

# What Do We Know

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## Benchmarking to Eliminate the Achievement Gap

by  
Gordon Cawelti

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# Benchmarking to Eliminate the Achievement Gap

This guide to re-engineering school districts that typically serve students from low-income families derives from a study of several economically disadvantaged systems whose leaders were able to transform them into high-achieving districts. *Benchmarking to Eliminate the Achievement Gap* is intended to help school district leaders and Board members identify and track necessary changes in three broad areas of action—standards and assessment, restructuring for accountability, and the use of research-based teaching strategies—that are essential components of any successful transformation effort.

## High Student Achievement and the School District

In 2001 a major research report on improving student achievement sponsored by the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, was published and broadly disseminated to school leaders across the United States. *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems* (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; see also Cawelti & Protheroe, 2002) was based on the results of the School District Effectiveness Study (SDES) undertaken by LSS in collaboration with the Educational Research Service in Arlington, Virginia. The study was one of the first inquiries into the probable factors contributing to substantial gains in student achievement in school districts that served significant numbers of students from low-income or minority families. Prior to SDES, there had been a number of studies conducted on high-achieving schools but very little research on high-achieving school districts. If the nation must indeed go school-by-school in its efforts to reform education, then it will be a long time before one can expect that the 15,000 school districts in the United States will be able to realistically assure their parents that a quality education will be provided to their children.

The purpose of SDES was to locate school districts in the United States that have accomplished substantial gains in student achievement and determine what strategies had been employed to accomplish these gains. Two criteria were used to choose districts for the study: (a) The district served a large number of students from low-income families; and (b) all or most of the schools had increased achievement (as measured by standardized tests) for five years prior to the study. The researchers identified six districts that met the appropriate criteria:

Brazosport Independent School District in Clute, Texas; Twin Falls School District in Twin Falls, Idaho; Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas; Barbour County School District in Philippi, West Virginia; Houston Independent School District in Texas; and Sacramento Unified School District in California.<sup>1</sup>

The remarkable turn-around of achievement in these districts, as reported and synthesized in *High Student Achievement*, demonstrates that improvement efforts must be concentrated in three areas: (a) standards and assessment, (b) restructuring school and district operations for improved accountability, and (c) helping teachers expand their use of research-based teaching strategies. Furthermore, if the achievement gap between poor or minority students and White, middle-class students is to be reduced or eliminated, if low performing-schools are to be transformed into high-performing learning communities, the total *system* must be considered as changes are made. Failure to make systemic changes has been a major flaw in prior attempts to improve student achievement which focused on individual school improvement.

## Benchmarks

If one seeks to eliminate achievement gaps at elementary, middle, and secondary school levels, then it is essential that improvement efforts focus on implementing a series of initiatives arrayed under the three

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<sup>1</sup> Houston Independent School District and Sacramento Unified School District did not meet the requirement that all or most of the schools in the district had shown substantial improvement in achievement but were chosen for their accomplishments thus far and to show that progress can be made in large, urban school districts.

areas of improvement identified above. The initiatives must aim to achieve a targeted degree of implementation, the benchmark, in a focused and progressive effort. The Benchmarking Worksheet (see p. 5) presents each of the three areas of improvement with a list of specific benchmark initiatives, thus providing a process for improved student achievement. Periodic evaluations of progress in reaching these benchmarks help determine when the various elements of the plan are in place and functioning reasonably well. Periodic visits to the schools enable superintendents and central office staff to estimate the extent to which work has been undertaken in each of the three key areas. For example, if a district already has implemented a curriculum that aligns instruction and instructional materials with standards—as described in the “Curriculum Alignment” initiative under the Standards and Assessment area of the worksheet—the superintendent may feel additional work is currently not needed. On the other hand, if the curriculum has been aligned, but no calendar or schedule of topics and skills to be taught has been established and implemented, this might appear under the “Next Steps Action Plan” section of the Benchmarking Worksheet.

### Options for Judging Progress

In addition to periodic visits by the superintendent and central office staff, a number of other options may be considered for rendering judgments on the extent to which the benchmarks are being achieved. In a team approach, a superintendent might, for example, include some of his staff, building principals, or teacher representatives to make a judgment about progress or needs in each of the three areas. The team approach offers a more thorough perspective on deciding where work is needed and in what order of priority. Another approach, contracting an independent, external consultant, might reveal some areas of need not identified by the team approach, but this approach should be executed carefully and thoroughly, with the results being provided to central office leaders or other members of the team working on the district’s annual plan for school improvement.

### Impediments to Success

Teachers and principals tend to have difficulty eliminating the achievement gap if they don’t really believe it can be accomplished. The real challenge for school district leaders who believe their students can achieve at high levels is helping others come to hold this same view. Of course, a wide range of evidence “now strongly suggests that, given high-quality learning opportunities, poor and minority students can succeed academically” (Resnick & Glennan, 2002, p. 161), so district leaders must inculcate this understanding and their vision of success in all stakeholders (Kronley & Handley, 2003). If district leaders can overcome this first impediment to success, they must then sustain enthusiasm for change, often over a protracted time. Administrators can maintain enthusiasm by their own insistent commitment to change, but they must also create structures and policies that will support the reforms (Hall & Hord, 2001). No significant improvements on student achievement will accrue until the district is well along in providing the necessary training to its staff and implementing the changes that will follow adoption of these benchmarks. In addition, school systems have only so much capacity for making real changes in any one year. In fact, the districts in the SDES took from four to eight years to see significant results. Central office leaders will always need to judge just how far they can move in any one year and which areas should be given priority. In short, continually reducing or eliminating the achievement gap requires a sustained focus on the three main areas of benchmarking.

### Using the Benchmarking Worksheet

The accompanying Benchmarking Worksheet is a tool to chart the progressive attainment of benchmarks arrayed under the three categories describe above, benchmarks essential to closing the achievement gap on a district-wide rather than fragmentary, school-by-school basis. Of course, accurate estimates of the extent to which the

procedures are actually being used in the district and the classroom are intrinsic to the usefulness of the worksheet. An accurate chart will readily inform leaders if, for example, training has been provided in a particular area and reveal the magnitude of implementation among district/school staff. Those making use of this worksheet may wish to add some of their own benchmark initiatives on behalf of raising achievement, but those cited here are derived from the key findings of SDES.

*I. Standards and Assessment.* The Standards and Assessment section of the Benchmarking Worksheet includes five benchmarks: (a) Key Indicators of Success, (b) Curriculum Alignment, (c) Management Information System, (d) Benchmark Testing, and (e) Using Item-analysis Data. Many districts work hard on providing staff development on teaching strategies only to find that test scores remain low because the curriculum teachers were using was not measured by the standardized tests the district had chosen or that were being required by the state education agency. Perhaps, too, the board of education had not articulated what the key indicators of success were, much less how judgments were to be made on these indicators. Key indicators of success may include scores on state assessments, but most boards probably are also interested in student performance in such untested areas as art, citizenship, and health.

The last three benchmark items in the Standards and Assessment section of the worksheet gauge how much has been done to ensure that teachers and principals have a continuous flow of information on student progress. Developing a good management information system, one that reliably informs school and district staff about student progress and provides a basis upon which to plan for improvement, takes time and the collaboration of both school and district information system personnel. If test data coming back from the state or other standardized testing agencies is not disaggregated to show how various subgroups of students are performing, the district office should do so before disseminating the data to the schools. The data should then be used to provide corrective instruction tailored to students' weaknesses.

*II. Restructuring for Accountability.* The Restructuring for Accountability section of the Benchmarking Worksheet includes four benchmarks: (a) Restructuring for Accountability, (b) Site-based Budgeting, (c) Team Planning for Improvement, and (d) Central Office Leaders Facilitate Processes. In all of the school districts that were included in the SDES, building principals were held responsible for improving student achievement and the message from the central office seemed to be: "You are expected to improve student achievement by whatever means you can devise."

A key finding of this study was that central office leaders have shifted their focus toward improving those processes that contribute to higher achievement rather than focusing on more traditional roles of control, resource allocation, and supervision. Their task today is to help principals and others get results. One strategy commonly employed is site-based budgeting, but even if a district decides against a true site-based budgeting plan, principals still need discretionary resources if they are to respond to immediate and changing needs. The building leaders and teachers in SDES had latitude in how they used their resources.

It is axiomatic that schools should be "data-driven," as were those schools in the earlier LSS study of high-performing districts (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001). In the schools studied, teachers were also deeply involved in the responsibility for improving student achievement and were arrayed in a variety of team efforts. However, many faculties will need training in how to work effectively as a team. Merely recognizing that meetings are held periodically by groups of people does not guarantee that a clear agenda is followed, data are used, decisions are made, and wide participation ensured.

In facilitating the restructuring of districts and schools for increased accountability, some districts provided more support than others, including district-wide staff development on teaching strategies, using data to plan improvements, identifying best practices, and helping the system retain its focus on improving student achievement.

*III. Using Research-Based Teaching Strategies.* Restructuring the schools and districts helps pinpoint

responsibility for student achievement, and standards and assessment must be clear at the outset. But ultimately, students need robust and appropriate learning experiences that are more effective than their previous experiences or no boost in achievement will be forthcoming. Because there is a considerable body of evidence supporting the gains that can be attributed to improved classroom management and instructional skills, using research-based teaching strategies is, consequently, one of the priority areas of the benchmarking processes. Section III of the Benchmarking Worksheet, Using Research-based Teaching Strategies, includes a few examples of research-based teaching practices districts can use to improve student achievement.

One proven aid to more effective teaching is *Teaching to Standards: The 8-Step Instructional Cycle* (Educational Research Service, 2002). This video demonstrates the cycle of teaching activities used by teachers in the Brazosport, Texas, school district to help keep their instruction congruent with standardized test content and synchronized with districtwide assessment times. In this 8-step process, teachers develop an objective-based instructional calendar for the school year. The objectives are derived from the curriculum framework for reading, writing, and mathematics established by the state of Texas. Teachers are able to differentiate between the students who need extra help and those who need enrichment activities appropriate to their skill level in various subjects.

Teachers in the Twin Falls district used the “50-in-a-Minute” teaching strategy that requires students to take daily practice tests throughout the year to facilitate their mastery of subject content and improve their test-taking skills. For example, in math, students have to complete 50 number-fact problems in one minute.

Training teachers in classroom management skills can improve achievement by ensuring that instruction time is used sufficiently and effectively. The *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement* (Cawelti, 1999) provides teachers with teaching strategies that research has shown to be effective in subjects such as science, mathematics, social studies, health, and art. All

of these strategies require high-quality training to enable teachers to transfer what they learn by observing others or in workshops to their own classroom. This process can be greatly facilitated by central office resources and funds.

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Benchmarks	Staff Implementation				Next Step Action Plans
	Training Provided	Few	Half	Broadly	
<b>I. Standards and Assessment</b>					
<b>Key Indicators of Success</b> Board of education adopts key indicators of success upon which district staff is willing to be judged; sets standards or attainment levels for everyone.					
<b>Curriculum Alignment</b> Schedule shows when skills and knowledge topics (standards) are to be taught at all grade levels prior to summative assessments. Item analysis results are also used to ensure alignment.					
<b>Management of Information System</b> Management of Information System (MIS) is developed to report data on achieving standards. Disaggregated feedback on assessment results is promptly provided to schools and teachers.					
<b>Benchmark Testing</b> Formative assessments are regularly used throughout the year as benchmarks in gauging progress toward achieving standards.					
<b>Using Item-analysis Data</b> Feedback from formative and summative (year-end) tests is used to provide corrective instruction for individual students.					
<b>II. Restructuring for Accountability</b>					
<b>Restructuring for Accountability</b> Principals are held responsible for improving student achievement and are given the authority as needed to do so.					
<b>Site-based Budgeting</b> Schools operate under site-based budgeting, and principals have latitude in allocating resources based on needs.					
<b>Team Planning for Improvement</b> Each school has a planning team responsible for improving achievement; such teams use MIS data to prepare improvement plans. Principals help make sure teams are trained to work productively and are provided time as needed for meetings.					
<b>Central Office Leaders Facilitate Processes</b> Central office leaders' roles shift from inspector, regulator, and authority source to facilitator of school improvement processes. Such processes include establishing procedures for rapidly disseminating disaggregated data to teachers and for identifying good teaching practices and enabling staff to learn from them. Leaders create a vision of success in all stakeholders.					
<b>III. Using Research-based Teaching Strategies</b>					
<b>Teaching to Standards: The 8-Step Instructional Cycle</b> Teachers are trained in and using the 8-step Instructional Cycle.					
<b>"50-in-a-minute" Teaching Practice</b> Teachers are trained in and using the "50-in-a-minute" strategy regularly to support retention of skills taught.					
<b>Teaching Strategies in Specific Disciplines</b> Teachers are trained in and using discipline-specific strategies as described in the Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement.					
<b>Classroom Management Skills</b> Teachers are trained in and using classroom management skills to maximize "time on task."					



The Laboratory for Student Success

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory  
at Temple University  
1301 Cecil B. Moore Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19122-6091