

A POLICY BRIEF FOR LEADERSHIP TEAMS

HIGH STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: HOW SIX SCHOOL DISTRICTS CHANGED INTO HIGH-PERFORMANCE SYSTEMS

by

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Leadership springs from all levels of the organization, if you develop a culture that makes it clear to people that their ideas are valued. We provided people with the right kind of environment and with opportunities, and they came forward with powerful ideas and solutions.

Manny Soto, Associate Superintendent
Ysleta Independent School District, Texas

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INTRODUCTION

Public education in communities across the nation is under considerable pressure to improve the achievement of students at all levels. To meet this challenge, educators are increasingly turning to research to gain information on what practices are most effective at both the classroom level and the organizational level. Most of the research on improving student achievement thus far has focused on schools and classrooms. Little research has been done on highly effective school districts—organizations that have been successful in increasing the ability of many or all of their schools to serve student populations that are typically low achieving. What are the critical elements in these organizations necessary to create a high-achieving school district? Strong leadership and teamwork are more than engaging rhetorical ideas; they are realized in action and combined with an inculturated demand for change to advance and sustain a successful learning environment.

The School District Effectiveness Study—undertaken by the Laboratory for Student Success, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, in collaboration with the Educational Research Service—presents pioneering study of six school districts in America that have accomplished substantial gains in student achievement. The purpose was to locate school districts in the United States that have discovered ways to ensure that students in all or most of their schools are making significant progress toward meeting high standards and to identify elements critical for creating a high-achieving school district. Committed leadership teams were a key element in the “exceptionally difficult work” of transforming these successful districts and their schools.

METHODOLOGY

SIX HIGH-PERFORMING DISTRICTS

The school districts chosen for the study were Brazosport Independent School District in Clute, Texas; Twin Falls School District in Twin Falls, Idaho; Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas; and Barbour County School District in Philippi, West Virginia. No very large urban districts were chosen for full study because none met the criterion of having all or most of their schools accomplish major improvements in student achievement over the past five years; barriers of size, politics, and limited resources all act to hinder improvement

efforts. However, because of the importance of the nations’ urban schools, the study investigated significant efforts made in the Houston Independent School District in Texas and the Sacramento Unified School District in California.

SELECTION CRITERIA

The districts were selected according to two requirements: the district serves a large number of children from low-income families and all or most of the schools in the district demonstrate significantly improved student achievement for five years prior to the study.

(“Significantly improved” was not defined since it was not apparent at the outset how many districts might be identified.) Information on the study was sent to the U.S. Department of Education’s ten Regional Educational Laboratories, chief state school officers, state education agency assessment officials, and others, with a request that they recommend districts for inclusion. Seventy-five districts were recommended as a result of this inquiry, and requests were received directly from a few other districts that asked to be considered.

DATA COLLECTION

All the districts were asked to send trend data on student achievement; a number of follow-

up contacts were made to discuss the data. Achievement data for many districts were also examined by visiting the websites of state education agencies that posted trend data on student test scores.

The research revealed that there are very few high-poverty public school districts that have found a way to transform all or most of their schools from low- or average-achieving schools to high-achieving schools. Although there are many school districts in the country that have a strong record of sustaining high levels of academic achievement, these typically, although not always, are located in more affluent suburbs and serve predominantly middle- or upper-class youth.

COMMON FEATURES OF HIGH-PERFORMING DISTRICTS

What has been the focus in such districts that have blazed a trail that needs to be taken by other districts? In the six selected school districts, interviews with superintendents, principals, and teachers, and site visits revealed the following common characteristics and modes of operating that contribute to turning low-performing school districts into high-performing learning communities:

- Assessment information is used to analyze both student and teacher performance, with staff working in teams to plan and implement improvement strategies. If students master particular skills, enrichment opportunities are available, but if they do not, tutorial services are provided. Helping students retain skills learned is necessary.
- Districts have restructured the system to place accountability in the hands of the people closest to the products (the schools, the principals, and the teachers), and they typically have adopted a “no excuses” mentality. Evidence was found in each of the districts to suggest that the concept “all children can learn” has moved beyond rhetoric.
- Superintendents and other central office leaders work to nurture widely shared beliefs about learning and high expectations and provide a strong emphasis on results. Staff members are expected to do whatever it takes to make sure that each student is achieving.

- Targeted, effective staff development is another characteristic of these high-achieving organizations.
- The districts studied focus on clear standards, such as teaching students subject matter aligned with standardized tests, and they have developed procedures to assess progress toward these standards.
- These districts use the knowledge base to ensure that their efforts are headed in the right direction. For example, extensive staff development opportunities provided by both districts and schools ensure that the knowledge base on improving teaching gets into the hands of teachers. Staff development also typically focuses on district initiatives, such as early reading instruction or classroom management.

HOW TO MAKE ASSESSMENT WORK

The use of standardized test scores as a measure of educational quality is often accompanied by controversy about both ends and means. This study began with the premise that high-stakes tests do provide some measure of how well—or how poorly—districts have been able to educate all their children. Trends in state-mandated test scores were used as a measure of progress, and, after visiting the districts and studying their efforts and accomplishments, one thing is clear: Large gains in test scores require (a) extensive efforts to align instruction with the test content, (b) detailed analysis of student responses to the tests or other assessments designed to parallel those tests, and (c) the provision of immediate and appropriate corrective instruction for individual students as indicated by that analysis. In the districts studied, these test-driven elements formed the basis for district, school, and classroom efforts to improve student achievement as measured by mandated tests.

CONCLUSIONS

The districts described in the School District Effectiveness Study have worked hard to achieve system-wide improvement, and we can learn much from their experience. Although the districts may not be “representative” of the over 14,000 districts in the United States, they are similar in many respects to other school districts facing the problem of unsatisfactory levels of student achievement. Their stories can therefore provide valuable guidance to others. It is also important to understand that many

districts were eliminated because only a few of their schools had shown significant progress over five years. However, these districts would also have something to contribute to the knowledge base about effective change. It is hoped that the study’s findings will help equip school district leaders, as well as teachers and principals, with a better understanding of what they would need to do to approach similar improvement processes both systematically and realistically.

This policy brief summarizes findings in *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems* (2001), by Gordon Cawelti and Nancy Protheroe. The complete 104-page report may be ordered from Educational Research Service, Arlington, VA, at (800) 791-9308 or from the website, www.ers.org. For information about the work of Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education, visit the website, www.temple.edu/education/crhde

