old belief that schools could not succeed with some groups of children" (Skrla et al., 2000, p. 18). Superintendents in this study embraced the mantra that "all students can learn" and believed they had a moral responsibility to put belief to action. Rosenholtz (1991) found that "moving" districts were characterized by superintendents who were more experienced and availed themselves of ongoing learning opportunities, thus "typifying organization norms through their action" (p. 182).

However, leadership also is extended beyond traditional positions of superintendent and principal to include teacher leaders, assistant principals, central office administrators, union leaders, and school board members. Some districts also redefined leadership roles. "District leaders determined that no single stakeholder could tackle instructional improvement alone" (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 31). In the study, the researchers noted that leadership was "not simply shared; [rather] most stakeholder groups sought to take on the elements of reform that they were best positioned to lead" (p. 31). Even external actors, such as representatives from state

offices, universities, and communities joined the improvement efforts working in coordination with districts.

Leaders in districts supported and “spurred” reform by:

- “Publicly acknowledging that student achievement was unacceptably low
- Accepting responsibility for the problem
- Clearly stating that all stakeholders in the system needed to be part of the solution
- Committing themselves to long-term efforts and supporting innovations even if they did not show immediate results” (Togneri & Anderson, p. 3 in *Leadership Brief*).

District level leadership is critical to improving student learning and school improvement. When examining Pew Network school districts, researchers noted that “we did not find any instances in which schools on a widespread basis were able to make significant improvements in classroom practice in the absence of active support and leadership from the district” (David & Shields, 2001, p. 37). In a study by Educational Research Service and Laboratory for School Success, the researchers write, “In no instance was a passive, laissez-faire style observed. In most cases, the superintendent moved well beyond articulating the focus by developing staff skills through activities such as analysis of achievement data and professional development opportunities intended to support specific reform efforts” (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003, p. 31). In the Learning First Alliance study, authors found that leaders in each district generally “harbored a deep understanding of the district vision” (Togneri & Anderson, p. 15).

Leaders in improved districts developed and nurtured common beliefs and plans of action. They helped create preconditions for system improvement. Leadership roles and responsibilities are woven throughout the components necessary for improving school systems; these components include setting goals, creating accountability, unifying and coordinating curriculum, using data, providing professional development, and driving reforms to schools and classrooms. These components are treated in subsequent sections of this document.

Suggestions for “acting strategically and sharing leadership” are provided by Knapp et al. (2003) in the *Leading for Learning Sourcebook* based on research and craft knowledge. Essential tasks for leaders include:

- “Identifying or creating pathways that have the greatest influence.
- Mobilizing effort along more than one pathway.
- Helping others assume and exercise leadership.
- Mobilizing support for activity along multiple pathways” (p. 37). (Pathways are “a stream of functionally related activities ... undertaken by different people” across the school system (p. 75). Leaders can influence learning and teaching through these activities.)

### Questions for Reflection

- *What is the central focus of senior administrators and other leaders in the district?*
- *How do leaders demonstrate their commitment to student learning and improved instruction?*
- *How do leaders create political will and moral responsibility in districts and communities to take actions necessary to provide equity and excellence in learning for all students?*

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<http://www.learningfirst.org/publications/districts/>



## **SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS OVER TIME**

Definition Improved districts sustain engagement in educational reform over time; district commitment to improvement efforts helps staff internalize the changes. District stability helps schools “stay the course” of school improvement, to persevere and persist. Change is seen as a long-term multi-stage process to attain high standards for all students.

Discussion Research on improved districts finds that promising results come only after reform strategies have been implemented and sustained for a long time. The task of improving student learning is difficult; changing practice—which involves changing people’s minds about teaching and learning—requires steady and persistent work. Many districts in the case studies had been engaged in education reform for 10 years and longer. Kronley and Handley (2003) write that “sustaining reform is primarily a local endeavor that involves district persistence, local capacity, and adequate resources ...” (p. 2). Firestone (1989) maintains that school and district staff “measure the seriousness of their task by the time that top leaders devote to it” (p. 158); thus, to sustain improvement, leaders need to keep in touch with the implementation work.

Togneri and Anderson (2003) report that the study districts were “committed to sustaining over the long haul.... They set their courses and stayed with them for years” (p. 8). McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) report that superintendents acknowledged that it took “almost ten years of planning for goal-driven, data-driven norms to be put in place” (p. 12). Researchers who investigated New York Community School District #2 report that the district had focused on literacy and its professional development approach for 10 years (DiAmico et al., 2001). Longevity of district leadership also contributes to continuity and sustained improvement efforts. In some improved districts, superintendents had served their districts at least eight years. In some districts the successor was selected with the view to maintain continuity of the reform efforts. In the districts in the Council of Great City Schools study, “political and organizational stability over a prolonged period” and “consensus on educational reform strategies” were seen as preconditions for reform to occur (Snipes et al., 2002, p. xvii).

School districts committed to a sustained improvement effort realized there were “no quick fixes,” and they created a culture in which “district leaders encouraged practitioners to try new ideas and did not expect immediate results” (Togneri & Anderson, p. 50). Sustained and consistent efforts are prized by teachers in particular as they work to change instruction and improve student learning. Massell and Goertz (2002) report that in some districts that phased in guidance of instruction, “teachers needed time to become familiar with new approaches to teaching, participate in professional development, and try out new techniques in the classroom ... and to develop supplemental materials and activities to address state and local standards” (p. 53). Teachers valued consistency and focus: “initiatives that persisted over time and gave them multiple opportunities to learn about changes they were expected to make” (p. 59-60). Elmore and Burney (1997a) assert it is important for districts “to focus

centrally on instructional improvement and to sustain that commitment long enough for people within the district to internalize it and to engage in problem solving consistent with that commitment” (p. 3). They state, “Instructional change is a long multi-stage process ... [that] involves at least four distinct stages—awareness, planning, implementation, and reflection.” At any point teachers and principals may be at “different stages of development” (p.1).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How does the district communicate its commitment to school improvement?*
- *How does the district demonstrate persistent and continuous improvement?*
- *How does the district maintain stability of leadership, vision, and concerted improvement efforts in a climate of political and social change?*

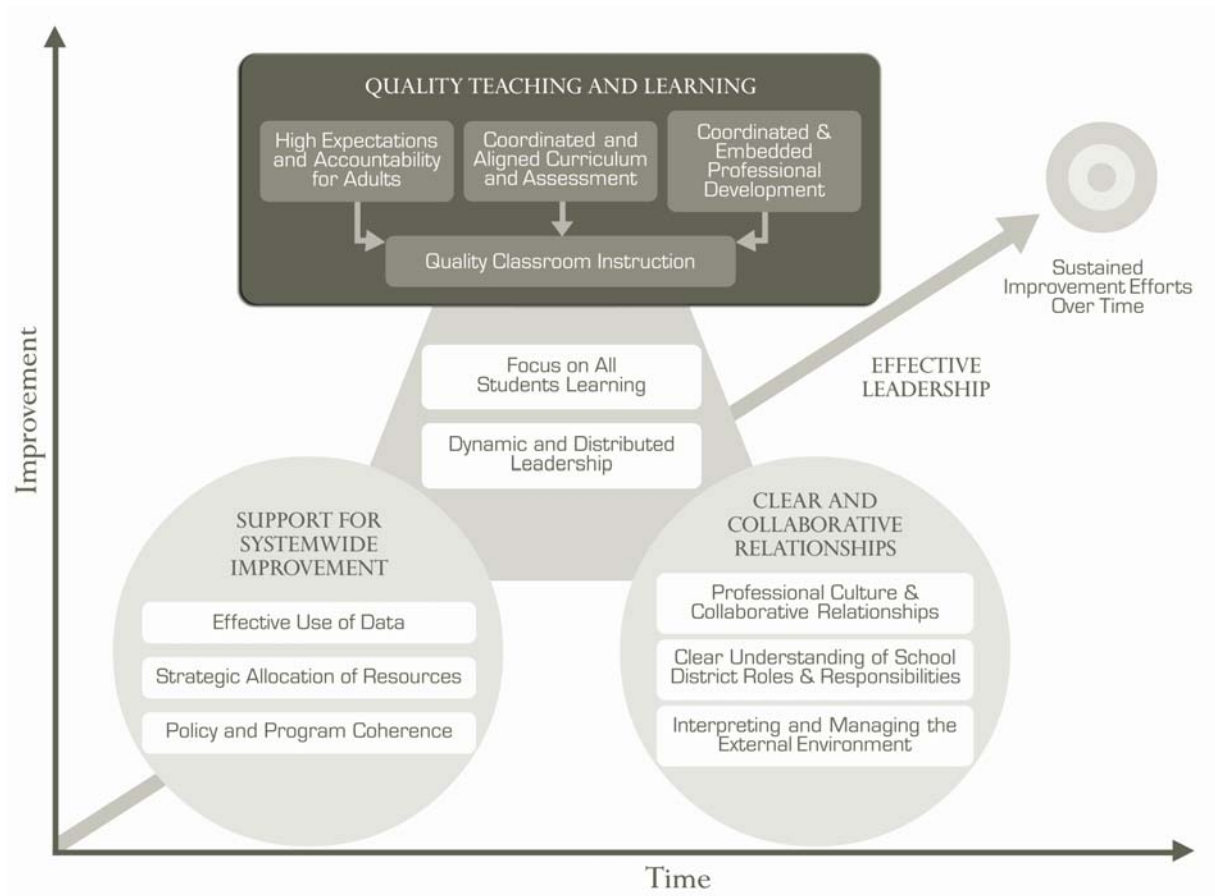
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## CHAPTER 3

# QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

The focus on all students learning to high standards requires quality teaching and learning. Thus, improved districts need to have *high expectations and accountability for adults* in the system because the adults have the main responsibility to improve student learning. District leadership *coordinates and aligns curriculum and assessment* and ensures alignment with state and district learning standards. In addition, *coordinated and embedded professional development* is provided continually to prepare teachers to meet high expectations for their performance. These three characteristics help ensure that *quality classroom instruction* takes place, and districts help schools develop a shared understanding of good instruction. These themes, which are defined and discussed below using information from the research literature, lead to improved student learning.



## **HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ADULTS**

Definition Improved districts hold all adults in the system accountable for student learning, beginning with the superintendent, senior staff, and principals. The districts have clear expectations for instruction and apply consistent pressure on schools for improved outcomes for students. The superintendent expects excellence by all, monitors performance, and provides feedback. High expectations influence hiring decisions and prompt districts and schools to address issues regarding ineffective teachers.

Discussion The research studies emphasize the importance of high expectations and accountability at all levels of the system. The effective schools research highlighted the importance of high expectations for students. In these studies high expectations were held for the adults who have responsibility for students' meeting high standards. Research studies indicate that the high expectations begin with the superintendent and central office staff and include principals and teachers in schools. Accountability focused on academic results and classroom practice. Under the relentless attention to the classroom, "teacher beliefs and practices had to change," according to Skrla et al. (2000, p. 18).

An early study of districts in Texas reports "superintendents and other central office leaders kept schools focused on district goals by keeping expectations for principals clear, insisting that principals develop believable, workable plans, reducing distractions, keeping relevant data about academic progress visible and public, and carefully balancing flexibility and accountability" (Raglan, Asera, & Johnson, cited in Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003, p. 14). In the Educational Research Services study, Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) report that the role of the central office was to set high expectations. They illustrate by quoting an Idaho elementary principal, "There is strong leadership at the central office, and the direction provided is very clear. The expectations that children will succeed is reiterated weekly—and daily" (p. 56-57). It was reported in one of the Texas districts that "(e)ven those with many years of experience said they had never really been expected to translate this belief [all students can learn] into daily activities, but that is exactly what the new superintendent expected them to do—and there would be 'no excuses'" (p. 64). In these districts, the superintendents were considered personally accountable for progress toward the district goals.

In a reference to Houston, Snipes et al. (2002) report that the district stressed a high level of expectations and accountability starting at the central office. The authors state, "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 it otherwise could not have" (p. 46). This research reports that improved districts put senior staff and principals on performance contracts tied to goals and that central offices took responsibility for the quality of instruction. Setting specific targets, establishing deadlines, and holding schools accountable for all students

helped districts take the reforms seriously and avoid a “this too shall pass attitude” (p. 47).

A report on school districts in North Carolina supports the importance of high expectations of the adults in the system. “(H)igh expectations were ‘lived and implemented from the central office to the classroom.’ There was a ‘sense of personal accountability for their students and a belief that everyone has a part to play. No one is ‘off the hook’” (in Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003, p. 63).

These studies provide some insights into the building of district professional norms or rules that guide behavior, responsibilities, and relationships. Districts can set clear expectations about classroom practice that help create norms to support improvement, use of data, and discussion and reflection on instruction (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003). Elmore (2003) asserts that “knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement. Holding schools accountable for their performance depends on having people in schools with the knowledge, skill, and judgment to make the improvement that will increase student performance” (p. 9). David and Shields (2001) find that it is as important to clearly identify high expectations for instruction as it is to have high expectations for student learning. They state that how districts communicate specific expectations for instructional practice and curriculum sets the stage for improving teaching and learning.

In a study of Virginia school districts, improved districts also are likely to take action to deal with ineffective staff. Successful districts (called divisions in Virginia) are described as able to support or dismiss ineffective teachers. These districts had effective programs for evaluating the needs of ineffective teachers and dismissing teachers who did not improve (Virginia JLARC, 2004).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How does the district communicate high expectations for adult performance?*
- *What processes are used in the district for accountability and to provide feedback to staff?*
- *How does the district monitor reform and change to maintain pressure for improved learning?*

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## **COORDINATED AND ALIGNED CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT**

Definition In improved districts, curriculum is aligned with standards, assessments, and policies. The districts have a centralized and coordinated approach to curriculum, which is adopted district-wide. Some districts use multiple measures to assess learning.

Discussion School districts across the studies are concerned with the alignment of curriculum and assessment as a factor in improving student achievement as measured by test scores. The studies indicate an almost universal concern with matching curriculum with state standards and state tests; however, approaches to alignment vary from district to district. Massell (2000) reports that in “today’s charged atmosphere of accountability and standards-based reform, districts are seeking to align the curriculum and instruction vertically to state policies and horizontally to other elements of district and school practice” (p. 4). Some district leaders believed that “strengthening and aligning curriculum and instruction was a central lever for improvement in the district” (Massell & Goertz, 2002, p. 50). Some districts used centralized curriculum alignment as a means for building capacity among schools and staff. In these cases, the process of aligning curriculum helped increase teachers’ knowledge and understanding of content standards and curriculum materials.

Alignment approaches range from tightly controlled district-level actions to less structured approaches. Two studies illustrate these different approaches. A key strategy reported in the study for the Council of Great City Schools was to adopt or develop districtwide curricula and instructional approaches rather than allowing schools to devise their own (Snipes et al., 2002). Each of the districts studied expected teachers and schools to use a common core for instruction. Massell calls this approach “technocratic” in that the elements of curriculum and instruction are tightly and centrally engineered at the district level (p. 4). In contrast, districts using a less structured approach, which allows staff more flexibility, may use professional development as a means for fostering alignment and may focus on subject matter content and district philosophy rather than specific textbooks or curriculum packages.

The research reports reinforce the connection between alignment and the improvement districts were experiencing. Skrla et al. (2000) report that the four Texas districts had aligned their curriculum and had developed instructional practices within the curriculum and linked them with assessments. The Education Research Service/Laboratory for School Success Study reports that districts had aligned local curriculum with state standards and assessments. These districts also did item by item analysis of results from state tests and revised curriculum and planned instruction accordingly. Districts provided teachers and schools time to work together to ensure alignment from grade to grade as well as across the district. Teachers were expected to use pacing guides that were developed by teachers. Interim assessments that paralleled the state test were developed to check student learning periodically (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003).

The Ohio evaluation notes that study participants “identified curriculum alignment as the single greatest factor in achieving improved test results. Two themes related to curriculum alignment consistently emerged: curriculum mapping and change in instructional practices.” Some districts used three-to-five year curriculum renewal cycles and aligned academic courses with state goals. The authors state, “Teachers were responsible for a collaborative effort to ensure that each grade at every school was teaching the same thing, and that teachers knew what was expected at the next higher grade...” (Kercheval & Newbill, 2002, p. 8-9). In North Carolina it was reported that districts promoted the “alignment of written, tested, and taught curriculum by providing district-wide pacing guides, lessons that could be shared among teachers, and, sometimes, periodic diagnostic assessments” (cited in Cawelti & Protheroe, p. 63).

The researchers in the Learning First Alliance study identified key components of systemwide approaches to improving instruction. These are “systemwide curricula that connect to state standards, are coherent across grade levels, and provide teachers with clear expectations about what to teach” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 11). They explain, “Before current reform efforts, the districts lacked universal understanding of expected outcomes. Some schools had common texts, but no districts had systemwide curricula. Boards did not make instruction and achievement central to their work... Today much has changed. In general districts are engaged in building systems in which the parts coalesce to collectively support instruction” (p. 11).

The research studies reflect variations in curriculum alignment across districts and content areas. Districts may make decisions to centralize curriculum development and alignment in some content areas and not in others. For example, mathematics was centralized more often than language arts according to several of the studies, although some acknowledge that decisions regarding reading or literacy appear to be more centralized in recent years. Districts may also phase-in curriculum reforms by grade level, subject area, or student developmental level. Massell and Goertz report that “phase-in gave teachers needed time to become familiar with new approaches to teaching, participate in professional development, and try out new techniques in the classroom. It also gave them time to develop supplemental materials and activities to address state and local standards” (p. 53-54). Improved districts provide varying levels of training and support related to curriculum adoptions.

### Questions for Reflection

- *How does district align learning standards with state standards and assessments?*
- *How does district align policies with curriculum and assessment?*
- *What are district processes for coordinating curriculum districtwide?*



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## **COORDINATED AND EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Definition Improved districts are providers or brokers of high quality professional development programs that are intensive, ongoing, focused on classroom practice, and include on-site coaching. Districts focus their support for professional development based on the teaching and learning needs of the school. Professional learning communities are developed and supported to build teacher knowledge and skills and to change instruction across the system. Central offices also develop as professional learning communities.

Discussion Research studies emphasize the importance of professional development to build the capacity of educators, schools, and districts to meet challenging learning goals. Improved districts tend to use professional development strategies that reflect researched practices. These districts also provide professional development for principals.

Improved districts regard “the building of teachers’ knowledge and skills as a crucial component of change” according to Massell (2000, p. 2). Other researchers concur. In the Pew Network districts, for example, “the greatest strides occur where the adults also have opportunities to learn” (David & Shields, 2001, p. v). Although some professional development continues to be “menu driven,” Massell reports that there is a “growing interest in the pursuit of less traditional formats for professional learning” (p. 3). Among “non-traditional” formats are teacher and school networks, peer mentoring, professional development centers, instructional support for teachers (e.g. coaching) that is school-based, teacher leaders and teacher participation in development activities.

McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) note that “reforming districts seek out and use cutting-edge practices, most especially in professional development where they have reallocated resources to provide site-based resources that reflect best thinking about how to foster teachers’ learning and instructional capacity” (p. 17). The “instructional supports provided schools by reforming districts” are described by these researchers as “very high quality ... intensive ... site-focused and ... designed in response to teachers’ expressed needs and evidence about student learning” (p. 18).

In many of the improved districts, professional development was related to particular curriculum adoptions or to district-supported principles of instruction. Togneri and Anderson (2003) also describe new approaches to professional development. These researchers write, “To varying degrees, all districts in the study moved beyond the traditional, one-time workshop approach to professional development and put in place coherent, district-organized strategies to improve instruction.... Today the picture looks quite different. It includes deliberate strategies to use research-based principles of professional development, widespread use of data in decision making, and clear connections between district goals and school-level practices. This is in large part the result of coherent strategies that districts put in place to support and improve instruction” (p. 23). They conclude that improved districts used “student performance

data to guide what teachers needed to learn and created cadres of principal and teacher leaders to provide quality instructional guidance” (p. 49).

The evaluation of improved districts in Ohio also identified professional development as an essential component. The report illustrates the range of professional development with a list provided by a superintendent in the study that included:

- “Improving student achievement
- Implementation of Continuous Improvement Plans
- Curriculum alignment and mapping
- Use of assessments to monitor and identify student academic progress
- Instructional strategies to reflect proficiency test format” (Kercheval & Newbill, 2002, p. 13).

A report from North Carolina describes coherent and consistent professional development. It is targeted on “long-term goals, builds school and district capacity, focuses on content and instruction, is based on research based practice, and is aligned with the overall direction and initiatives in the school and district” (in Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003, p. 63).

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction has published a planning guide for teacher professional development that identifies seven research-based practices for districts and schools to consider and use (Washington OSPI, 2003).

The study of districts in the Merck Institute of Science Education project reinforces the importance of sustained professional development. The authors conclude that “making significant changes in the classroom requires long-term sustained efforts on the part of districts.... Teachers change their practice incrementally at first, and it takes time for them to develop both competence and confidence in new methods” (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003, p. 37).

The building of a professional community is another dimension of professional development in improved districts. A professional community is generally related to staff in a school. Some authors believe the creation of a professional community is necessary at the central office as well. Supovitz and Christman (2003) assert that “(c)ommunities of instructional practice are a powerful way for groups of teachers to engage in instructional improvement through sustained inquiry into their practice and investigations into ways that their teaching can most effectively produce greater student learning. Communities focused on instruction bring teachers out of isolated classrooms and engage them in structured ways to systematically explore together the relationships between their teaching and the learning of their students. Working together teachers learn with and from each other, capitalizing on the ways that adults learn most effectively” (p. 8). Professional learning communities help provide organizational supports and resources, help break down obstacles, and facilitate the challenging work of school reform.

Knapp et al. (2003) include professional community as one of the areas of action for *Leading for Learning*. They give the following essential tasks for leaders:

- “Building trusting relationships among professionals in the school or district.
- Creating structures and schedules that sustain interaction among professionals.
- Helping to frame joint work and shared responsibilities.
- Modeling, guiding, and facilitating participation in professional communities that value learning.
- Promoting a focus on learning and associated core values” (p. 25-26).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How does the district build capacity in the district and the school to improve instruction and student learning?*
- *How does the district reflect research-based professional development practices?*
- *How does the district ensure coherence across professional development, policies, and teaching and learning practices?*

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## QUALITY CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

**Definition** Improved districts pay close attention to classroom practice and provide guidance and oversight for improving teaching and learning. Districts emphasize principles of good instruction and communicate clear expectations for what to teach. Districts develop a common vision and understanding of quality teaching and learning. They monitor instruction, curriculum, and changes in instructional practice. Their guidance and improvement efforts require actions such as systemwide approval, interventions and corrective instruction, tutoring, and alignment.

**Discussion** The studies on improved districts report intensive attention and guidance focused on classroom instruction. Different researchers have described this focus on instruction as a “single-minded system emphasis,” a “clear unitary focus,” a district “instilled vision,” and support for “faithful implementation.” The studies describe the strategies and approaches used in districts to train staff as well as support and monitor instructional classroom practice. David and Shields (2001) state that districts that “communicated ambitious expectations for instruction, supported by a strong professional development system, are able to make significant changes in classroom practices.... [They] conclude that clear expectations for instruction are as critical as clear expectations for student learning” (p. iii).

Massell and Goertz (2002) summarize strategies used in one district. The district trained principals and teachers in what appropriate instruction would look like and used a “system of ... instructional elements ... to monitor teachers’ implementation of new instructional approaches” (p. 51). The district also used teacher specialists who worked with teachers in schools to help change their practice. Similarly, McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) describe districts that provided a clear instructional focus that was widely shared and sustained over time. Districts created “supportive infrastructure” and created communities of work and learning (p. 195).

Skrla et al. (2000) reported the changes in the Texas districts that had to occur to support “equity beliefs” so that they became more than “empty slogans” (p. 23). The districts incorporated “proactive redundancy” as a means for ensuring effective classroom practice. For example, more than one process, e.g., procedure, action, or structure, was used to target a particular change in practice to be sure teachers were successful with children in their classes.

According to Snipes et al. (2002), low-performing schools in some districts received “particular scrutiny” from central offices. They were given the message that “deviation from the curricula was not acceptable” (p. 52). The districts developed strategies, accompanied with substantial resources, to educate teachers about the curriculum and instructional strategies. In these districts, central office staff had a specific role in guiding and supporting instruction and classroom and school implementation of district strategies.

In the Learning First Alliance study, districts “refined their overarching vision” and also “sought to develop a more specific vision for good instruction. In general,

instructional visions were not a series of practices—for instance, cooperative learning or direct instruction—but rather a philosophy of practice. More specifically, district leaders sought to infuse a reflective and evidence-based approach to teaching practice. This meant that they expected teachers to actively engage students in rigorous content, assess the impact of instructional methods, reflect on their practice, work with colleagues to research and share effective practice, and make appropriate adjustments to help students learn effectively” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 15). Some districts developed networks of teachers as mentors or content specialists to support new teachers or others who needed assistance.

Districts differ in their visions and philosophies regarding coordinating and monitoring instruction. While some districts offer guidance, others mandate given practices. Some districts adopt textbooks that are quite prescriptive with lesson plans and pacing guides and monitor teacher adherence to these in implementing the curriculum. Some emphasize the need for particular instructional processes, such as organizing instruction to allow for assessing skills regularly before students move on, providing tutoring or extra help for students who fail to master the skills and enrichment activities for those who have, and frequent practice throughout the year to help students remember what they have learned. Other districts provide explicit expectations for instructional practice and then use “walk throughs” or other processes to look at classroom instruction. Regardless of approaches used, the districts, from central office administrators to principals and teachers, were focused on classroom instruction (Cawelti & Protheroe, David & Shields, Skrla et al., and Snipes et al.)

Togneri and Anderson emphasize the importance of instruction for improving student achievement as one of the “lessons” learned from their study. They write, “It is basic: Students learn what they are taught; students will learn more if they are taught well.... In these districts, reforms focused on improving instruction, and this approach is paying off” (p. 49). The study of the Pew Network districts states, “Districts that succeed in supporting widespread and ongoing improvement in teaching practice have shifted their central offices from ones that manage dollars, programs, and people to ones focused on leading and supporting improved instruction” (David & Shields, p. 30).

### Questions for Reflection

- *What is the district-wide vision for “good” instruction?*
- *How do teachers develop the knowledge and skills described by the vision?*
- *How are principles of learning implemented in classrooms?*
- *What guidance for instruction does the district provide to schools?*

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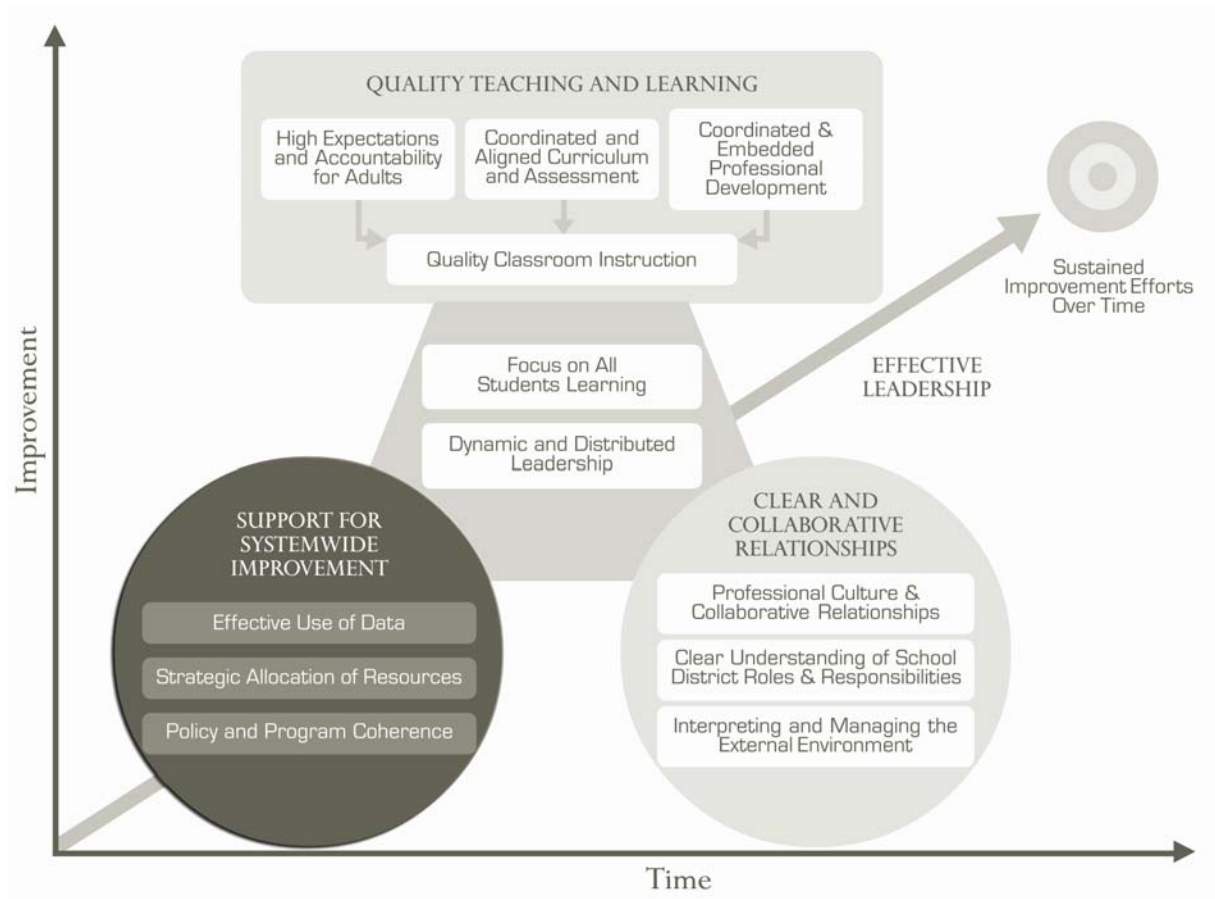
## Characteristics of Improved School Districts



## CHAPTER 4

# SUPPORT FOR SYSTEMWIDE IMPROVEMENT

Improved districts serve and support student learning by *using data effectively*, *strategically allocating resources*, and ensuring *policy and program coherence*. The themes of support affect all parts of the organization, and in improving districts, they clearly support the central focus on student learning. Leadership uses data to make decisions regarding instruction and strategic resource allocation. Districts marshal and allocate resources to ensure quality instruction and equitable distribution of resources to meet high expectations for all students. Finally, improved districts develop and revise policies and programs to ensure coherence with the central focus on all students learning and to support quality teaching and learning. These three themes are defined and discussed below with examples from the research literature.



## EFFECTIVE USE OF DATA

Definition Improved districts use data as evidence to monitor results, for making instructional and resource allocation decisions, and for accountability. District staff provides time and training in the use of data and helps schools in gathering and interpreting data. The evidence is used to monitor equity, make decisions about alignment, and target professional development efforts.

Discussion Data use figured prominently as an essential tool in the research studies on improved school districts. The research studies report a range of data types and uses. Data generally include student performance results based on local and state tests. Districts in one study stress the use of multiple—not single—measures of student and school performance. In addition to setting the expectation of “data driven decision making,” districts take responsibility for collecting data, analyzing it, and providing it to schools in manageable, understandable forms. Many districts also provide training to central office and school staff in interpreting and using data in decision making. Some districts report sophisticated systems for managing data. McLoughlin et al. (2004) view data as one of three “cross-cutting levers” districts have to use as change agents, along with leadership and equity.

Based on a study of 22 districts in five states, Massell (2000) found a growing emphasis on the use of data to drive decisions as districts developed expertise at the district and school level. David and Shields (2001), in the Pew Network evaluation of school districts, also saw “increased attention to data in school planning, examples of richer notions of accountability that rely on multiple measures, professional judgment, and shared responsibility for student learning” (p. 44).

McLoughlin and Talbert (2003) also found that use of data was central to inquiry-based reform efforts in Bay Area school districts. These 58 districts relied heavily on the use of data to inform instructional decisions. These “reforming districts improve(d) system performance by using data on trends in organizational conditions and student achievement within and across schools to focus their reform efforts and to refine their supports for individual schools.” The researchers conclude there is “evidence from our field research and from quantitative analysis of reform outcomes that such district practice results in improved teaching and learning. As reported, both teacher and principal ratings of their district’s professionalism and support track closely with district reform action, and district reform action predicts both schools’ progress toward organizational conditions conducive to ongoing improvement and gains in students’ academic performance across the system” (p. 20).

Data for decision making is a powerful educational reform tool according to a number of studies of improved districts. Some districts had developed a “data-driven culture.” Examples to illustrate the ways districts use data include:

- Data as a tool for “generating a sense of urgency for improvement” in the study districts in Texas (Raglan, Asera, & Johnson, in Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003, p. 13).

- Data for decision making and instruction, to identify problem areas for teachers and students, and provide feedback on progress through disaggregating data by school, teacher, student, and race (Snipes et al., 2002).
- Data as feedback to provide information on “each grade, each class, each child, data to manage performance of schools, teachers, and students, computer-generated individual learning profiles, and ... to improve district programs, teacher instruction, and student performance” found in Houston (Cawelti & Protheroe, p. 27).
- Tracking data and keeping schools apprised of their students’ progress as provided by staff in Ohio school districts (Kercheval & Newbill, 2002).
- Data from multiple assessment sources used in decision making related to curriculum alignment and mapping and professional development according to the Ohio study (Kercheval & Newbill).

According to Togneri and Anderson (2003), improved districts make data “safe.” They emphasize data as a tool for seeking solutions, not for purposes of blaming individuals. They also make data clear and manageable and train staff in their use.

#### Questions for Reflection

- *How does the district make data available for use in schools?*
- *How are school leaders trained in the use of multiple measures and analysis of data?*
- *How does the district support classroom teachers’ use of data in making instructional decisions about individual students?*

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## STRATEGIC ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

Definition Improved districts provide, allocate, reallocate, and find resources to ensure quality instruction. Districts provide additional resources—financial as well as human and social capital—to support low performers. Districts give schools some autonomy over staffing, schedules, and budgets within parameters that establish their roles and responsibilities.

Discussion Almost universally the districts in these research studies were responsible for planning, locating, allocating, and reallocating staff and financial resources. Resources generally include time, personnel, materials, and facilities. How school districts manage their responsibility for use and distribution of resources has significant impact on educational reform across the system. As school districts shifted their role from one of monitoring compliance to one of providing support and service, resources were also shifted to school buildings. Central office staff members, for example, were often found in schools and classrooms working with teachers and principals (Skrla et al., 2000).

Spillane and Thompson (1997), in their report of a study of Michigan districts, describe the interdependent nature of human and social capital and financial resources. Human capital includes the “commitment, dispositions, and knowledge of local reforms” that are part of a district’s capacity needed to promote school improvement. Social capital, a result of “professional networks and trusting collegial relations” is needed for creating human capital and in turn depends upon human capital for their effectiveness. “Social interactions surfaced insights, understandings, and perspectives” that advance school improvement. Time, as a material resource, interacts with human and social capital along with curricular materials to shape district capacity for educational reform. District leadership, commitment, knowledge, and trustworthiness are needed to ensure that resources are used to greatest advantage in improving teaching and learning (p. 2-3).

The studies describe the strategic allocation of resources to support education reform. In some improved districts, for example, teachers were provided time and opportunity to meet together, analyze data, plan curriculum, discuss student work, and observe other teachers in order to improve instruction. Professional development helped teachers acquire knowledge and skills to meet challenging academic goals (Skrla et al.). Districts in the Council of Great City Schools study “revamped and professionalized the district’s business operations and pushed to change central office culture” to serve and support schools (Snipes et al., 2002, p. 39). They pursued new funds from public and private sources to support their reforms. However, these districts were careful not to *chase the money* if it interfered with their coherent approach to education reform (p. 39-40). Other studies also reported “strategic allocation of financial and human resources” to target improving instruction (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 5).

Districts in the studies allocated funds for special efforts for student learning. Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) report that districts used funds for a range of purposes, from

supporting after-school classes to funding a master teacher position who demonstrated lessons and helped teachers develop lesson plans. The Ohio study noted the use of funds for supporting intervention and remediation programs for students that were offered before and after school, intervention sessions during the school day, and Saturday and summer school. Time, space, and staff were reallocated to support such programs (Kercheval & Newbill, 2002). Other studies also emphasized resources in the form of coaches and facilitators assigned to schools for in-building support for improving teaching. In a study of Cincinnati and Philadelphia districts, Supovitz and Christman (2003) explicitly call for providing discretionary funds to create instructional communities for teachers to work together.

Personnel, or human resources, is an important component of school district policy and programs. Teachers matter a great deal in efforts to improve learning for all students. Some studies reflected efforts by districts to recruit, retain, evaluate, and remediate or dismiss teachers to increase the quality of staff as a part of education reform. Although teachers and administrators and their roles and attributes are treated in some studies, recruitment and retention, per se, did not receive much attention. Elmore and Burney (1997b) and the Panasonic case studies (Thompson, 2002) describe programs and activities used in some districts to increase the quality of teachers and administrators. The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission evaluation of Virginia districts does surmise that the ability to deal with ineffective teachers was an important factor in the success of some districts (Virginia JLARC, 2004).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How do resource allocations reflect district policies?*
- *How are human, social, physical, and financial resources developed, managed, and allocated across the district?*
- *How does the district determine the adequacy of resources needed and provided to improve student learning?*
- *How does the district ensure equity in allocating resources to close the achievement gap?*

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## **POLICY AND PROGRAM COHERENCE**

Definition Improved districts develop and implement policies and strategies that promote equity and excellence, and they review and revise those policies and strategies to ensure coherence among programs and practices linked to district goals. Student learning is central to roles, budget, operating procedures, and personnel practices—all are redefined as needed. All district systems are explicitly included in reinforcing common goals and efforts to attain the goals. The central office monitors coherence of actions and programs to the focus and vision of the district.

Discussion The research studies emphasize the importance of coherence across policies, programs, and practices. Districts, particularly large urban systems, have been recognized as complex organizations. Schools exist within the context of the broader school system and community. Often described as complex “nested” systems, the parts within the system must support and reinforce each other so that districts and schools are working from a “unifying design that enables all staff members to function to the best of their abilities and that integrates research-based practices into a *coherent* and *mutually reinforcing* set of effective approaches to teaching and learning” (RAND, cited in Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003, p. 69). Several studies stress that improved districts move on several fronts and that no single change made all of the difference in improving student learning (Kercheval & Newbill, 2002; Snipes et al., 2002). In these improved districts, their change efforts were systemwide rather than program based. Consequently, the efforts superceded specific programs, departments, or operations.

Districts create policy, as well as interpret and implement state policy, in ways that reinforce and support a vision for improving teaching and learning. Districts, according to some studies, use the district vision and focus as a means for establishing coherence linking policy and operations. Programs and practices are adopted or implemented in relation to their support of the vision. Districts also link policy and classroom practices. Districts that explicitly identify a content area or establish a set of instructional principles as part of the district vision increase coherence in the system. A clear focus contributes to consistency in the programs and resources that are brought into the improved districts. In fact, some studies acknowledge that district officials may reject projects or initiatives that distract from their focus (McLoughlin & Talbert, 2003).

Strategic planning is a tool used by some improved districts to help build coherence. Such planning can increase the likelihood that all components, such as staffing, budgeting, and inservice training, are connected with the district vision. Districts can create roles and structures that support teachers in improving instruction through providing time for collaborative work and helping create professional communities that enhance coherence. Financial planning and budgets also align with programs and practices increasing the coherence in systems. The districts studied by the Learning First Alliance, for example, made instruction the “centerpiece of their improvement efforts.” The districts then put in place a systemwide approach to improve instruction and built the necessary infrastructure to support instructional improvement (Togneri



& Anderson, 2003, p. 3 in *Leadership Brief*). In these districts, coherence was built by linking learning standards, grade level and school system expectations for teaching and learning, and professional development, and implementing multiple measure accountability systems (Togneri & Anderson).

Corcoran and Lawrence (2003) confirm the importance of aligned and coherent policies and programs. “When district policies send clear and consistent messages to teachers about priorities and best practices, these messages are more likely to be understood, accepted as legitimate, and acted upon. Conversely, failure to align policies produces inconsistent, confusing messages, and practitioners may respond differently, attending to the most pressing policy message or simply ignoring the guidance altogether” (p. 21). According to Snipes et al., comparison districts in the Council of Great City Schools study gave schools “multiple and conflicting curricular and instructional expectations,” which they were left to “decipher ... on their own” (p. 6). The central offices took “little or no responsibility for improving instruction or creating a cohesive instructional strategy throughout the district.” Also, “the policies and practices of the central office did not result in the intended changes in teaching and learning in the classrooms” (p. 6).

Newman et al. (2001) draw the same conclusion based on research on school improvement in Chicago. The authors state, “Research has documented the importance of school organizational factors such as a unity of purpose, a clear focus, and shared values for student learning. Research has also drawn attention to the problem of incoherent school programs, where diverse initiatives set up to serve important needs, but which lack the sustained attention of the majority of staff within the school, have no apparent effects on the core goals of improving student achievement” (p. 10). School districts, along with states, “conceivably have more clout to strengthen school instructional program coherence” (p. 42). The authors encourage districts to emphasize instructional program coherence throughout their operation, including professional development, hiring and evaluating principals, and curriculum and textbook adoption. Further, they suggest “an oversight district committee could review district mandates and regulations to consider their fragmenting effects on instructional program coherence within schools” (p. 43).

The *Leading for Learning Sourcebook* includes a description of creating coherence in the school district. Essential tasks include:

- “Utilizing pathways that intentionally address student, professional, and system learning.
- Aligning activities with resources, with each other, and with compelling visions of learning and teaching.
- Creating structures and incentives for system learning that supports student and professional learning” (Knapp et al., 2003, p. 40).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How does the district ensure coherence in policy across district programs and operations?*
- *How does the district policy reflect the goals of equitable and excellent learning?*
- *How do operational systems in the district reinforce learning goals?*

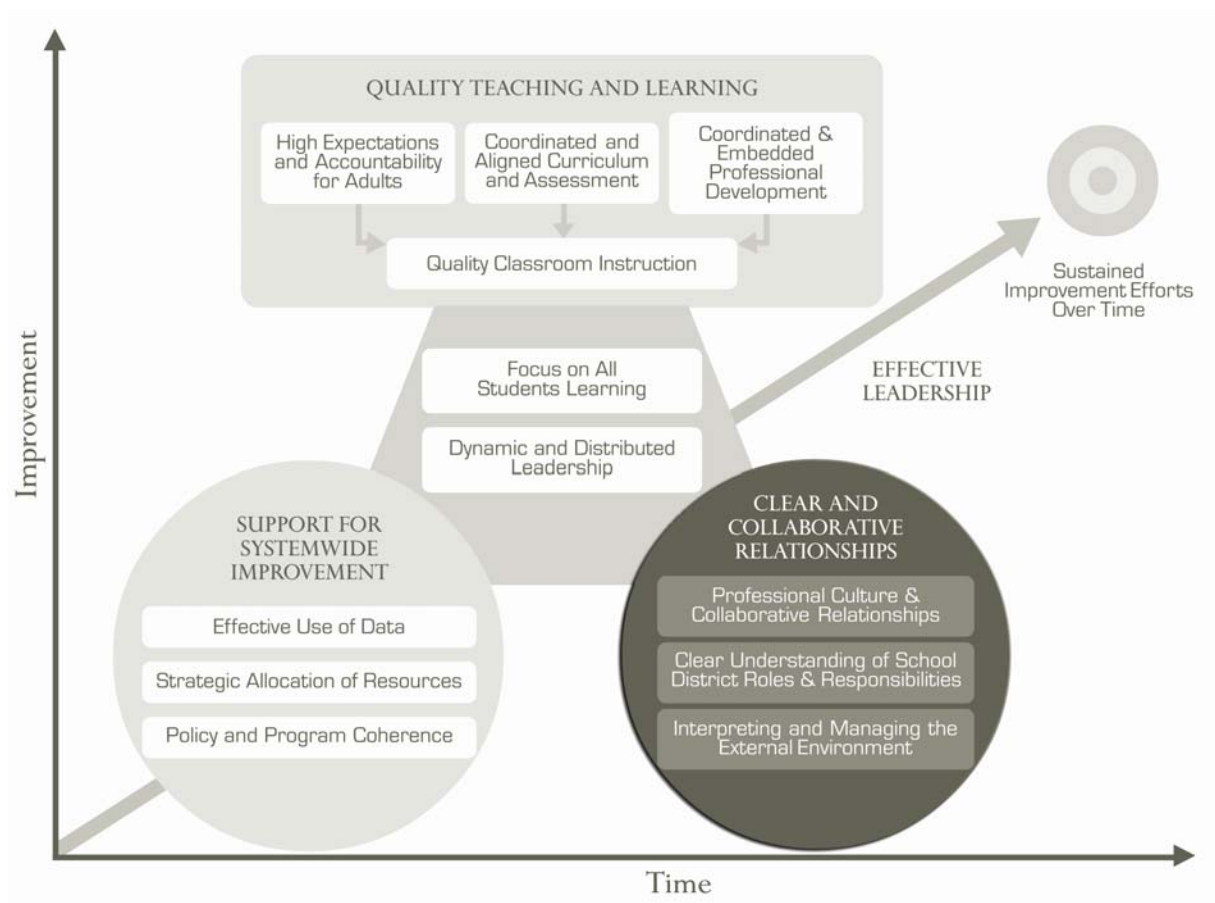
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## CHAPTER 5

# CLEAR AND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Improved school districts have collaborative relationships that reflect the needs and strengths of the district, schools, and community stakeholders. Educators in the system develop and nurture a *professional culture and collaborative relationships* marked by professional learning, mutual respect, and trust inside the organization, between and among parts of the organization, and outside the organization. Improved districts also develop a *clear understanding of district and school roles and responsibilities*. They work together to determine the balance between district control and school autonomy. Finally, leaders in these districts *interpret and manage the external environment* by inviting stakeholder participation and buffering classrooms from distractions. These final three themes are defined and discussed below.



## **PROFESSIONAL CULTURE AND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

Definition Improved districts build a culture of commitment, collegiality, mutual respect, and stability. Professional norms include peer support, collaboration, trust, shared responsibility, and continuous learning for the adults in the system. Districts support school communities of practice and also develop central offices as professional learning communities.

Discussion Improved districts intentionally work to create professional learning communities marked by trust, support, shared responsibility, and continuous learning. Research studies describe district climate and actions that reinforce these qualities of professionalism. Trust is essential between school board and district leaders and among district leaders and staff.

In the Dana Center study of districts in Texas, researchers found evidence of trust between superintendent and school board. For most of the original 10 districts identified for study, “dramatic growth in student achievement seemed to coincide with periods when there was a high level of trust between the superintendent and the school board.... As a result of this trust, school boards were willing to allow district leaders to develop and implement programs and make key personnel changes, and start new initiatives that otherwise would never have happened” (Raglan, Asera, and Johnson, cited in Cawelti, 2003, p. 13). McLoughlin and Talbert (2003) describe the trust that can exist between district administrators and teachers. “Building teachers’ trust in district administrators’ commitment and ability to support their learning and change is key to an effective district instructional support role.” One central office administrator is quoted, “There is a strong relationship between the district and the schools in that sites are starting to trust and realize that the central office is there to be of help to them ... and that their opinions are important” (p. 18).

Spillane and Thompson (1997) write that the districts “that had made the greatest strides in reforming their mathematics and science programs were also ones with a strong sense of trust among educators within the district. Trust was crucial because it facilitated conversations about instructional reform among local educators.... Trust was also essential for genuine collaboration among educators, enabling them to work together to develop a shared understanding of the reforms. Moreover, trust created an environment in which local educators were comfortable discussing their understandings of and reservations about new instructional approaches, conversations that were essential for reconstructive learning” (p. 195). These conversations provided “occasions for local educators to gain new understanding about mathematics and science education and the skills necessary to use this knowledge to revise their practice. Moreover, they afforded teachers an opportunity to gain the insights of others on the practical problems of trying to revise practice” (p. 196). In another district in the study, there were tensions and a lack of support and trust between teachers and administrators. In these cases, administrators spoke of “teacher resistance as a constraint” on attempts to reform and teachers described the “lack of support from administration” (p. 196). These researchers describe the human and social capital that must be developed in districts as part of these professional communities.

Supovitz and Christman (2003) explain that “policy makers can foster communities of instructional practice” (p. 1). Professional communities need as much autonomy as can be provided, according to these researchers. Teachers will make a greater commitment if they have authority to make decisions. Autonomy also enhances identity and distinctiveness. However, if autonomy is promised and then undermined by central office “edicts and policy mandates,” teachers become “cynical about the possibility of meaningful community” (p. 8). These writers call for both horizontal and vertical communities to enhance relationships among teachers at the same grade level as well as across grade configurations.

The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission evaluation of districts in Virginia supports the importance of collaboration and teamwork. The report concludes that high scoring schools and successful challenged schools (academically successful schools despite demographic challenges) reflected “teamwork, collaboration and vertical integration” (Virginia JLARC, 2004, p. 68). The report states “successful divisions [districts] encourage collaboration across schools to improve instruction. High-scoring and successful challenged [districts] tend to encourage collaboration among teachers and principals across the [district] so that all teachers can benefit from best practices that are successfully used in particular grade levels and vertically among schools that serve the same group of students” (p. 84).

The Learning First Alliance report also emphasizes the importance of teamwork—“working together takes work.” The report states that “simply getting along was not the goal; leaders determined that amity held little value if it did not create positive change for children.” Togneri and Anderson (2003) described collaborative efforts between districts and union leaders in some improved districts. Although unions’ focus varied in the study districts, in some situations union leaders worked with district leaders to increase support for teachers, communicate professional development needs, and build “trust by communicating visibly and regularly with district leaders.” Unions also “introduced and supported research-promoted approaches to professional development” (p. 35). The “most collaborative districts in the study worked on working together. Districts deliberately sought and implemented tools to guide collaboration. To be sure, not all of these districts involved all of the stakeholders to the same degree, but the record so far suggests the collaboration of important stakeholders is vital to school improvement” (p. 50).

Fullan et al. (2004) offer a perspective on professional culture in which “teams of people [are] creating and driving a clear, coherent strategy.” They suggest that “collective moral purpose” is essential to sustained reform. “The moral imperative means that everyone has a responsibility for changing the larger education context for the better. District leaders must foster a culture in which school principals are concerned about the success of every school in the district, not just their own” (p. 43). This “lateral capacity building” will extend, deepen, and help sustain system change. “Teams working together develop clear, operational understandings of their goals and strategies, fostering new ideas, skills, and a shared commitment to districtwide development” (p. 44).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How is the district building a professional culture that supports high standards for students and adults in the system?*
- *How does the district build trust, mutual respect, and competence among stakeholders in the system?*
- *How does the district provide opportunities for peer support and collaboration, and develop professional learning communities?*

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## **CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Definition Improved districts set expectations, decentralize responsibility and support to schools, and serve as change agents enabling schools to improve. Districts restructure central offices to support learning, serve critical roles as mentors, and help seek solutions. Districts balance district authority and school autonomy; they simultaneously empower and control. The central office has responsibility for defining goals and standards; schools have latitude in the use of resources and influence over issues important to school staff.

Discussion Improved districts develop a balance between centralized authority and school flexibility and autonomy. The research studies describe the roles and responsibilities manifested in the district structure. Several studies describe changes the districts made from monitoring compliance to rules and regulations to supporting teaching and learning in schools. The districts have also developed new directions and new role definitions. As districts assume a stronger role related to curriculum and instructional practice, David and Shields (2001) noted that tensions develop between the “traditions of school autonomy and centralized control of decision-making. We find it is districts, not schools, that create districtwide priorities and expectations; and districts make significant choices about the resources available for professional development.... In fact, we did not find any instances in which schools on a widespread basis were able to make significant improvements in classroom practice in the absence of active support and leadership from the district” (p. 37).

Marsh (2000) writes that there is a “delicate balance” between central authority and school autonomy “with some of the more successful districts setting clear expectations accompanied by decentralized responsibility” (p. 11). Other authors note that a “dynamic tension” exists between districts and schools in regard to control at central offices and flexibility or freedom at the school level (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988, p. 178).

Districts “remain the legal and fiscal agents that oversee and guide schools. In many ways, districts are *the* major source of capacity-building for schools—structuring, providing, and controlling access to professional development, curriculum and instructional ideas, more and more qualified staff, relationships with external agents, and so on” (Massell, 2000, p. 6). Central offices are described as “gatekeepers for federal and state policy” and as such translate, interpret, support, or block actions on behalf of their schools (p. 1). Massell writes, “School districts strongly influence the strategic choices that schools make to improve teaching and learning” (p. 1).

In the Dana Center study of 10 Texas districts, “reorganization of the central office meant ‘central office personnel were more likely to assume support functions and less likely to assume compliance monitoring functions. They were more likely to help schools find answers and less likely to provide directives. They were more focused on instruction in classrooms and less focused on administrative procedures.’ One superintendent described it as more than a change in structure. ‘It is really a change in

culture. It's a way of thinking” (Raglan, Asera & Johnson, cited in Cawelti, 2003, p. 15).

McLaughlin and Talbert (2003) found that the “central office and the schools have mutually reinforcing but different roles in defining and advancing a strong reform agenda. The central office assumes responsibility for defining goals and standards for teaching and learning, allocating resources to the school level, and providing the supports principals and teachers need to be successful in meeting district-established standards” (p. 20). In the reforming districts in the Bay Area, “schools are assigned significant authority and responsibility.” Principals and teachers in these districts “appreciate this strong district role because they feel the district provides both clear standards and effective support” (p.20–21). According to the researchers, the debate in these districts moves “beyond centralization/decentralization dichotomies to feature the responsibility and functions assigned to each level of the system. The salient issue in reforming districts is how to be tactical about what decisions are made where and how responsibilities follow” (p. 22).

Researchers assert, “Some balance must be struck between centralization and decentralization, between exerting pressure on teachers to change their practice and granting them room to experiment with or define the direction of the changes, if ambitious goals for instructional renewal are to be realized.... The issue has less to do with the strength of the district’s presence in instructional renewal and more with *what* it assumes responsibility for and *how*. It is thus possible that districts can be simultaneously assertive and empowering, strong and supportive, and that dichotomous thinking about centralization and decentralizing tendencies is not useful for identifying the district’s role in instructional renewal” (Hightower et al., 2002, p. 200).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How does the district balance district authority and school autonomy?*
- *What are district responsibilities and prerogatives and how are they determined?*
- *What are parameters for school-level decision making and how are they determined?*
- *How are different roles for central office and schools developed, communicated, and monitored?*

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## **INTERPRETING AND MANAGING THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT**

Definition Improved districts access, analyze, interpret, and mediate state and federal policy with local policy. Districts buffer schools against external disturbances and distractions, mobilize and manage community and business support, and involve family and community as partners.

Discussion The interaction between school districts and their state and local contexts is manifested in a variety of ways, according to the research studies. Interaction and relationships of districts with their states depend on how districts interpret and manage their implementation of state policies. Improved districts access, interpret, and manage state policy to determine how district and schools will implement educational reform and change classrooms. However, districts also sometimes buffer schools from external disturbances that might interfere with successful learning and attempt to manage internal conflicts to protect the teaching and learning processes from disruption. Improved school districts also interact proactively with their local communities by seeking collaborative relationships.

A function of school districts is to access and interpret state and federal policies and to implement them appropriately in schools and classrooms. Interpreting and implementing policy, however, is not particularly straightforward. Responses to state and federal policy are influenced by the knowledge and understanding of school district leaders. The level of understanding, as well as leaders' capability and willingness, influences districts' action. According to Spillane (2002), "It is, in part, a function of district leaders' understanding of policy messages and the manner in which they communicate these understandings to teachers" (p. 143). Leaders "learn" the policy and in turn teach it to others within the system. "District leaders must decipher what a policy means to decide whether and how to ignore, adapt, or adopt it into local policies and practices" (p. 144). He concludes that the "district leaders' understanding of reform is an important explanatory variable in the implementation process" (p. 149).

McLoughlin and Talbert (2003) provide another perspective regarding the concept of managing the external environment. The California districts in their study used their clear focus on student learning and teaching as a means to "protect their reform agenda in the face of initiatives and high stakes accountability measures coming at them from the state." Leaders in the three districts studied did not worry that state pressures or policies would "throw them off course." These superintendents put compliance issues into perspective and maintained their reform efforts (p. 16).

Researchers noted experiences of improved districts in working with local communities. In the Dana Center study, the Texas school districts and their communities are described as "integral to each other;" they have mutual responsibility to work together for "equitable student learning" (Skrla et al., 2000, p. 35). The district and school leadership actively sought community and parent participation in their schools which included "knock(ing) down the barriers" such as childcare and transportation (p. 36). "Thus, to various degrees for these four districts,

a shared belief emerged that the district and its community, actual or created, must unite to deliver equitable learning” (p. 36).

The Learning First Alliance researchers describe the collaborative leadership roles utilized in their study districts. Leadership was expanded to include external stakeholders, such as representatives from state offices, universities, and communities, board members, teacher leaders, and union leaders, who worked in a collaborative, coordinated manner with district staff. “In these districts, leadership was not simply shared; most stakeholder groups sought to take on the elements of reform that they were best positioned to lead” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 7).

David and Shields (2001) conclude that unions and communities can be critical to successful reform. They write, “Districts face an uphill battle in attempting to implement major reforms without the support of the organizations that represent educators and without the backing of parents and the business community . . . where districts have built collaborations with unions, their reform efforts are more likely to be supported” (p. 35). The researchers report the actions of various groups outside the central office that have pressured districts to move forward with some reform efforts while other groups have fought to slow reforms or move them in different directions. Early involvement of stakeholders in planning, design, and decision making has been used in some districts to help manage outside forces and increase support. “Stakeholders in the most collaborative districts were not simply informed about new efforts but involved in their development and implementation” (Togneri & Anderson, p. 32).

Some researchers have examined the experiences of districts engaged in partnerships with outside proponents of reform such as private foundations or other educational support groups. Kronley and Handley (2003) summarize five case studies of districts in partnership with a number of these support organizations. They write, “What is being ‘supported’ is a process of transformation that will lead to better outcomes for students; in the dynamic that is central to this process, both the district and [the support organization] will serve as ‘supports’ for each other” (p. 4). They offer some guidance to district leaders who are in the position of working with such organizations.

The *Leading for Learning Sourcebook* suggests tasks for “engaging external environments that matter for learning” that include:

- “Making efforts to understand community, professional, and policy environments.
- Building relationships with individuals and groups.
- Anticipating resistances and devising ways to manage conflict.
- Garnering the full range of resources (fiscal, intellectual, human, etc.) that support the learning agenda” (Knapp et al., 2003, p. 31).

### Questions for Reflection

- *How does the district interpret state and federal policy to schools and assist with implementation?*
- *How does the district mobilize community support?*
- *How does the district involve family and community in school district affairs?*
- *How does the district enlist the involvement and support of all stakeholders including staff members, union leadership, business leaders, families and community in implementing reform initiatives?*
- *How does the district balance the need to buffer schools from external distractions while opening schools for family and community involvement?*

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## CHAPTER 6

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The current body of research illustrates that what happens at the district level can help improve schools and student learning. Educational reform efforts that bypass districts and concentrate on schools can raise performance in individual schools, but reaching all students across a district requires a systemwide vision and strategy as well as the implementation of a well-designed improvement plan. The research on improved school districts reveals 13 themes that are interrelated and mutually supportive that districts can study in greater depth to ensure all students will meet high standards.

To help explain these themes and their relationships to one another, we developed a conceptual framework based on a synthesis of the research literature. The framework presents the themes in four categories: *Effective Leadership*, *Quality Teaching and Learning*, *Support for Systemwide Improvement*, and *Clear and Collaborative Relationships*. These categories and themes are summarized in the table on the next page. Education reform at the district level will require a sustained commitment to improvement over time in order to achieve the goals of excellence and equity for all students.

### **Next Steps**

The brief discussions of the themes with the reflection questions are designed to stimulate dialogue at the district and school levels as leaders prepare their improvement plans. The sources used to describe the themes provide additional information for those wanting to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts. Appendix C provides an annotated bibliography of 10 studies we selected to help introduce readers to the various themes.

School district leaders can draw upon this body of research to increase their understanding of the challenges and the potential they have for improving all students learning. Although the studies do not provide causal relationships between the themes and student achievement, districts can glean many useful ideas, and some cautions, from these studies that can have an impact on schools and classrooms. The studies show that school districts can create vision, a professional culture, and a sense of urgency among stakeholders and implement teaching and learning strategies to advance the work of educational reform. The research reports provide encouragement for struggling districts by suggesting concrete steps they can take that will improve their organizational policies and procedures, enhance teachers' knowledge and skills, and improve instruction for students. The 13 themes represent characteristics that a district can strive toward in their improvement efforts. District leaders can find additional resources to assist with the practical business of educational improvement. A sampling of these was offered in the first chapter.

## Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes from Research

### *Effective Leadership*

#### **Focus on Student Learning**

- Focus on all students learning to high standards
- Share beliefs & values, have clear goals and shared vision of change
- Hold all district staff, programs and operations responsible for student learning

#### **Dynamic/Distributed Leadership**

- Exhibit dynamic leadership, united in purpose, visible in schools, interested in instruction
- Expand to encompass central office, principals, teacher leaders and others
- Provide moral leadership that moves from talking to doing, to ensure students learn

#### **Sustained Improvement Efforts**

- View educational improvement as long-term commitment and processes
- Persevere, persist, and stay the course
- Help staff internalize the changes

### *Quality Teaching and Learning*

#### **High Expectations and Accountability for Adults**

- Hold all adults accountable for student learning
- Expect excellence, monitor performance, provide feedback
- Make high expectations part of personnel decisions

#### **Coordinated and Aligned Curriculum and Assessment**

- Align curriculum with standards, assessment, policies
- Centralize and coordinate curriculum approaches and decisions
- Use multiple measures to assess learning

#### **Coordinated and Embedded Professional Development**

- Provide high quality, ongoing professional development focused on classroom instruction
- Include school-based coaching and support for instruction
- Support professional development based on teaching and learning needs in schools

#### **Quality Classroom Instruction**

- Pay close attention to instruction, provide guidance and oversight to improve teaching and learning
- Develop a common vision of good instruction
- Monitor instruction, curriculum, and changes in practice

### *Support for Systemwide Improvement*

#### **Effective Use of Data**

- Use data to monitor results, equity, accountability, and for resource allocation
- Use data for instructional decisions and professional development
- Provide time and training to staff to use data

#### **Strategic Allocation of Resources**

- Provide, allocate, reallocate, and find resources for quality instruction
- Provide additional resources to support low performers
- Give schools flexibility within parameters for resource use

#### **Policy and Program Coherence**

- Develop and implement policies that promote equity and excellence
- Review and revise policies as needed to link programs and practices to goals and ensure coherence
- Monitor coherence of actions and programs to district focus, goals

### *Clear and Collaborative Relationships*

#### **Professional Culture and Collaborative Relationships**

- Build a culture of mutual respect, collaboration, trust, and shared responsibility
- Support school communities of practice for continuous learning for adults
- Develop central offices as professional learning communities

#### **Clear Understanding of School and District Roles and Responsibilities**

- Set expectations, decentralize responsibility, and serve as change agents
- Support learning, serve as mentors, and help seek solutions
- Balance district authority with school flexibility and autonomy

#### **Interpreting and Managing the External Environment**

- Analyze, interpret, and mediate state and federal policy with local policy
- Buffer schools from external disturbances and internal distractions
- Mobilize community and business support
- Involve family and community

More research is required to fully understand the nature of systemwide improvement and to discover relationships between strategies and learning outcomes. Districts can undertake action research projects based on educators' inquiry into their own instructional practices. Districts can also collect and analyze data from multiple sources to track performance of schools as they offer service and support to improve teaching and learning. This information can inform decisions that impact student learning and teacher practice.

Universities and research institutes have produced a number of studies in the past 10 to 15 years that constitute the current body of research. These researchers will undoubtedly continue to probe into the effects of school systems on improved student learning in a standards-based environment. District and school leaders can learn from these studies as they emerge in the literature.

Under the current *No Child Left Behind Act*, most school districts will eventually fall short of the student achievement requirements needed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This means that greater support and services will be required from the broader educational community. These supporting entities—professional organizations, educational service districts, state education agencies, and universities—will have an important role in providing this assistance. This report and the *School System Improvement Resource Guide* are two examples of how Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is supporting school districts, particularly those struggling to make AYP.

All stakeholders—educators, families and communities, businesses, and legislators—must join ranks to increase excellence in our schools and districts. This is a challenge we must face together if all students are to reach the high standards we now expect of them.





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## APPENDIX A

# METHODOLOGY

OSPI's Research and Evaluation Office collected more than eighty research reports and relevant articles related to school district improvement. An iterative process was used to review, analyze, and synthesize this body of research. A representative set of studies was selected to analyze for common themes. Criteria were developed in an attempt to ensure a broad, but relatively balanced, set of studies was analyzed. The themes emerged from research that met the following:

- Reports were based on research studies (although most were case studies) rather than professional experience.
- Studies examined school districts rather than a school.
- Studies were conducted relatively recently, within the past 10-15 years.
- Studies primarily included multiple districts.
- Inclusion of reports of research that examined the same district was limited.
- Studies generally were conducted over a period of time.
- Inclusion of reviews of research literature was limited.

Initially 12 reports were analyzed to identify emerging themes. These themes were then plotted on a matrix (in Appendix B) to determine the degree to which they appeared in the studies. Finally, other studies were added to the matrix to confirm the themes. In this step of the process, the criteria were somewhat relaxed; for example, studies of single districts were included. In total 23 studies were plotted. After the analysis, the themes were deemed sufficient to encompass the major concepts found in the studies. Also, themes were determined to be robust enough to be developed separately rather than merged. For example, quality classroom instruction received sufficient attention in the studies that the theme was not merged with curriculum and assessment as is often the case.

Key descriptors or concepts from the studies were compiled. From these, the themes were framed as topics consistent with the key descriptors. Then definitions were written using the descriptors and concepts from the studies. Each theme is briefly discussed using relevant details from selected research studies that develop and explain the concepts. The research literature base was expanded for the discussion portion of the document to draw on other pertinent and appropriate sources. Finally, the themes were organized into four larger categories that are *Effective Leadership*, *Quality Teaching and Learning*, *Support for Systemwide Improvement*, and *Clear and Collaborative Relationships*. A conceptual framework was developed to help clarify the themes in relationship to one another and among the categories.

The preliminary analysis of themes and definitions was shared with educators in Washington school districts, Educational Service Districts, and Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Themes, terminology, and descriptions were refined using their comments. A group of 10 studies were annotated for busy educators as an introduction to the research base (see Appendix C). Lastly, the complete document was also reviewed by researchers and practitioners in the state.



## APPENDIX B

### MATRIX OF THEMES FROM SELECTED REPORTS

Twenty-three studies were selected from a bibliography of more than 80 research studies and articles on improved school districts. Initially 12 studies were analyzed to identify common themes. In addition, 11 studies were analyzed to confirm the themes. The 13 themes were organized under four broad topics: *Effective Leadership*, *Quality Teaching and Learning*, *Support for Systemwide Improvement*, and *Clear and Collaborative Relationships*. In the tables that follow, **core** and **confirming** research studies are listed by author and date. The matrix reflects the extent to which the selected studies reflect the identified themes. A full citation for each study follows the tables.

<b>Core Research Studies</b>	<i>Effective Leadership</i>			<i>Quality Teaching and Learning</i>				<i>Support for Systemwide Improvement</i>			<i>Clear &amp; Collaborative Relationships</i>		
	Focus on all students learning	Dynamic/distributed leadership	Sustained improvement efforts	High expectations for adults	Aligned curriculum & assess	Coordinated/embedded prof dev	Quality classroom instruction	Effective use of data	Strategic resource allocation	Policy/program coherence	Prof. culture & collaboration	School & district roles /relations	Interpret/manage external envir
1. Cawelti, Protheroe 2001	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*			X	
2. Corcoran, Lawrence 2003	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X
3. David, Shields 2001	*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X
4. Kercheval, Newbill 2002	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
5. Marsh 2000	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	*	X	X	X
6. Massell, Goertz 2002	*	X	X	*	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
7. McLaughlin, Talbert 2003	X	X	X	*	*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*
8. Petersen 1999	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X	*	
9. Skrla et al. 2000	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
10. Snipes et al. 2002	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
11. Spillane, Thompson 1997	X	X	X		X	X	X		X		X	X	*
12. Togueri, Anderson 2003	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

X indicates theme is explicitly discussed in the report.

\* indicates the theme is strongly implied.

Characteristics of Improved School Districts

<b>Confirming Research Studies</b>	<b><i>Effective Leadership</i></b>			<b><i>Quality Teaching and Learning</i></b>				<b><i>Support for Systemwide Improvement</i></b>			<b><i>Clear &amp; Collaborative Relationships</i></b>		
	<b>Focus on all students learning</b>	<b>Dynamic/distributed leadership</b>	<b>Sustained improvement efforts</b>	<b>High expectations for adults</b>	<b>Aligned curriculum &amp; assess</b>	<b>Coordinated/embedded prof dev</b>	<b>Quality classroom instruction</b>	<b>Effective use of data</b>	<b>Strategic resource allocation</b>	<b>Policy/program coherence</b>	<b>Prof. culture &amp; collaboration</b>	<b>School &amp; district roles /relations</b>	<b>Interpret/manage external enviro</b>
13. Corcoran, Christman 2002	X	X		X	X	X		*	X		X		
14. Darling-Hammond et al.2003	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
15. Elmore, Burney 1997	X	X	X	X	*	X	X		X	X	X	X	*
16. Firestone 1989	X	X	X	X		X			X	X	X	X	X
17. Fouts et al. 2001	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
18. Murphy, Hallinger 1988	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	*		X	
19. Supovitz, Christman 2003	X	X	X			X	X	*	X		X	X	
20. Supovitz, Taylor 2003	X	X		*	*	X	X	X	*		X		
21. Thompson 2002	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	*		*	*
22. US Dept of Ed 1995	*	*	*	X		X			X			X	X
23. Virginia JLARC 2004	X	X		X	*	X	*	X	X		X	*	

X indicates theme is explicitly discussed in the report.  
 \* indicates the theme is strongly implied.

## References for Theme Analysis

### Core Research Studies

1. Cawelti, G. & Protheroe, N. (2001). *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
2. Corcoran, R. & Lawrence, N. (2003). *Changing District Culture and Capacity: The Impact of the Merck Institute for Science Education Partnership*. Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.
3. David, J.L. & Shields, P.M. (2001). *When Theory Hits Reality: Standards-Based Reform In Urban Districts*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
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10. Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement*. Washington DC: MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools.

11. Spillane, J.P. & Thompson, C.L. (1997). Reconstructing Conceptions of Local Capacity: The Local Education Agency's Capacity for Ambitious Instructional Reform. *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 19(2).
12. Togneri, W. & Anderson, S.E. (2003). *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. Washington DC: Learning First Alliance.

### **Confirming Research Studies for Analysis**

13. Corcoran, R. & Christman, J.B. (2002). *The Limits and Contradictions of Systemic Reform: The Philadelphia Story*. Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.
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16. Firestone, W.A. (1989). Using Reform: Conceptualizing District Initiatives. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 11(2).
17. Fouts, J.T., Baker, B.D., Riley, S.C., Abbott, M.L., & Robinson, H.L. (2001). *The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Model District Initiative Year 1 Evaluation Results*. Prepared for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Lynnwood, WA: Washington School Research Center.
18. Murphy, J. & Hallinger, P. (1988). Characteristics of Instructionally Effective School Districts. *Journal of Educational Research*. 81(3).
19. Supovitz, J.A. & Christman, J.B. (2003). *Developing Communities of Instructional Practice: Lessons from Cincinnati and Philadelphia*. Policy Briefs. Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.
20. Supovitz, J.A. & Taylor, B.S. (2003). *The Impact of Standards-Based Reform in Duval County, Florida: 1999-2002*. Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.

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## APPENDIX C

### SELECTED ANNOTATED RESOURCES ABOUT IMPROVED SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Many studies have documented the characteristics of improving schools, but relatively little is known about districts that have shown significant improvement. Research on school districts has been conducted largely within the past 10-15 years and is primarily descriptive and based on case studies. To provide a better understanding of improved school districts and their characteristics and actions, the Research and Evaluation Office at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction collected and analyzed more than eighty research studies and reports.

A number of common themes emerged from this analysis. Improved districts:

- Focus intentionally on student learning.
- Have dynamic and distributed leadership.
- Sustain their improvement efforts over time.
- Hold high expectations for adults.
- Have a coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment system.
- Provide coordinated and embedded professional development.
- Ensure quality classroom instruction.
- Rely heavily on data to make decisions.
- Have a high degree of policy and program coherence across the district.
- Allocate resources strategically.
- Exhibit a professional culture and collaborative relationships.
- Maintain clear and effective district and school roles and responsibilities.
- Interpret and manage the external environment effectively.

Ten of the studies were identified to help introduce these themes to educators in Washington state. The studies shed light on the relationship between school district policy, programs, and practices and the improvement of student learning. Because school districts are complex systems within the contexts of states and communities, the strategies noted in these studies should not be considered prescriptions to follow but rather ideas to be considered. (A matrix at the end of this section shows the extent to which the common themes are included in these studies.)

**1. Cawelti, G. & Protheroe, N. (2001). *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.**

Educational Research Service and the Laboratory for School Success conducted case studies in six school districts. Districts were nominated and selected according to criteria that included numbers of low-income students and improving test scores in all or most schools. Districts studied were Brazosport and Ysleta in Texas, Twin Falls in Idaho, and Barbour County in West Virginia. The Sacramento and Houston school districts were included to provide the perspective of large complex systems in which there has been substantial improvement, although test scores had not improved in most of their schools. The authors describe the districts and their programs and practices in some detail. They identify the key elements in developing high-performing school systems as “establishing high standards” that in these districts included basic skills tested by their states, “using the knowledge base” to improve the quality of instruction, and “restructuring the system for accountability” (p. 96).

The researchers report on page 98 the following common characteristics that were found across the school districts:

- Superintendents and other leaders “developed and nurtured widely shared beliefs about learning, including high expectations, and ... provided a strong focus on results.”
- The district was restructured “to decentralize management and budgeting to the building level. This change increased accountability by linking people to results....”
- The local curriculum was aligned with state standards and districts analyzed test items and student responses to test items.
- The district focused on classroom instruction to include interim assessments, extra help for students and enrichment, and frequent practice to help students retain their mastery of skills.
- “They recognized the importance of sustaining multiple research-based changes over a period of years that actually have a positive effect on the daily instructional lives of students.”
- “All of the schools and districts that showed large gains in achievement focused teaching activities on the test content itself and on reteaching specific skills, based on test items students did not answer correctly.”

The researchers acknowledge that multiple change efforts working together are probably responsible for the results. They also describe some of the tension and difficulties associated with reform efforts.

**2. David, J.L. & Shields, P.M. (2001). *When Theory Hits Reality: Standards-Based Reform in Urban Districts*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.**

In 1996, Pew Charitable Trusts gave four-year grants to seven urban school districts to assist in implementing standards-based systemic reform. The seven districts were Christina, Delaware; Community District #2, New York City; Fayette County, Kentucky; Pittsburg, Pennsylvania; Portland, Oregon; San Diego, California; and Yonkers, New York. The evaluation used a modified multiple-case-study design. The final report from the Pew Network for Standards-Based Reform asked if the theories behind standards-based reform “pan out in practice” (p. 4). The core components are ambitious standards, aligned assessments, and accountability. The central finding was “core components . . . do not play their intended roles well. [They] do not do a very good job of communicating high expectations for students, providing information to guide instructional improvement, or motivating widespread instructional change beyond test preparation” (p. 17). They conclude that “clear expectations for instruction are as critical as clear expectations for student learning” (p. 6).

Many of the study districts were making progress in changing instruction. The evaluation report points to encouraging trends found across the districts, such as

- Professional development that includes “placement of staff developers in schools;”
- Testing that includes students demonstrating their work beyond checking one of several choices;
- Use of data in school planning;
- Making a shift to include all schools in the reform effort, not just a few;
- “Richer notions of accountability that rely on multiple measures, professional judgment, and shared responsibility for student learning;”
- District change strategies that focus on one or two subject areas; and
- “More opportunities for students who are failing or who are at risk of failure to have extra instruction that is challenging, not remedial” (p. iv).

The authors state that “(d)istricts that succeed in supporting widespread and ongoing improvement in teaching practice have shifted their central offices from ones that manage dollars, programs, and people to ones focused on leading and supporting improved instruction” (p. 30). Active support and leadership from the district appear necessary for schools on a widespread basis to make significant improvements in classroom practice. The authors explore the new roles and relationships for districts to provide direction and support to schools.

**3. Firestone, W.A. (1989). Using Reform: Conceptualizing District Initiatives. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 11(2). p. 151-164.**

The Center for Policy Research in Education tracked reform in six states in their study of district and state reform. A total of 24 school districts were included from Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania. The study methods included site visits to states and districts. Firestone writes that mandates and inducements are the primary means policymakers use to seek educational reform. However, he stresses neither “overcome skill deficits.” To effectively implement state reform, districts require both the will and the capacity to make the necessary changes.

Firestone explains the functions that need to be performed for successful implementation of reform. He speculates that districts are best situated to perform these functions. Some of these functions are described below:

- Developing and selling a vision—both concept and operational procedures are needed for individuals to implement the ideas of the vision.
- Obtaining resources—this includes time, personnel, materials, and facilities. Knowledge and ideas are also key resources for reform. It often takes teachers “18 months or more to be able to use new procedures comfortably” (p. 159).
- Providing encouragement and recognition—social support and encouragement are important incentives. Both formal and informal acknowledgement can be effective.
- Adapting standard operating procedures—make changes in regulations to reflect reforms, budget the reforms, and provide orientation for newcomers.
- Monitoring the reform—monitor processes as well as results. Administrators need to pay attention to the reform, e.g., “management by wandering around” (p. 160).
- Handling disturbances—buffer from outside disturbances but also manage internal difficulties. Change requires stability.

District-school linkages facilitate reform—applying consistent pressure to improve, providing targeted support to schools to include coaching and training, and providing opportunities for “participation that gives teachers real influence over issues important to them with a minimum of time expenditure” (p. 161).

**4. Marsh, J. (2001). *District Support for Teaching and Learning*. Research Brief. Washington DC: The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform.**

This Research Brief summarizes the literature on school districts' relationships with state education agencies, schools, and communities. The summary is based on the author's review of 13 studies that examined over eighty school districts. Districts are described as active change agents. The human, social, and physical capital of a district impact its "ability to bring about positive change." The organization and culture of the district influence the commitment and attitudes of teachers. School district authority and school autonomy are balanced in successful districts with a mix of loose and tight control. Schools need flexibility, but schools also follow district-level direction for consistency.

The author lists key areas in which superintendents should be involved with regard to comprehensive school reform:

- "Setting goals and selecting professional development activities,
- Supervising and evaluating staff, and
- Monitoring schools' activities" (p. 2).

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform recommends the following:

- "Create a culture of high quality teaching by expecting all levels of the district to focus on and support instruction.
- Emphasize professionalism among all staff members.
- Foster a collective identity by developing shared goals and values, creating opportunities for collaboration and building key norms into professional development programs.
- Structure time for ongoing professional development in which all staff members, including leaders, can participate.
- Assure the purchase and appropriate use of high quality materials.
- Establish clear expectations, but give schools responsibility and autonomy for meeting those expectations" (p. 2).

**5. Massell, D. (2000). *The District Role in Building Capacity: Four Strategies. Policy Briefs. Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.***

This Policy Brief reports research conducted over a two-year period involving 22 districts in California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas. Districts were selected for their improvements and standards-based reform initiatives, and site visits were conducted in 1998-1999. The author identified the following strategies that appeared most frequently in the districts in the study:

- “Interpreting and using data” for planning, aligning curriculum and assessment, evaluating staff, and identifying students that need additional help.
- “Building teacher knowledge and skills” through on-site assistance, facilitators, or instructional guides and teacher leaders who provide information and support to colleagues, and enlisting teacher participation in activities such as development of curriculum, assessment, and scoring guides.
- “Aligning curriculum and instruction,” both vertically with the state and also horizontally across schools and district.
- “Targeting interventions to low-performing students and/or schools,” providing additional resources and attention, oversight and feedback (p. 1).

The Policy Brief notes three challenges, on page 6-7, that districts need to consider:

- “Helping teachers and administrators to better understand how to use data to improve their performance.”
- Moving “beyond a focus on test-taking skills to integrating standards and the philosophies of reform into their instructional core.”
- Focusing and coordinating professional development to increase coherence with the goals as well as to meet the needs of new and “seasoned” staff.

**6. McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J. (2003). *Reforming Districts: How Districts Support School Reform. A Research Report.* Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.**

The researchers conducted a study of California school districts in the San Francisco Bay Area and San Diego City Schools over a four-year period. The researchers used multi-level, multi-method research approaches drawing from quantitative data from surveys and student assessment. Qualitative data came from a four-year case study of three reforming Bay Area districts. The researchers looked for patterns of district action that support the progress of school reform and examined practices over time. The researchers conclude that a fundamental perspective of reforming districts is they take themselves “as the focus for change and (have) a clear theory of change for the system” (p. 10).

“Key conditions that characterize reforming districts” include:

- “a system-approach to reform
- learning community at the central office level
- coherent focus on teaching and learning
- a stance of supporting professional learning and instructional improvement
- data-based inquiry and accountability” (p.10).

The researchers provide detailed descriptions around these characteristics. For example, to create a *coherent focus on teaching and learning* (see pages 14-17), reforming districts:

- “Adopt a system focus on instruction.”
- Express clear, specific, and measurable instructional goals (e.g. literacy goals).
- Communicate a focus on teaching and learning to increase “consistency in programs and resources brought into the district.”
- Set specific and understandable goals to guide budget decisions.
- Stay focused on teaching and learning to “protect their reform agenda in the face of a flood of initiatives and high stakes accountability measures coming at them from the state.”
- “Seek out and use cutting-edge practices, most especially in professional development” by providing “site-based resources that reflect best thinking about how to foster teachers’ learning and instructional capacity.”
- Provide professional development for principals based on their needs.
- “Use some conventional district management tools in unconventional ways,” (e.g. action research projects as an alternative for evaluation of tenured teachers).
- Engage central office staff “in an ongoing process of improving their practice in support of system reform.”

The researchers conclude that “teachers and principal ratings of their district’s professionalism and support track closely with district reform action, and district reform action predicts both schools’ progress toward organizational conditions conducive to ongoing improvement and gains in students’ academic performance across the system” (p. 20). They rebut several “myths” about districts and reform

efforts. One such myth is that “Teachers and schools resist a strong central office role.” The researchers conclude that “(t)eachers and principals appreciate their strong district role because they feel the district provides both clear standards and effective support.” They note the important lesson “is not necessarily the *strength* of the district role” that “affects teachers’ morale and view of the district, but rather *what* that role is and *how* it is carried out” (p. 21).



**7. Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, Jr., J.F. (2000). *Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts. A Report on Systemic School Success in Four Texas School Districts Serving Diverse Student Populations*. The Charles A. Dana Center. Austin, TX: University of Texas**

This study is based on four school districts in Texas: Aldine, Brazosport, San Benito, and Wichita Falls. Originally 11 districts were identified as among the best examples of academic success for low income students. Four were selected from these in 1999 for in-depth study. To be selected, districts had to have more than 5,000 students with more than one-third high poverty campuses. They also needed to be rated as *recognized* or *exemplary* on accountability measures in the state. The research included site visits, interviews, shadowing some staff members, classroom observations, and data collection and analysis.

Five major themes emerged as findings:

- State context of accountability for achievement and equity—including moving to results-driven accountability and public access to disaggregated performance data for schools and districts.
- Local equity catalysts—driven by dissatisfaction with the status quo, issues of desegregation, and public accountability data.
- Ethical response of district leadership—vision, guiding philosophies, and sincere commitment to improving learning for all students, moving from beliefs to concrete actions based on the beliefs.
- District transformation—a focus on changing classroom teaching and learning and shared equity beliefs. “All children, regardless of their racial and SES differences, have the capability to learn and succeed at equally high academic levels.... It is the responsibility of all adults in the district to insure that all of the children succeed academically” (p. 20).
- Everyday equity—leads to changed assumptions about students and what they can learn.

The authors summarize focused equity practices as follows:

- “Generating, directing, and maintaining focus
- Developing and aligning curriculum and delivering instruction
- Building and supporting the capacity of people to contribute and lead
- Acquiring, allocating, and aligning fiscal, human, and material resources
- Collecting, interpreting, and using data and monitoring results
- Supervising, evaluating, and holding people accountable
- Refocusing energies, refining efforts, and ensuring continuous performance
- Creating and nurturing alliances” (p. 23).

The study suggests new roles for stakeholders as follows:

- Superintendent—keep the main focus of the district and the community on equitable and excellent learning.
- Principal—lead for equitable and excellent learning.

## Characteristics of Improved School Districts

- Central office—support and assist principals and teachers in educating all students.
- Board members—set goals and establish policies that promote equitable and excellent learning.
- School district and community—work together to support equitable student learning.

**8. Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement*. Washington DC: MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools.**

This research focused on four urban school districts: Houston, Sacramento, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and New York City's Chancellor's District. (Two unnamed districts were used for comparison purposes.) The districts were selected using the following criteria: at least three years of improved overall student achievement; a narrowing of the differences between white and minority students; making more rapid progress than their states during that time frame; and representing different areas of the country.

This "exploratory" report attempts to determine what makes an effective district. The authors identify several key characteristics. The key points are as follows:

- Preconditions to provide a foundation for reform
  - School board role—setting policies and priorities to raise student achievement.
  - Shared vision—consensus among board and superintendent and a stable relationship.
  - Diagnosing situation—analyzing district strengths and weaknesses and factors related to achievement.
  - Selling reform—building concrete and specific goals, listening to the community, and conveying "urgency, high standards, and no excuses."
  - Improving operations—improving effectiveness, creating a sense of customer service, and fixing annoying problems.
  - Finding funds—shifting funds into instructional priorities and seeking additional funds.
  
- Educational Strategies
  - Setting goals—sets specific performance goals, builds consensus, sets timetables, and focuses relentlessly on goals.
  - Creating accountability—goes beyond state accountability and puts senior staff and principals on performance contracts tied to goals.
  - Focusing on lowest performing schools—uses school improvement process to drive schools forward, develops and uses a bank of interventions, shifts funds, provides extra help, and targets programs and quality teachers to lowest performing schools.
  - Unifying curriculum—adopts or develops uniform curriculum or framework for instruction, explicitly aligns grade to grade, uses pacing guides for classroom teachers, and uses scientifically-based reading curriculum.
  - Professional development—pushes for faithful implementation of curriculum, provides professional development to support curriculum, focuses on classroom practice, and provides teacher supports when needed.
  - Pressing reforms down—works to drive reforms all the way into the classroom, has a system to encourage and monitor reform, and takes responsibility for the quality of instruction.

## Characteristics of Improved School Districts

- Using data—assesses student progress throughout the year, disaggregates data in different ways, and uses data to target interventions and professional development and to monitor student and school progress.
- Starting early—starts in early elementary grades and works into higher grades.
- Handling upper grades—begins to use more effective strategies with older students, provides additional instructional time for some students (e.g. double class periods) who are behind in basic skills, and increases AP courses in high schools.

In short, “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” (p. 6). The report includes considerable detail about the districts and their reform efforts.

**9. Spillane, J.P. & Thompson, C.L. (1997). *Reconstructing Conceptions of Local Capacity: The Education Agency's Capacity for Ambitious Instructional Reform. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis. 19(2). p. 185-203.***

These researchers use data from a 5-year study on state policy and school districts in relation to mathematics and science education in Michigan. The authors say that district “capacity to support ambitious instruction consists to a large degree of [district] leader’s ability to learn new ideas from external policy and professional sources and to help others within the district learn these ideas” (p. 187). The study highlights the unevenness of learning among the districts as they attempted to align curriculum substantively. The researchers identified “salient features of capacity, including knowledge, commitment and disposition, professional networks, trust and collaboration, time, staffing or labor, and materials” (p. 189). These concepts appear to fall into the categories of human and social capital and financial resources.

The authors explore the categories using evidence from the school districts in the study.

- Human capital includes knowledge, commitment, and disposition. Although separate dimensions, these are closely connected and interactive. The relationship between knowledge and commitment, for example, was reciprocal. As educators increased knowledge and understanding, their disposition to learn and commit to reform increased.
- Social capital includes trust and collaboration and is manifested in various professional networks. Social and human capital are also interrelated. The power of the networks, for example, depends upon the knowledge and commitment of the educators within them.
- Financial resources include time, staffing or labor, and materials. The effectiveness of financial resources depends upon human and social capital. Time for collaborative planning and looking at student work may not be used effectively if the individuals do not possess sufficient knowledge and commitment to the task. If there is hostility rather than trust among the members, collaboration will be thwarted.

District leaders are responsible for creating an environment to support teachers to learn about substantive reform ideas. They need the capacity for doing so. “The processes of learning and teaching by leaders and other teachers are generally iterative rather than linear” (p. 199). In other words, the leaders don’t learn everything they need to know before teaching others. Trust is fundamental to the relationship between district leaders and teachers. The districts “that had made the greatest strides in reforming their mathematics and science programs were also ones with a strong sense of trust among educators within the district” (p. 195). Where trust and norms for collaboration are high, educators experience a better learning environment. The authors conclude that districts rich in human and social capital will get richer in the “human capital that ultimately matters most—the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers need to teach challenging subject matter effectively to a broad array of students” (p. 199).

**10. Togneri, W. & Anderson, S.E. (2003). *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do To Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. Washington DC: Learning First Alliance.**

Five high poverty school districts in five states that were improving student achievement were selected for this study by Learning First Alliance. The districts are Aldine, Texas; Chula Vista Elementary, California; Kent County, Maryland; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Providence, Rhode Island. The districts exhibited success in increasing student achievement in mathematics and/or reading over three or more years across grade levels and race/ethnicity groups. The districts had at least 25 percent of their students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch. The districts also had “a reputation for effective professional development practices based on recommendations from education leaders” (p. 2).

The authors present 10 findings about these districts (see p. 5-8):

- “Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.”
- “Districts put in place a system-wide approach to improving instruction.” The approach focused on student learning, articulated coherent curricular content and provided instructional supports, required accountability, distributed leadership across stakeholders, and strategically allocated financial and human resources.
- “Districts instilled visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement.” The vision was clearly to “drive programmatic and financial decisions at every level of the system.”
- “Districts made decisions based on data, not instinct.”
- “Districts adopted new approaches to professional development” that involved a “coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction.” The approaches provided support to new teachers, helped school staff use data, and allocated financial resources to improving instruction and achievement.
- “Districts redefined leadership roles.” “Superintendents used central office policies, structures, and human resources to guide instructional improvement.”
- “Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul.” Districts understood reform takes time. “They set their courses and stayed with them for years.”

The researchers and the districts being studied acknowledge the challenges that remain. The districts demonstrated improvement, but not all are high achieving. There also may be other initiatives or factors that contributed to the progress districts experienced that were not part of the study. The report provides considerable detail about the characteristics, vision, and practices of the study districts. It concludes with 10 lessons learned:

1. “Districts can make a difference.
2. Let truth be heard.
3. Focus on instruction to improve student achievement.
4. Improving instruction requires a coherent systemwide approach.
5. Make decisions based on good data.

## Characteristics of Improved School Districts

6. Rethink professional development.
7. Everyone has a role to play in improving instruction.
8. Working together takes work.
9. There are no quick fixes.
10. Current structures and funding limit success” (p. 49-50).

### Matrix of Ten Research Studies

These 10 studies were selected from a bibliography of about 80 research studies and articles related to improved school districts. This cross section of reports illustrates the themes that emerge related to districts’ policies, programs and practices for improving student learning. The studies are predominately descriptive case studies and cause–effect relationships have not been determined. The themes inform the work of improving schools and districts but should not be considered prescriptive.

Study	<i>Effective Leadership</i>			<i>Quality Teaching and Learning</i>				<i>Support for Systemwide Improvement</i>			<i>Clear &amp; Collaborative Relationships</i>		
	Focus on all students learning	Dynamic/distributed leadership	Sustained improvement efforts	High expectations for adults	Aligned curriculum & assess	Coordinated/embedded prof dev	Quality classroom instruction	Effective use of data	Strategic resource allocation	Policy/program coherence	Prof. culture & collaboration	School & district roles /relations	Interpret/manage external envir
1. Cawelti, Protheroe 2001	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*			X	
2. David, Shields 2001	*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*	X
3. Firestone 1989	X	X	X	X		X			X	X	X	X	X
4. Marsh 2001	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	
5. Massell 2000		X	X		*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
6. McLaughlin, Talbert 2003	X	X	X	*	*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	*
7. Skrla et al. 2000	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
8. Snipes et al. 2002	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
9. Spillane, Thompson 1997	X	X	X		X	X	X		X		X	X	*
10. Togueri, Anderson 2003	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

X indicates theme is explicitly discussed in the report.

\* indicates the theme is strongly implied.