

Creating sustainable reform: five urban districts implement models
for continuous improvement and lasting change.

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School systems are notable for making change after change in their pursuit of educational excellence. When reforms fail, it is often because the school district has not established adequate systems that ensure sustainability. Typically, it takes at least four or five years for a change to become fully institutionalized and part of the system's culture. School system leaders are wise to spend considerable time at the beginning of a reform initiative building an infrastructure that supports change over the long term.

During the past several years, school superintendents and educational leaders from around the country have convened at the Pearson Education Instructional Leadership Council to discuss solutions for some of the most pressing issues they confront, especially regarding teaching and learning. Several common change principles have emerged from these discussions that apply to school districts almost universally:

- * Implementation of a comprehensive, districtwide school-change model;
- * Adoption of districtwide, standards-based curricula (especially for K-8 reading and math);
- * Attention to leadership, including placing the principal firmly in the instructional leadership role of the school along with shared leadership building at all levels;
- * Data-driven decision making to inform both classroom instruction and professional development; and
- * Professional development that is ongoing and collaborative for teachers and administrators.

Initiatives addressing these principles are being implemented at the K-8 level in five urban school systems: Los Angeles Local District 3; Newark, N.J.; Whittier City, Calif.; Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C.; and Lawrence, Mass. The superintendents of these districts are seeking sustained, systemwide change.

Los Angeles Local District 3

Since 1999 the Los Angeles Unified School District has implemented a multiyear, comprehensive district reading plan that supports teachers in their efforts to "teach reading relentlessly--every day, in every school, in every classroom, to every child." More recently, the district applied a comprehensive mathematics plan.

Prior to assuming her current position as the district's assistant superintendent for student integration services, Sharon Lamonta Curry was one of eight local superintendents charged with carrying out the district reading plan. The superintendents first formulated a vision of district expectations, then established a structure to carry out that vision. The structure was based on five key elements:

- * Coherent curricula throughout the district. A single standards- and research-based reading program focuses on ensuring all students are readers by the end of 3rd grade.
- * Formative assessments. These are given every six to eight weeks to assess student learning and identify specific needs for professional development.
- * Practice-based professional development. Each year, teachers must participate in five days of differentiated professional development that is linked to the instructional program. Administrators also are mandated to participate so they can help teachers implement the adopted curriculum with fidelity.

Shortened instruction days each week give teachers time to work together to plan instruction, review data, develop learning plans for students based on the data and reflect on their own practice. This method, known as lesson study, is the primary strategy used to deepen teacher content and pedagogical knowledge.

* Active and knowledgeable school leadership. If principals are to support and improve instruction, they need to know what improved instruction looks like. Administrators participate in monthly principal conferences facilitated by the local district superintendent and the entire instructional support team of directors, coordinators, specialists and coaches.

Content experts and coaches engage principals in processes to deepen their content knowledge, review assessment data and plan specific activities to improve teaching and learning. Principals are expected to lead professional development with the support of the coach at their school sites. Regular classroom observations are a key element of this process.

* Coherent technical assistance. The local district works collaboratively with the central office to plan, implement and continually evaluate the implementation of the intended curriculum. The central office provides funding for instructional materials and trained staff, including coach coordinators, literacy experts, advisors and coaches, to support professional development in the local districts.

The school district is seeing evidence of improvement. On the English language arts portion of the California standards exam, the average percent of students scoring proficient or advanced across grades 2-5 improved from 35 percent in 2003 to 39 percent in 2005. For math, the average percent improved from 43 percent to 51 percent.

The cornerstone of California's accountability system is the Academic Performance Index, which assigns a score from 200 to 1,000 with 800 or higher being the target. District 3, one of the most diverse in the city, increased the percent of elementary schools scoring an API of 600 or greater from 45 percent in 1999 to 97 percent in 2005. While most subgroups are improving, the gap, though narrowing, still exists. To address this, District 3 is connecting culturally relevant content and responsive teaching strategies to all areas of the curriculum.

Newark Public Schools

Since 2002-03 the Newark, N.J., Public Schools, under Superintendent Marion A. Bolden and Assistant Superintendent Gayle Griffin, has implemented a reform initiative called Reaching for the Brass Ring. The program was established in this ethnically diverse district to bring at-risk students into the education mainstream.

The district reviewed the latest scientifically based practices and reports from organizations such as the National Science Foundation, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the National Reading Panel, then incorporated the best available instructional resources with the latest content pedagogy and professional practices. The district also embraced curriculum-embedded, classroom-based coaching as a mainstay for all teachers.

The district identified and put in place the materials and human resources needed to ensure successful outcomes. This included an internal monitoring team that visits classrooms to ensure the intended curriculum and system of teaching is being implemented, to survey school climate and to monitor administrative practices. The collected data become part of an educational audit that is shared with the building principal.

Joint district and state NCLB monitoring and accountability teams, called Collaborative Assessment for Planning and Achievement teams, visit schools needing improvement under federal law and provide a full assessment of operations and instruction. They then produce a two-year blueprint for instructional improvement.

To deliver additional leadership and professional development, the district began using the Instructional Leadership model in selected schools during 200506. Developed by the LessonLab Research Institute, this model provides an infrastructure of site-based leadership and ongoing professional development to facilitate focused discussions around student work and how teaching, learning and achievement can be improved. Thus the model has helped the district connect the dots of standards, assessments, curricula and professional development.

Everyone's time is valued, so the time spent together outside of the classroom is

focused on achieving important academic goals. A critical aspect of the Instructional Leadership model is its role in helping the district coordinate regular "familiar school settings." For Newark, these familiar school settings include monthly principals meetings, monthly meetings of the Academic Achievement Leadership Team to set direction in improving instruction and student achievement and grade-level team meetings/departments meetings at least twice per month.

Teachers in these schools meet to discuss how they teach and how they can teach better. Students are engaged, teachers are able to make decisions based on data and parents have access to information they need to actively participate in their children's education. In Newark, the hard work of improving and sustaining high quality teaching and learning in all schools, for all students, is well under way.

Newark is seeing signs of improvement. From 2001 to 2005, 4th-grade language arts literacy achievement rose from 52 percent to 71 percent passing. Over the past five years, 4th-grade math achievement rose from 34 percent to 68 percent passing; 8th-grade language arts literacy increased from 48 percent to 57 percent passing; 8th-grade mathematics increased from 22 percent to 37 percent passing; 8th-grade science increased from 29 percent to 51 percent passing; and the percentage of students going on to college rose from 45 percent to 60 percent.

Based on New Jersey's performance assessments, which are rated among the most rigorous in the nation, Newark is one of the fastest improving districts in the state.

Whittier City Schools

The reform movement in the Whittier, Calif., City School District began about 10 years ago under Superintendent Carmella S. Franco. The strategy entails building assessment teams at school sites, targeting teacher training and encouraging staff to analyze student data to inform decisions. Critical to the plan is the incorporation of a districtwide, standards-based curriculum to ensure essential alignments for each grade-level subject with the state standards--all tied to the adopted textbooks.

As part of the districtwide effort and in conjunction with the use of the Instructional Leadership model, the overall plan for school change focuses on improving teacher practices. Administrators, coaches and teacher leaders participate in monthly professional development activities that emphasize leadership, curriculum and learning. Regular school visits by district personnel ensure effective implementation and district and school co-accountability regarding goals and initiatives.

With the infrastructure in place, the district reached a level of sophistication where it was ready to take a close and productive look at data. A grade-level team identifies a particular student need to focus on, formulates an objective and plans instruction to address the objective. By promoting teacher leaders, school principals are able to share responsibility for the school and district goals.

Whittier is experiencing improvement. In 2005, 10 of the district's 12 schools met the state-mandated improvement targets on California's Academic Performance Index compared with only 68 percent of schools statewide. The average score in the district was 701, representing an increase of 78 points during the past five years. In addition, 75 percent of Whittier City Schools increased their API scores by 100 points or more over a five-year period, and two Whittier City Schools, on the basis of their major improvement, were eligible to apply for California Distinguished School status for the 2005-06 school year. Nine schools made adequate yearly progress in 2005.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Educators in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., Schools realize that for a school change model to succeed, a solid infrastructure must be in place first. In 1996, the district launched a specific effort to shift district funds from higher-performing to lower-performing schools. The district also reduced class sizes in the lower-performing schools and offered to pay graduate-school tuition for teachers who agreed to teach in those schools for at least two years.

In addition, the district adopted a phonics-based reading program for all of its

elementary schools and a math program that blends conceptualization, basic skills and universal access. For the past eight years, students at each grade level have been tested in math and reading.

Under Superintendent Frances Haithcock, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has employed a model to carry out its broad reform goals that is based on four simple components: Plan, Do, Check and Act. Every school has a school improvement plan tied to the district plan. These plans are built around areas such as academics, technology, nutrition, business and community engagement, and include specific analyses of what the schools need to do to move forward.

In the Do phase, schools carry out the processes detailed in those plans. The Check phase provides accountability while the Act phase affords an opportunity to make adjustments, including curriculum revisions, goals realignment and a re-focus of professional development.

To help articulate and achieve its specific goals, the district uses the Balanced Scorecard model, which translates the district's vision into everyday action. It also helps funnel resources to where they are needed most, in the classroom. Thus the scorecard, replete with specific indicators that include baseline data and 5-year benchmarks for each goal, provides information that helps the district make important decisions and respond to needs that affect all students and employees. Rapid support teams and resources are available for underperforming schools.

To ensure that the district is attaining its benchmarks for classroom improvement, the district developed a process called The Drill-Down. At the end of each quarter, teachers give students a district-developed 30-question benchmark test. Within a week, teachers receive a computer-generated report of how well their students performed on key concepts and how much they have improved. As part of a pilot program called Pay for Performance, CMS provides monetary rewards to teachers whose students meet their benchmarks for classroom improvement.

Professional development is mandatory for administrators and teachers at all schools. Principals receive a full day of professional development each month, including training in specific content areas. A primary goal of principal training is

to build the capacity of school leaders to identify quality instruction aligned with standards. To make professional development more relevant and valuable for teachers, it is embedded in the work of school-based teams. The district uses the lesson study approach, embracing the idea that teachers learn by working together to plan, implement, observe and analyze classroom lessons.

Evidence of improvement includes these signs: The percentage of students in grades 3-8 who are proficient in reading, as measured by the end-of-grade tests, increased from slightly more than 70 percent in 1999 to about 85 percent in 2005. For math, the percent proficient increased from just under 75 percent in 1999 to more than 85 percent in 2005.

Among the 11 big-city districts that participated in the National Assessment of Education Progress' 2005 Trial Urban District Assessment, Charlotte-Mecklenburg had a higher average scale score than the other urban districts in reading (grades 4 and 8) and in math (grade 4). On NAEP black students in the district outperformed black students in the nation and all other urban districts in grades 4 and 8 math.

Lawrence Public Schools

The Lawrence, Mass., Public Schools, under Superintendent Wilfredo T. Laboy, is now in its fifth year of systemic reform efforts. When Laboy arrived in Lawrence in July 2000, each school was in the process of researching and selecting one of the Comprehensive School Reform models approved by the Department of Education. He decided to focus his leadership on bringing the K-8 schools together around one program, Success for All, with which they could align all of their resources, both financial and human.

The adoption of Success for All is only one piece of the district change model. All work is anchored in district goals that are set and shared among the entire school community. These goals follow the district's Essential Elements of School Reform and drive the development of the district's Comprehensive Educational Plan and its measurable outcomes. Educators use data to assess whether the measurable outcomes have been met and to further refine the plan. Each school develops its

own School Comprehensive Educational Plan, which aligns with the district plan.

The district has developed a culture in which data-based decision making is the norm and the expectation. Much of the district's professional development is devoted to teaching everyone how to access, analyze and use data to set improvement targets and develop strategies to meet them. At the forefront is the district's use of formative assessment that provides teachers with critical achievement information about each student three times during the school year. Teachers use this information to guide their differentiation of instruction to specific student growth targets.

Twice each year, Laboy conducts the Principal Performance Peer Review, an evaluative instrument for principals that is designed to guide an evaluative discussion of accountability among the superintendent, the district's leadership team and the principal. The tool uses the district's multiple sources of data for each individual school to assess student achievement and climate indicators in each school.

For the past five years, the district also has worked to create a culture in which collaborative planning is essential. Professional development is anchored in the principles of adult learning, where staff members come together as colleagues to examine and construct new knowledge. Laboy views professional development as "the engine that drives the school improvement train and transforms school culture."

The Lawrence schools are experiencing some improvements in academic outcomes. The percent of students entering 1st-grade reading at or above grade level, as determined by the Success for All Roots assessment, tripled to 71 percent of students in 2004 over 2002. In addition, 87 percent of students in the Class of 2005 passed the 10th-grade high-stakes Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, earning High School Competency Determination by passing both the English Language Arts and Mathematics tests, compared to 71 percent of students in the Class of 2003.

In 2004, the percent of students with limited English proficiency earning passing

scores on state tests increased by an average of 18 percent at every grade level in both reading and math. The most significant gains occurred among students in grades 7 and 8, where the percent passing increased from 13 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2004. On the grade 8 math test, the percent of LEP students earning passing scores increased from 2 percent in 2000 to 12 percent in 2004.

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Gale Document Number:A151544898

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