STANDARD FOR DISTRICT SUCCESS 1: CURRICULUM
The district develops and implements a curriculum that is rigorous, intentional, aligned to state goals and content standards, and ensures seamless student transitions.

Abstract
The curriculum – what teachers teach - has a powerful affect on student achievement. The curriculum in high performing districts is meaningful, coherent, and aligned to state content standards and assessments. In these districts, teachers and administrators, with the support of central office staff, play a vital role in achieving curricular alignment and coherence at the classroom, school, and district levels.

Current research supports the development of a rigorous common academic core for all students, especially at the secondary level. Research on the value of a rigorous academic curriculum and its relationship to student performance is unambiguous; academic achievement is directly related to challenging coursework. According to research, student learning, as measured by test scores, increases when students are exposed to a rigorous curriculum. This effect is particularly strong at the high school level where, for example, students who complete a full sequence of college preparatory mathematics courses score higher on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) than those who complete only one or two courses. In addition to influencing learning as measured by test scores, academic rigor is also a powerful predictor of college success, especially for students of color. The academic intensity and quality the high school curriculum contributes more to college success than test scores and academic GPA. This research confirms what teachers have always known namely that children will rise to the expectations adults set for them.

Yet, despite this strong evidence, many students are relegated to remedial courses that neither challenge them nor prepare them for postsecondary education or the workplace. Students, especially low income students, students of color and English language learners, lack equal access to rigorous coursework. The differential access to rigorous coursework has been documented by many studies. According to recent statistics by the U.S. Department of Education, African American and Latino high school students are less likely to complete advanced math and English coursework than white students. This pattern holds true of low-income students as well. The disparities in access to coursework reflect both “opportunities offered” by schools and “opportunities taken” by students. In some cases, this is because not all high schools offer advanced courses. For example, according to research, about one-third of high schools do not offer any advanced courses in science and another 28 percent offer advanced work only in one science subject, most commonly biology. Schools with high proportions of low-income students offer fewer and less-advanced mathematics courses than offered by schools with high proportions of high-income students. Even at schools with extensive advanced course offerings, students of color and low-income students are disproportionately underrepresented in advanced coursework.

6 Ibid.
classes. It is clear that a rigorous common core curriculum for all students is an essential strategy for both improving student performance and narrowing the achievement gap.\(^7\)

Curriculum coherence and alignment are well-documented in the research on effective classrooms, schools, districts, and in the research on educational change. According to this extensive body of evidence, the curriculum in high performing districts is aligned to state curriculum goals and content standards; aligned across classrooms, grade levels and schools; and is connected to effective instructional practices and assessments.\(^8\) Researchers found that when the curriculum is aligned vertically and horizontally, it serves as a “curricular roadmap” for teachers and administrators.\(^9\) Studies suggest that an aligned curriculum facilitates seamless transitions for students across grade levels and school structures, as well as to post-secondary education and the workplace.\(^10\)

High performing districts achieve curricular coherence and alignment through an articulated process of monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the curriculum.\(^11\) Providing teachers and administrators the time to review data and information, including item analyses from state assessments, and to discuss the curriculum standards was found to be essential in achieving an successful alignment of the curriculum. At the district level, leaders and central office staff support alignment by establishing frameworks, guidelines, and quality standards to unify curriculum planning ensuring that it is consistent at the district, school, and classroom levels.\(^12\) In high performing districts central office staff provide direct support for building and classroom curriculum efforts, as well as conduct district-wide curriculum alignment and review efforts to ensure consistency across schools.\(^13\)

Research supports the integration of workplace readiness skills into the curriculum and the provision of opportunities for career related learning experiences.\(^14\) Although more students are completing advanced coursework, graduating from high school, and enrolling in postsecondary


\(^12\) Cotton, K. (2000). The schooling practices that matter most. Portland, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.


education than ever before, research indicates they often lack the essential skills required for success beyond high school, either in work or post-secondary education. A startling set of statistics points to the vast disconnect between what students are expected to learn in high school and the knowledge and skills required for success after high school.

Strategies for preparing students for work in the modern economy include organizing the curriculum, especially at the secondary level, around broad occupational themes; focusing on developing skills required for modern work environments including problem-solving and decision-making and critical thinking skills; providing learning opportunities which foster the development of qualities essential for success in the workplace such as dependability, cooperation, adaptability, and self-discipline; and using work-based learning experiences to reinforce basic skills.

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16 Ibid.


STANDARD FOR DISTRICT SUCCESS 2: INSTRUCTION
The school’s instructional program actively engages all students by using effective, varied, and evidence-based practices to improve student academic performance. The district provides evidence-based, results-driven professional development opportunities for staff and implements performance evaluation procedures in order to improve teaching and learning.

Abstract
Good teaching matters. High performing districts maintain a targeted focus on teaching and learning and have a clear and articulated strategy for improving instruction. Effective teachers demonstrate a mastery of content knowledge and diverse pedagogical methods; possess expertise and skill in the use and analysis of student performance data; and are culturally competent. Professional development is the link between reform policy and classroom practice. High performing districts have an articulated system-wide strategy for using professional development that is informed by principles about the process of systemic change.

Program
High performing schools and districts maintain a targeted focus on teaching and learning and have a clear and articulated strategy for improving instruction.20 In contrast to most districts, districts that effectively support school level improvement adopt a system focus on teaching and learning and establish instructional goals that are clear, measurable and specific.21 District wide, educators at all levels of the system emphasize the importance of teaching and learning. In these districts the central office is described as an instructional leader; they assist with improvement efforts by helping build and coordinate the capacity of schools for teaching and learning that boosts student achievement. For example, recognizing the importance of instructional leadership and support for their reform efforts, Cambridge Public Schools created a high level position, Deputy Superintendent for Instruction, and an integrated instructional division to bolster district capacity in this domain.22

According to research, the instructional program in effective schools and districts is aligned to school, district and state learning goals and assessments.23 Teachers utilize a variety of instructional strategies to meet the diverse learning needs of their students and continually monitor the effect of their instructional approaches on student achievement.24 Research also points to the value of using educational technology for instructional support.25 Some effective uses of technology include using computers and word processing to foster the development of writing skills; enhancing lessons with integrated video media, CD-ROM technology, and Internet research; using software that provides students immediate real-time feedback on their responses and identifies problems; and providing activities that simulate workplace uses of computers and other technology to build employability skills for all students.26

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Personnel

Good teaching matters. According to studies of school effects, teacher experience is the variable most strongly related to student achievement.\(^{27}\) For example, the proportion of well-qualified teachers (e.g., fully certified, with a major in their assigned subject) is the strongest and most consistent predictor of state performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math tests.\(^{28}\) Conversely, the proportions of teachers who were new to the profession, uncertified, or lacked even a minor in their assigned subject area are the strongest negative predictors of a state’s student achievement. In one study, teacher expertise\(^{29}\) accounted for roughly 40 percent of the variance in student achievement on standardized tests in reading and mathematics. Moreover, when controlling for the income level of students, the effects of teacher expertise are so strong that the achievement gap between African American and white students is almost entirely explained by differences in teacher qualifications.\(^{30}\)

Students taught by experienced teachers perform better than those taught by inexperienced teachers, regardless of the student’s initial achievement level. According to one study, on average, the least effective teachers produce gains of about 14 percentile points among low-achieving students during a school year whereas the most effective teachers post gains among low-achieving students that average 53 percentile points.\(^{31}\)

What are the characteristics of effective teachers? Numerous studies, both quantitative and qualitative, and research summaries have addressed this question. A review of this literature reveals three major areas of effective teaching behavior: effective classroom management; active engagement of students using a wide variety of teaching skills and techniques including a focus on individual students’ needs; and efficient use of instructional time.\(^{32}\) Research also suggests that effective teachers are those who demonstrate mastery of content knowledge and diverse pedagogical methods necessary to challenge and motivate all students to high levels of learning.\(^{33}\)

According to a growing body of research effective teachers possess the knowledge, skills, and instructional practices necessary to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student

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As measured by performance on state teacher assessments, years of teaching experience, and completion of an advanced degree.


The Annenberg Institute for School Reform’s School Communities that Work initiative describes effective teaching in its summary, Generally Accepted Principles of Teaching and Learning.

While culture does not determine a child’s ability or intelligence, it can produce many different ways of knowing and learning. Culturally competent teachers understand the role culture plays in learning and find ways to connect the knowledge students learn in school to their everyday lives.35 Culturally sensitive instruction aims to facilitate the ability of all students to meet high standards, using approaches best suited to meeting students’ individual needs.

The features of culturally sensitive instruction are closely aligned with what educators and researchers recognize simply as good teaching. Culturally sensitive teaching is characterized by a pro-student philosophy; all students are seen as having the inherent resources and ability to experience academic success. Culturally sensitive instruction capitalizes on each child's strengths, viewing cultural ways of learning as resources to be used rather than deficits to be remedied. Culturally sensitive teaching is based on the premise that there is no single best method that will effectively reach all students at all times. Instead, effective teachers diversity their instructional approaches in response to individual students’ interests and abilities. Finally, a central feature of culturally sensitive instruction is its emphasis on the maintenance of high expectations and high academic standards for all students. 36

Effective instruction is based on students’ needs, which are determined through ongoing monitoring of their learning progress. Effective teachers demonstrate expertise and skill in the use and analysis of student performance data to inform instruction. Studies of high performing districts consistently identify data-driven instructional improvement as the cornerstone of school improvement.37 Moreover, studies of schools that have successfully narrowed the achievement gap identify a teacher’s understanding of data and their ability to link data to instructional practice as an essential component.38 In these districts, central office staff serve a support function, providing teachers guidance on data analysis and interpretation.39

The kinds of monitoring efforts that characterize effective schools include: reviewing student performance data routinely to identify and support students needs; establishing procedures for collecting, summarizing and reporting aggregated and disaggregated data; using assessment methods in addition to standardized achievement tests; aligning classroom assessments with written curriculum and instruction; and making summaries of student performance available to staff, parents, and community members.40

Professional Development

37 Skrla, L., J. Scheurick, et al. (2000). Equity-driven achievement focused school districts: A report of systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations. Austin, Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin.
40 Cotton, K. (2000). The schooling practices that matter most. Portland, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
Early research on the connection between professional development and student learning focused primarily on “generic” teaching skills such as allocating class time, providing clear classroom demonstrations, assessing student comprehension during lectures, maintaining attention, and grouping students. These studies showed small to moderate positive effects on student’s basic skills. More recent research probed deeper into student learning by focusing on students’ reasoning skills and problem solving potentials rather than only basic skills. According to this research, professional development can influence teachers’ classroom practices significantly and lead to improved student achievement when it focuses on: 1) how students learn particular subject matter; 2) instructional practices that are specifically related to the subject matter and how students understand it; 3) strengthening teachers’ knowledge of specific-subject matter content. According to one study, student achievement was consistently higher and growth in students’ basic and advanced reasoning skills was greatest when their teachers’ professional development focused on how students learn and how to gauge that learning effectively. Professional development that is rooted in subject matter and focused on student learning can have a significant impact on student achievement.

However, to be effective, professional development must provide teachers with a way to directly apply what they learn to their teaching. Professional development leads to better instruction and improved student learning when it connects to the curriculum materials that teachers use, the district and state academic standards that guide their work; and the assessment and accountability measures that evaluate their success. Studies suggest the more time teachers spend on professional development the more significantly they change their practices. It is clear, however, that more time by itself is insufficient. Rather, professional development must focus on the subject-matter content that research has shown to be effective.

Effective professional development must extend beyond mere support for teachers’ acquisition of new skills or knowledge to providing authentic occasions for teachers to reflect critically on their practice and to fashion new knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learners. Research suggests participating in professional learning communities is a promising strategy. Effective professional development involves teachers as both learners and teachers and allows them to struggle with the uncertainties that accompany each role. According to research on teacher learning, effective professional development has the following characteristics:

1. It engages teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development.

2. It is grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation by teachers.

3. It is collaborative among educators and focuses on team learning.

4. It is connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students.

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5. It is sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and collective problem solving about specific practices.\(^{46}\)

While all districts engage in some form of professional development, most lack a serious strategy for using professional development to drive system-wide changes in instruction. Research has begun to document the role school districts can play in systemic school improvement and the role of professional development in connecting reform policy to classroom practice.\(^{47}\)

Through an analysis of New York City’s District 2, Elmore and Burney (1997) outline what it means to use professional development to improve instruction district-wide. Specifically, District 2’s strategy consisted of 1) a set of organizing principles about the process of systemic change and the role of professional development in that process and 2) a set of models of staff development that focuses on system-wide improvement of instruction.\(^{48}\)

Districts that effectively support school improvement provide instructional support that is responsive to school needs. According to research, the instructional supports provided schools by these “reforming districts” differ in both kind and degree from resources typically furnished schools in other districts. Specifically, they are of a very high quality, they are intensive and site-focused, and they are designed in response to teachers’ expressed needs and evidence about student learning.\(^{49}\)

According to studies of high performing districts, strategies for using professional development to drive improvement district-wide include: establishing a clear vision that focuses teachers and administrators on improving instruction; specifying the outcomes expected for students and schools; creating district-wide curricula to guide instruction; using data at every level to inform the work, and creating a coherent set of strategies to support and improve instruction.\(^{50}\)

A culture of professional learning is evident in districts where professional development drives improvement.\(^{51}\) When districts provide teachers the time and opportunity to meet together to analyze data, plan the curriculum, examine and discuss student work, and observe other

\(^{46}\) Ibid.


\(^{50}\) Cotton, K. (2000). The schooling practices that matter most. Portland, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

teachers in the classroom, teachers report improved feelings of efficacy and effectiveness. Indeed, many districts developed strategies for drawing on the “in-house” expertise of staff by developing district-wide cadres and networks of instructional experts.

Coordinated, focused and cohesive investment in and delivery of teacher development is a critical component of the district effort to lead instructional excellence. Effective districts set priorities and a framework for professional development, but delegate control of professional development to schools. New York City’s District Two is an example of a district reform effort that focused on major investment in teacher professional development. It required strong leadership, examination of the networks and structures that provide existing professional development and willingness to challenge them, and stable resources to ensure follow through and continuity.

Likewise, San Diego is an example of a district that pursued a system-wide approach to improving instruction. San Diego’s approach to school improvement is rooted in powerful ideas about learning and instruction and features investment in people at the system level. Former Chancellor Alvarado and the Institute for Learning made the learning and professional growth of the district’s educators their top priority and keystone in the district reform initiative. Most notably, the district structures opportunities for educators to learn together and from each other. The district is divided into nine “Learning Communities” which bring together principals to engage in research, reflection and shared experiences. Data indicated

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STANDARD FOR DISTRICT SUCCESS 3: DISTRICT AND SCHOOL CULTURE AND NORMS
The district and school function as an effective learning community and support a climate conducive to performance excellence.

Abstract
High performing districts are guided by a distinct set of norms or beliefs. Staff in high performing districts fundamentally believe in the educability of all their students regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or English language proficiency and assume complete responsibility for the performance of their students. Teachers and administrators maintain a safe and orderly environment and implement practices proven effective for all students. Finally, educators in high performing districts share a commitment to continuous professional improvement.

The culture of high performing districts stands out in comparison to underperforming districts. Specifically, a shared commitment to high academic expectations for all students is prevalent in high performing districts.\textsuperscript{55} No matter of instructional improvement can improve student performance if educators do not fundamentally believe in the educability of their students.\textsuperscript{56} This finding is substantiated by studies of schools and districts that have closed the achievement gap. In these districts, a shared commitment to high academic expectations for all students regardless of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or English language proficiency was common.\textsuperscript{57} For some practitioners, truly embracing a commitment to high expectations for all students entailed addressing deep-rooted race-based assumptions about students' academic potential.\textsuperscript{58}

A commitment to equity and diversity at all levels, from the classroom to the central office, is also common in high performing districts that have closed the achievement gap.\textsuperscript{59} According to


\textsuperscript{57} Skrla, L., J. Scheurick, et al. (2000). Equity-driven achievement focused school districts: A report of systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations. Austin, Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin.


researchers, equity in learning opportunities and outcomes is achieved in these districts by making the equitable distribution of achievement a clearly stated and vigorously pursued goal. Staff assume complete responsibility for the performance of students; they do not “explain away” the performance of certain groups of students nor do they blame low performance on parents, social service agencies, or others outside the district. In order to achieve a clear understanding of how students of different groups are performing, disaggregated achievement and behavioral data are reviewed and analyzed routinely. Finally, according to several studies, administrators and teachers in high performing districts implement practices identified by research as effective in promoting the achievement underperforming groups of students.

Studies of effective schools and districts also point to a high degree of staff collaboration as an important variable. When teachers and principals have the time to review and analyze data on student performance, discuss curriculum, and set school and district priorities they report greater feelings of efficacy. Inquiry based teacher communities facilitate the development of a “norm of collective problem-solving”. The character and strength of teachers’ professional communities within a school is a significant factor in most all accounts of school improvement. A “teacher learning community” is characterized by shared commitment to improving success with all students and by knowledge-sharing and collaboration to continually improve the quality of their instruction. A culture of collaborative learning is also an essential component of effective professional development; when teachers learn together they tend to hold themselves and each other more accountable. In these districts staff members share a belief in continuous professional improvement; a “norm of improvement” permeates school and district culture.

A culture of professional inquiry and learning among staff in the central office is equally as important. Although the role and effect of the central office is new, early studies show central office staff play an important role in school improvement. A school’s success, according to these studies, is dependent on how well the central office provides and learns to improve school reform support. Districts must focus their support and learning on three issues: establishing a coherence focus on teaching and learning; providing instructional support that is responsive to school needs, and engendering data-based inquiry and accountability. In these districts central office administrators understand that change can be professionally and personally threatening to teachers and principals and therefore work to support he risk-taking entailed in school reform. The norms of honesty and trust allow for the free-flow of information and facilitate often brutal conversations about school performance frequently absent from districts.
Districts that effectively support school improvement maintain a system focus on teaching and learning. The success of reform in both New York City's District Two and San Diego illustrate the significance of a system focus on teaching and learning. In both cases, Tony Alvarado aggressively concentrated district resources and energy on literacy-focused teaching and learning which resulted in improved student outcomes. These districts achieved coherence through a focus on common principles for literacy instruction at all grade levels and from the alignment of curriculum materials and professional development with these instructional principles.

The importance of a safe and orderly environment for student learning is supported by both correlational and observational studies on classroom management. According to this body of research, a safe school environment typically consists of:

1. A visible and supportive principal
2. Broad-based agreement about standards for student conduct
3. High expectations for student conduct that are clearly communicated to students
4. Input from students into policies
5. Consistent application of rules
6. Concern for students as individuals
7. Designation of disciplinary authority to teachers

The perception that learning environments are safe affects student achievement. Classroom management and discipline practices that support student achievement include: clearly articulated classroom procedures; academic and social support for students; standards that are aligned to the building codes of conduct; involvement of students in establishing classroom standards; teaching pro-social behaviors; stopping disruptions quickly; and focusing on inappropriate behavior rather than on the student.

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STANDARD FOR DISTRICT SUCCESS 4: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The district effectively engages families and community groups to remove barriers to learning in an effort to meet the intellectual, social, career, and developmental needs of all students.

Abstract
Family and community engagement in education is essential. High performing districts understand the importance of putting a vision into action by engaging parents and the community as key partners. For family and community involvement to have an impact on student learning, schools and districts must link activities to student learning goals and be respectful of differences among families. By providing multiple avenues for involvement high performing districts facilitate the engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders.

Meaningful parent involvement in their children’s education has a positive influence on academic performance.74 Students whose parents are actively involved typically achieve higher grades, have better attendance, complete more homework, are better motivated, and are less likely to be cited for disciplinary action.75 Students of involved parents are more ready and able to learn and more likely to stay in school and benefit from high quality learning experiences.

Students are not the only ones to experience the advantages of parent involvement. Educators too accrue benefits when parent involvement is strong.76 As parents come to understand more about their schools and teaching and learning in general, school staff gain important allies. As interaction between school staff and family members increases, schools become more aware of ways they can build on family strengths to support children’s success. Schools with strong parent involvement also experienced a decrease in complaints from families about homework or the curriculum.77

Despite strong evidence that parent involvement has significant benefits, many barriers to involvement exist for both the school and families. Teachers often lack the time and opportunity to work on parent involvement. They see it as an additional task added to their already long list of responsibilities. Staff perceptions of parents’ abilities is an obstacle to strong parent involvement. In some low-income schools, in particular, staff may feel that parents are unable to help their children due to their limited educational backgrounds. Although quite common, solid research disputes this belief. Many low-income poorly educated families support learning by frequently talking with their children about school, careful monitoring activities, and clearly transmitting the

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belief that education is important. This suggests that the belief that all parents can make a contribution to their children’s education is essential.

A cultural mismatch between the home and school environments can often hinder parent involvement. Many parents do not feel welcome in schools, especially those who speak a language other than English. Other parents have bad experiences in school and feel unsure about the value of their contribution. Finally, research has found that even some parent involvement programs that are used as models require parents to conform to school practices rather than training educators to accommodate the cultures of or to incorporate the views of parents. Finally, some families simply lack the resources, specifically time, to be involved. When schools are aware of the issues facing parents, they can better design parent involvement activities that address and overcome the challenges. For example, like of childcare or transportation often limit parent’s involvement.

High performing districts understand the importance of putting a vision into action by engaging parents and community members as key partners. In these districts the district leadership communicates a vision for reform, listens for reactions, engages in conversations about the plan, and then refines the plan. Publishing indicators of school quality and providing them to parents and community members fosters communication and stimulate public action.

Research has identified several practices for successfully engaging parents. Specifically, effective schools and districts have written policies that explicitly acknowledge the value and importance of parent and community involvement. Effective parent involvement efforts link parent activities to student learning goals. They seek to engage all parents regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency and parental educational background through vigorous outreach efforts. By providing several different avenues for parents to become involved schools are respectful of differences among families. Schools that succeed in engaging families from diverse backgrounds tend to focus on building trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members. They deliberately target parent groups and communities historically underrepresented among parents involved in schools. These schools also recognize and respect families’ needs and embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and authority are shared.

Studies of districts that have narrowed the achievement gap identify family and community engagement as paramount. In these districts, practitioners work on breaking down the barriers

82 Cotton, K. (2000). The schooling practices that matter most. Portland, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
84 Skrla, L., J. Scheurick, et al. (2000). Equity-driven achievement focused school districts: A report of systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations. Austin, Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin, Cawelti, G. and N.
that exist between the families/communities that often feel alienated by the school system. These districts share a belief that a district and its community must unite to deliver equitable learning opportunities. Staff work with cultural minority parents and community members to help children cope with any differences in norms noted between the home and school. In culturally and linguistically diverse communities, effective communication between school staff and parents and community members is essential. By translating written communications and providing translators for conferences and meetings these districts engage more parents and community members.

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STANDARD FOR DISTRICT SUCCESS 5: LEADERSHIP
School and district decisions focus on support for teaching and learning, organizational direction, high performance expectations, creating a learning culture, and developing leadership capacity.

Abstract
Effective leadership is an essential component of high performing districts. Effective leaders communicate a clear vision; effectively monitor performance; authentically involve teachers in decision-making; use data to drive decision-making; and are strategic in the allocation of resources to support teaching and learning.

Although leadership is often invested in persons of formal authority, leadership encompasses a set of functions that may be performed by many different persons in different roles throughout the school. Leadership, according to Leithwood and Reihl (2003), is a “function more than a role.”87 Most definitions of leadership incorporate two essential functions: providing direction and exercising influence.88 Leaders mobilize and work with others to achieve shared goals. According to this definition leaders do more than simply impose objectives on followers; they work with others to create a shared sense of purpose and direction. This definition implies that leaders primarily work through and with people and help establish the conditions that enable others to be effective.

Effective leadership makes a difference.89 Decades of research indicate that successful leadership can play a highly significant role in improving student learning.90 Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn in schools. Specifically, the total direct and indirect effects of leadership on student learning account for nearly 25 percent of total school effects.91 Moreover, the effects of leadership are the

88 Ibid.
89 According to Leithwood et al (2004), claims about the effects of school leadership on student learning are justified by three different kinds of research: qualitative case studies, large-scale quantitative studies examining overall leadership effects, and large-scale quantitative studies examining the effects of specific leadership practices.
largest in underperforming schools indicating that the chance of any reform improving student learning is contingent on the motivations and capacities of local district and school leaders. While many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, leadership is often the catalyst. This research highlights the value of leadership development as a strategy for improving underperforming schools.

Current theory and research evidence suggests school leaders primarily affect student achievement indirectly, through teachers and staff members. As with any manager or leader, principals and district superintendents influence performance through others. Moreover, the influence of leaders includes a broader spectrum of behaviors than just the supervision of staff. Leader’s actions that structure the school’s organization and climate appear to have an impact on student achievement.

According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), a core set of leadership practices form the “basics” of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts. While necessary, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) contend these practices alone are insufficient for school success. The “basics” of successful leadership include: setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization.

### Setting Directions
Leaders help to develop shared goals that encourage a sense of common purpose among followers. To successfully set a clear direction, a leader must become skillful at identifying and articulating a shared vision; creating high performance expectations for all participants; and communicating effectively those goals and expectations.

- **Identifying and articulating a vision.** Effective educational leaders help their schools to develop and endorse visions that embody the best thinking about teaching and learning. School leaders inspire others to pursue ambitious goals.
- **Creating shared meanings.** People’s actions are based largely on how they understand things. Effective educational leaders help to create shared meanings and understandings to support the school’s vision. When the school staff and the broader community share clear understandings about students, learning, and schooling, the legitimacy and effectiveness of the school is enhanced.
- **Creating high performance expectations.** Effective leaders convey their expectations for quality and high performance. They hone the perceptions of the gap between what the school aspires to and what is presently being accomplished.

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93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.


97 Researchers label these categories of leader practices differently. For example, Hallinger and Heck (1996) label them “purposes”, “people,” and structures and social systems.” Conger and Kangungo (1998) refer to “visioning strategies, “efficacy-building strategies” and “context changing strategies.” Within each of these similar categories of practice are numerous, more specific, competencies, orientations, and considerations.
• **Fostering acceptance of group goals.** Effective educational leaders promote cooperation and help others to work together toward common goals.

• **Monitoring organizational performance.** Effective school leaders assess use multiple indicators to assess school performance and use the information in the development and review of goals. Thus, effective leaders must possess skills in gathering and interpreting information and must foster a tradition of inquiry and reflection among their staff. These leaders ask critical and constructive questions, emphasize the use of systematic evidence, and encourage careful monitoring of teaching and learning.

• **Communicating.** Effective leaders communicate a school’s vision clearly and convincingly. They foster productive discourse and decision-making among their staff.

### Developing People
Leadership requires social relationships, because people are influenced by direct experiences with those in leadership roles. To influence organizations members to strive towards the achievement of shred goals, leaders must offer them intellectual stimulation and provide them individualized support. Moreover, successful leaders must provide followers an appropriate role model, using their own practices and performance to demonstrate desired behaviors.

• **Offering intellectual stimulation.** Effective leaders encourage reflection and challenge their staff to examine assumptions about their work and rethink how it can be performed. They provide information and resources to help people understand challenges and enable others to gain mastery over the complexities of necessary changes.

• **Providing individualized support.** Effective leaders understand the personal challenges change often entails. Leaders provide incentives and structures to promote change, as well as opportunities for individual learning and appropriate means for monitoring progress toward improvement.

• **Providing an appropriate model.** Effective leaders model desired dispositions and actions that are consistent with the school’s values and goals.

### Redesigning the Organization
The culture and structure of the organizations should match the changing nature of a school’s improvement agenda in order to facilitate the work of organizational members. Leaders must skillfully strengthen school cultures, modify organizational structures and build collaborative processes, because without these organizational adjustments, they will be hard pressed to successfully achieve a school improvement agenda.

• **Strengthening school culture.** Effective school leaders play an important role in developing school cultures that embody shared norms, values, and attitudes that promote mutual trust and caring among staff members.

• **Modifying organizational structure.** School structures can either enhance or hinder individual performance. Effective school leaders monitor and adjust the structural organization of the school to facilitate individual success and achievement of school goals. They direct structural changes that support positive conditions for teaching and learning.

• **Building collaborative processes.** Educational leaders enhance the performance of schools by allowing for and facilitating the participation of teachers in decisions that affect them.

• **Managing the environment.** Effective leaders establish strong relationships with representatives from the school’s community including parents, community members, and business and civic leaders.
Additionally, research at the school level suggests that effective school leaders are often instructional leaders. There are several instructional leadership models that specify particular leadership practices and provide evidence of the impact of those practices on both organizations and students. According to Hallinger there are three important dimensions to instructional leadership: defining the school’s mission; managing the instructional program and promoting a positive learning climate.

Specifically, effective instructional leaders: maintain an unwavering belief that all students can learn and that the school makes a difference; possess expertise and knowledge of validated teaching and learning practices and the ability to model them; are familiar with research on effective instruction; effectively distribute resources for the professional development of curriculum developers and teachers; engage staff in the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; maintain a commitment to long-term instructional improvement; possess the ability to maintain staff engagement in instructional improvement.

Finally, research suggests that successful school leaders respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students. Leithwood and Riehl (2003), successful school leaders in diverse contexts focus their efforts on: building powerful forms of teaching and learning; creating strong communities in school; valuing the assets diverse students bring to school; and nurturing the development of families’ educational cultures.

Researchers have begun to explore the influence of district leadership on the performance of students and schools. According to these studies, district leaders also play an essential role in developing and nurturing shared beliefs among their staff. In each of the five high performing districts studied by Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) superintendents and other leaders developed and nurtured widely shared beliefs about learning, including high expectations. These leaders were willing to accept ownership of difficult challenges and seek solutions without placing blame. Leaders also provided a strong focus on results by mandating the use of data for decision making. Finally, leaders’ beliefs were backed by actions; superintendents directed resources into professional development aimed at developing staff skills to support reform efforts.

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100 Cotton, K. (2000). The schooling practices that matter most. Portland, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

101 Most of what we know empirically about leaders’ effects on student learning concerns school leaders. Until recently, district leadership effects on student learning have been considered too indirect and complex to tease out.


District leaders play an important role in supplying the support and resources to get the job done. When teachers and principals are provided with high level knowledge, skills, resources, and support they report greater feelings of efficacy, even in the face of challenging academic goals. High performing districts align resources and support to build the capacity of teachers to achieve student performance goals. In these districts, central office staff assumed support functions rather than compliance and monitoring functions. Staff members work with teachers and principals, for example, by helping them to analyze data or demonstrating good instructional practice.

Finally, effective district leaders maintain a focus on the system. A recent study of four California districts identifies a systems approach to reform as an essential characteristic of a “reforming district”, districts that have achieved reform at scale. These districts engage in the same activities carried out by most districts – curriculum change, developing strategies for recruitment and development of teachers, identifying standards for student performance – but they do so with “an express, deliberate view of the whole.” One district administrator characterized this system focus as having a “district direction”. In districts that have a “district direction” central office administrators and staff are united around a shared vision of improving education for all district students. This runs in sharp contrast to the “typical fragmented district office culture in which specialized functions have their own agenda and routines.”

Bibliography


Ibid.

Ibid.


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STANDARD FOR DISTRICT SUCCESS 6: INTEGRATED SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

The district develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive improvement plan that communicates a clear purpose, direction, and action plan focused on teaching and learning. The school and district are organized to maximize the use of all available resources to support high student and staff performance.

Abstract

High performing districts operate under a central vision with a clear roadmap for schools and teachers. These districts exhibit a culture of continuous improvement. District leaders and staff work with schools to establish broadly representative school-based management teams. District leaders maintain vertical and horizontal lines of control by emphasizing planning, the use of data at all levels, and a belief that everyone in the district is accountable for results.

Planning and Improvement

High performing districts exhibit a culture of continuous improvement.109 In fact, research identifies strategic planning at the system level as a key characteristic of “reforming districts.” Reforming districts develop and sustain shared reform goals and focused efforts through system-wide planning processes. According to cases studies, these districts bring together people from all levels and parts of the district system to deliberate over reform goals and outcomes, to share knowledge of successful practices, and to design strategies for change. In these districts, the strategic planning process was found to be fundamental to establishing shared accountability among district administrators, principals, and teachers for progress on agreed-upon reform goals.110

Where a culture of continuous improvement exists, district leaders and staff work with schools to establish broadly representative school-based management teams that draw their membership from administrators, teachers, students, non-certified staff, parents and community members. They maintain both vertical and horizontal lines of control by emphasizing planning, the use of data at all levels, and a belief that everyone in the district is accountable for results.

Districts play an important role in the collection, use, and analysis of data for decision-making and community-building. Data should reflect a wide range of indicators that can help inform practice. An essential district role is not only to improve the validity and reliability of data collected, but equally important, to provide technical assistance in how to use data for management, instruction, and curricular purposes.111 Good data about student performance, teacher quality, demographics, and other metrics allows districts to assess local needs transparently. High quality data assist districts in their efforts to identify schools in need of assistance.

Academic improvement is not accidental in high performing districts; it is planned.112 In these districts staff members at the school and district level use data to assess their strengths and needs as well as to weigh the value of various courses of action. Moreover, district leaders expect

schools to justify and defend their decisions with data. When asked about their choices by central office staff, schools were expected to be able to respond with answers grounded in data.113

Organizational Structures and Resources

Data plays an important role in district improvement.114 A study by the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) of select schools in California found that collecting, organizing, and presenting data to teachers and principals was a key component in helping schools succeed.115 Likewise, a district-level study commissioned by the Council of the Great City Schools found that successful districts focused on low-performing schools and used data to inform decisions about instruction.116 Specifically, data generates a sense of urgency for improving student achievement, especially for student subgroups historically underserved by the district.117 A commitment to data starts with district leaders including the superintendent, school board members and other central office leaders.

Access to a high-quality system of data is important at all levels of the system – classroom, school and district. The data teachers require to make decisions about the how to improve instruction are different from that which central office staff require to monitor and assess the performance of different programs or the performance of different schools.118 To be effective, the data system must address the varying data needs of teachers, principals, and central office staff. For example, districts produce dynamic data on each grade, each class, and each child; data to manage performance of schools, teachers, and students; computer-generated individual learning profiles; and data and feedback to improve district programs, teacher instruction and student performance.119 Finally, high performing districts build a strong infrastructure to meet the varying data needs of practitioners. In addition, these districts provide timely data in a useful form and train principals and teachers to use data effectively.120


114 Skrla, L., J. Scheurick, et al. (2000). Equity-driven achievement focused school districts: A report of systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations. Austin, Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin.


In high performing districts, central office operations were frequently revamped to serve and support schools. Members of central office staff are oriented toward service to schools rather than compliance and monitoring. Some districts characterized this shift as a “customer service orientation”.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform, among others, emphasizes the vital need for districts to review policies and restructure resource allocation systems in order to optimize human and financial resources. Recruitment, retention, and development of high quality personnel at all levels is a significant focus of district leadership in high performing districts. These districts are characterized by well-functioning personnel processes, local autonomy according to consistent standards of quality, and innovation and creativity in the use of personnel.

Transparency and delegation are the principles that characterize financing decisions. Again, reflecting the work of the Annenberg Institute, principals need to understand and control budgets for their staff and programs. A student-based or weighted budget formula can be a key building block in establishing some financial transparency, an improved understanding of where resources exist and how they can be reallocated and better used.

Effective districts operate under a central vision with a clear plan of action and a roadmap for schools and teachers that is well-defined. These districts structure ample opportunities for working together and facilitate a new culture of district-wide collaboration. High performing districts share a broadened focus from the individual school to the context in which the school is embedded. These districts achieve effectiveness through comprehensive and coordinated approaches at the classroom level, grade or department level, school, and district levels. They are characterized by strong support from the top, coherence, accountability, and the alignment of fiscal, human, and material resources in support of instructional improvement and equity.

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