Strategies

Instruction at the Core

For what purpose does your school district exist?

This question should not evoke a range of answers from district to district. Although the wording may vary, we would expect the answer to be something like this: "We exist for the purpose of educating all the students we serve to high levels through high-quality instruction."

Few school district leaders would dispute this statement of purpose. But we believe that quite a few would have a hard time offering an honest "yes" in response to this question: Is the instructional purpose of your district the central driver of what goes on throughout your district—from top to bottom, left to right? One reason for this fairly common disconnect is that although it is true that districts have an instructional purpose, it is also true that they operate in a political environment. District leaders who ignore this fact are guilty of reckless endangerment of the system they are supposed to be stewarding.

Nevertheless, to fulfill the instructional purpose, continuous instructional improvement must be the relentless focus—if not obsession—of leaders and practitioners throughout the system. A substantial body of research indicates that quality instruction is about 15 to 20 times more influential in terms of student learning growth than family background, income, race, gender, or other commonly recognized predictors.

The core work of continuous instructional improvement throughout the system is not simply a large-scale technical challenge. It's a large-scale adaptive or transformational challenge with systemic implications at every turn. The nature and intensity of professional development and material support required to bring one teacher from average to master-

> "High absolute scores on assessments such as the SAT are best predicted by family income, but if we are predicting student growth—progress made over the year—[research has] demonstrated that good instruction is 15 to 20 times more powerful than family background and income, race, gender, and other explanatory variables."
>
> —*Theodore Hershberg in*
> *Phi Delta Kappan, December 2005*

ful instructional practice involve a considerable investment of time, energy, expertise, and dollars. Accomplishing this challenge in all classrooms in all schools on an ongoing basis is the supreme systemic challenge for district-level educational leadership in the 21st century.

In This Issue

We explore this mega-challenge by investigating the efforts of two school districts to make instructional improvement a relentless system-wide priority. The districts—Atlanta

Public Schools in Georgia and the Highline School District near Seattle, Washington—are both current Panasonic Foundation partners. They also have in common the belief that strong district leadership around rigorous common learning standards should be balanced with strong school leadership and enough autonomy at the school level to adapt strategies based on student need. Leaders in both districts recognize the value of external strategic partners in leveraging needed resources and expertise, and both have become skilled at managing multiple partnerships.

The two districts also exhibit some interesting differences in their strategies, organization, contexts, and theories of action. Whereas Atlanta is a big-city district with more than 50,000 students, the Highline district encompasses a number of small municipalities that surround the Seattle-Tacoma Airport

The Big Ideas

Key assumptions underlie a focus on instructional improvement as the engine for systemic changes that will result in better academic outcomes for all students. Stephen Fink, a Panasonic Foundation senior consultant and the executive director of the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington, a key partner to the Highline School District, identifies the following as the "big ideas" that inform CEL's strategic assistance to Highline and other districts:

(1) If kids are not learning, they are not being afforded powerful learning opportunities.

(2) If teachers are not affording students powerful learning opportunities, principals and district leaders are not doing what they need to do to equip and support teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills.

(3) Teaching is complex, and teachers are capable of making important instructional decisions with effective professional development.

(4) To facilitate powerful instruction, teaching practice must move from private to public. The traditional school culture in which teachers close their doors and teach in private represents a significant barrier to the continuous improvement of instruction. Teachers need real-time, in-context feedback to make the needed improvement.

(5) Richard Elmore has coined the term "reciprocal accountability"— holding people accountable only for what you have ensured they have the capacity to accomplish. School districts that succeed at building instructional competence to scale develop systems of accountability that hold teachers accountable for student performance only to the extent that the district is held accountable for providing the support that teachers need to help their students achieve academic goals.

(6) You cannot lead what you don't know. All of the above is dependent on effective instructional leadership and instructional coaching. Instructional leaders at the school and system levels need deep knowledge of instructional practice and content. Without that, their efforts to lead instructional improvement are based on little more than guesswork. ◀

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and serves fewer than 20,000 students. Atlanta is pursuing continuous improvement through national, comprehensive school reform designs, such as Project GRAD, Co-Nect, and Modern Red Schoolhouse, and by establishing School Reform Teams in schools to coach teachers and principals and to address administrative tasks ranging from transportation to technology. Highline is pursuing continuous improvement through intensive instructional coaching aimed at changing classroom practice and building the capacities of instructional leaders at both the school and district levels.

As you will see in this issue, there is a great deal more to learn from both of these districts. You will also find a new feature that we're calling Endpaper. The premier commentary in this space, titled "Closing Achievement Gaps," was penned by the Panasonic Foundation's new executive director, Larry Leverett.

A Standing Invitation

We always welcome your thoughts and recommendations for *Strategies*. Please let me hear from you at sthompson@foundation.us.panasonic.com. ◀

—*Scott Thompson, Editor*

Highline, WA:

A System of Learners from Superintendent to Kindergartners

On a spring morning in 2006, a 5th grade boy is in conversation with his teacher and a visiting literacy consultant. These three sit at one end of a long table in a meeting room at Bow Lake Elementary School, in the Highline School District just south of Seattle. Also seated at the table are teachers, principals, several instructional coaches, and a central office director.

The consultant's conversation with the student and his teacher is aimed at modeling the art of conferring—the process by which teachers gain a fine-grained understanding of individual student progress and needs—and all the observers are watching, listening, and scribbling notes. In the Highline School District, it's everybody's job to learn, and student learning is at the center of adult learning.

The district, encompassing Seattle-Tacoma Airport, or SeaTac, and five adjacent municipalities, has undergone a seismic shift in demographics in recent years. Its proportion of students of color has risen from 20 to nearly 60 percent, and the district's transformation is nowhere near complete. Hispanics now account for one of every four students, and estimates project that in another five years the proportion will be one out of three. For many,

the change has been dramatic and staggeringly quick.

The district serves about 17,600 students, 56 percent of whom qualify for free and reduced-price meals. Students in the district represent 81 nationalities, with 70 languages spoken at home.

Highline is situated in a state that is no stranger to accountability. Washington was using its state test, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), to rank schools in the early 1990s, well before passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

According to Assistant Superintendent Carla Jackson, before about 2000, "whenever we tried to make change and encountered rough seas, we did not want to rock the boat too much. We would look for a compromise. Now we know the importance of being intentional and pushing practice systemwide." Six years ago, leaders took a hard look at sobering data: far too many students were not succeeding, and there were yawning achievement gaps based on race and class and among special needs students.

Highline was ready for change. A community survey revealed that 90 percent of respondents would support a strong literacy push. The board and then-Superintendent Joe McGeehan, who retired in June of 2005, were of one voice, saying, "We have to do whatever it takes to improve student achievement."

Highline district leaders began by setting rigorous goals. "By 2010 we want 90 percent of students proficient in reading, writing, and math according to state standards, 90 percent graduating on time, and 90 percent prepared for college, career, and

citizenship," says John Welch, who became superintendent when McGeehan retired.

Welch describes Highline's theory of action succinctly: Only when all students are engaged in rigorous, relevant, and personalized learning will they be prepared for college, work, and citizenship. Three major strategies for enacting the district's theory are (1) improving instruction, (2) creating and sustaining a districtwide culture of learning, and (3) establishing a system of shared accountability for results. In Highline, according to Welch, "it is about kids, and the evidence that we are succeeding is in what kids know and are able to do."

District leaders understood that they didn't have a ghost of a chance of meeting their achievement goals without an unprecedented investment of energy, time, and dollars in the improvement of instructional practice and instructional leadership throughout the system. "If we do nothing else," says Welch, "the improvement of teaching has to be front and center."

They also understood that they couldn't tackle the whole array of content areas at once and that the improvement of the teaching of literacy can be a foundation for overall instructional improvement. So they started with a literacy initiative.

The Literacy Initiative

Improvement of instruction has become Highline's core strategy for achieving rigorous, relevant, and personalized learning. In 2003 the district partnered with the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership (CEL). The

center's theory of action rests on three "basic footings" that dovetail with the district's theory of action: (1) helping districts "get smarter" about powerful instruction through study sessions and leadership coaching; (2) working with content coaches and teacher leaders with the aim of connecting professional learning to classroom practice; and (3) ensuring that the necessary policies, practices, and structures are in place to support powerful instruction systemwide.

Taking its cues from models such as San Diego and schools in New York City, Highline chose content-embedded coaching as the dominant professional development pedagogy. Coaching is delivered through a combination of internal school-based and external coaches.

Taking one teacher out of the classroom in each elementary and secondary building to serve as a school-based literacy coach involved using state funds earmarked primarily for class-size reduction. The decision to move what was perceived as class-size-reduction money to an all-out professional development initiative was not without controversy. According to Highline Education Association President Alan Sutliff, much of teachers' frustration stemmed from a feeling that this was another case of blaming the teachers for system failures. Skepticism ran the gamut from questioning the effectiveness of coaches to suspicion about their roles. Sutliff says teachers wondered, "Were coaches placed in schools to evaluate their peers?"

Over time, as coaches have proved themselves to be supports and not judges, much of the controversy has subsided. Although support of content-embedded coaching is by no means universal, Sutliff now reports that the coaching initiative has proved "much more effective than pulling teachers out of the classroom and putting them in workshops."

External coaches are provided to schools through contract with CEL for a predetermined number of days throughout the year. These coaches are selected for their expertise in literacy and are carefully matched to fit the culture of the district. School-based literacy coaches are housed within every school to extend and sustain the work launched by the external coaches.

Content-embedded coaching provided by external coaches takes three forms in Highline: Literacy Leadership, Literacy Studio Residency, and Literacy Study Group.

Literacy Leadership is the venue through which all central office staff, principals, and lead teachers receive new subject area content and instruction in literacy pedagogy. Professional development sessions on literacy leadership cover such topics as using accountable talk as an instructional strategy—that is, teaching students to think more rigorously by asking them to support what they say with evidence; and literacy as discourse—readers working together to make meaning from a text they have all read. This new content and pedagogy are then introduced, modeled, and reinforced at all schools through the principal and the literacy coaches.

Literacy Studio Residency is a structured, ongoing, reciprocal learning experience whereby teachers in one school, "the studio," open their classrooms and teach lessons to the entire class in the presence of "residents"—teachers and principals from another school and central office staff. Each residency takes place over a period of a week or more and involves ongoing written and oral reflection, dialogue, development of debriefing notes, and next steps. Resident teachers use next steps to guide their professional growth and are supported by internal coaches and principals who track teacher progress. (See "Studio Residency at Bow Lake" on p. 7.)

Literacy Study Group is an ongoing vehicle for supplementing and strengthening instruction and supporting teachers in between residencies. These one-and-a-half-hour sessions are offered monthly on a voluntary basis to all teachers who have been working with external coaches. During these sessions, teachers extend their learning through discussions of strategies (both curricular and pedagogical) for improving the quality of student talk during conferences, use of assessment tools, development of mini-lessons, and other matters.

Making Practice Public
In some districts this model would be considered intrusive and too risky for teachers who believe that the classroom is their private domain. In Highline, the culture of making practice public is still evolving. "The feeling that what I do all day long could be viewed by anybody, so that I need to make sure I'm highly engaged with kids and offering the best instructional opportunities possible is certainly a change for principals and teachers alike," says Shorewood Elementary Principal Deborah Holcomb. "I think we're on a good path, but it's a long one."

Highline is working hard to create a safe environment for trying out new strategies. And according to teachers, coaching combats the isolation that often accompanies teaching. "When we do embedded coaching, there are five people teaching my class," says Carrie Howell, a literacy teacher in the 11th and 12th grades. "I have never felt more a part of a team. Now I have others with whom to share and celebrate student progress. By being in each other's classrooms, we are building similar beliefs about how capable our students truly are."

Percent 4th Graders Meeting Standard in Reading

100
80
60
40
20
0

02–03　03–04　04–05　05–06
YEAR

Percent 7th Graders Meeting Standard in Reading

100
80
60
40
20
0

02–03　03–04　04–05　05–06*
YEAR

Percent 10th Graders Meeting Standard in Reading

100
80
60
40
20
0

02–03　03–04　04–05　05–06
YEAR

*An anomaly occurred in 7th grade WASL data statewide.
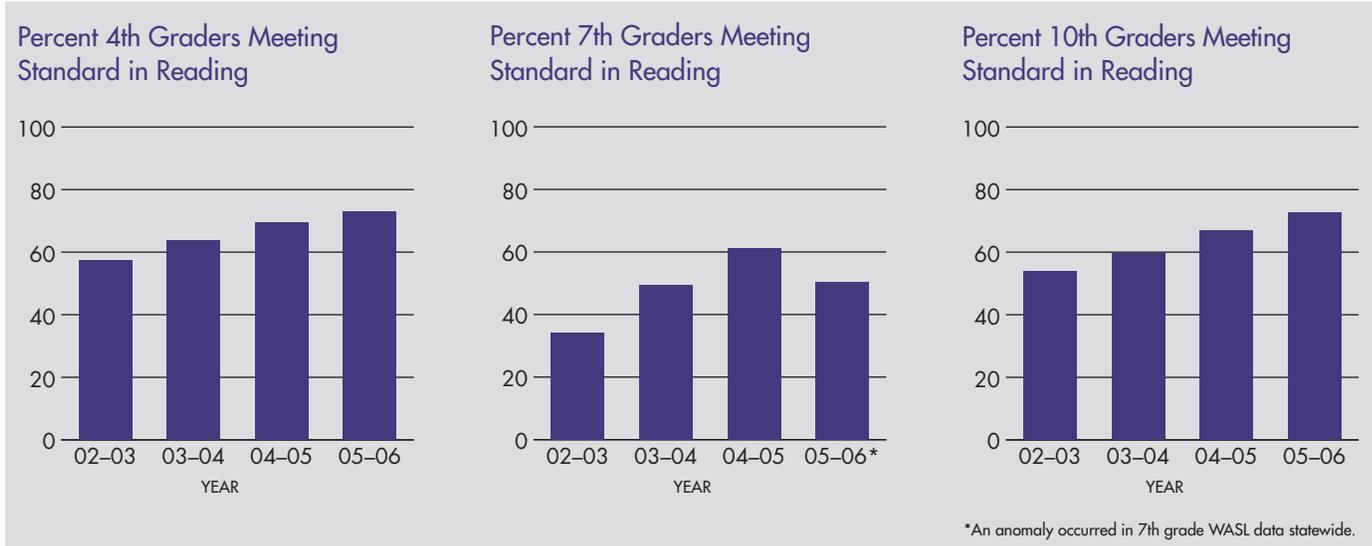
Because coaching is so personal, much of the art of coaching is about relationship building. It requires the utmost respect between coaches and teachers. That respect is apparent in the encouraging comments external coaches make in the context of coaching sessions. "You are such amazing teachers," says CEL coach Jenn McDermott to a group of high school teachers she's been working with. "I am heartened by the risks you are continually willing to take on behalf of your students and the great love you have for the subjects you teach."

The ongoing embedded coaching offered by the school-based coaches mirrors what external consultants offer. Although the particular style of coaching varies based on where teachers are in terms of making their practice public, most ongoing coaching still happens real-time in the classroom. The coach models a lesson and steps back to observe the teachers teach while giving feedback as the lesson progresses or immediately afterward.

Teachers who have been recipients of embedded coaching have high praise for it. "I have learned more in the last seven months with my coach than I did in college and graduate school combined," says literacy teacher Howell.

Creating a Districtwide Culture of Learning

The same community of learning focused on instructional quality that is being forged in Highline classrooms is being modeled and reinforced at the district level. Superintendent Welch is quick to acknowledge that the emphasis on instructional improvement has created opportunities. "We know that there will always be new challenges, so we *all* have to become learners. We have had to center on the work, not on outlying issues." In Highline, they are creating a new culture day by day through their language and through the systems they are creating that support continuous improvement and tangible results.

The Center for Educational Leadership's project director for Highline, Anneke Markholt, describes the role of CEL as creating and supporting new ways for people to relate to one another around their professional learning. She echoes Michael Fullan when she says that shifting the context in which people do their work can dramatically change how they work together. For example, all new content and pedagogy are first introduced through interactive, day-long Literacy Leadership seminars. During these seminars, assistant superintendents, principals, coaches,

teachers, and executive directors who are responsible for supervising principals are all learning together. According to Markholt, as these folks who typically have line authority over one another are learning new material side by side, "we have shifted the context for doing the work and have, in effect, leveled the playing field."

Similarly, when a teacher is practicing a new lesson—with the principal, other teachers, and central office staff observing and carefully taking notes to identify critical teacher and student moves—the context has shifted again. Supervisors are not in attendance ready to ding a teacher for poor performance, but rather are part of a group of learners working together to refine practice.

"What's good for the teacher and student relationship," says Madrona Elementary Principal Mike Fosberg, "is good for the teacher and principal relationship, and for the district office and principal relationship. I see that evolving in this district. I'm asking teachers to really know their kids, and, at the same time, I really need to know my teachers, and my boss needs to really know me and the rest of the principals so that everyone's needs are being met."

Tackling High School

In general, it is not surprising to see elementary teachers focusing on developing strategies to meet each child's instructional needs. But at the high school level, where many teachers see their work as teaching content and not students, the notion of an unyielding focus on the learner is much less common. In Highline, the high school is not the last bastion for adults who do not want to change— it is the place where they began content-embedded coaching and where teachers are most deeply involved in examining their practice. High schools receive 56 days of external coaching that are shared among two schools, and the 18 elementary schools each receive six and a half days of coaching.

This concentrated amount of coaching in high school classrooms is reflected in changes in how teachers approach the task of teaching. "My attitude toward instruction has changed," says Jodie Wiley, a 10th grade social studies and literature teacher, to colleagues who have been working with a coach over time. "I am more willing to see it as my problem and that I need to change what I do. It is no longer 'what is wrong with these kids?'"

Letting Each School Lead Its Own Learning

Although the Literacy Initiative embraces a single message for powerful, high-quality instruction, Superintendent Welch recognizes the need to allow and encourage individual schools to take the lead in their own learning. "On any given day, we can't begin to think that we understand all the specific issues of individual schools. They need to be empowered to move quickly." With a common vision and parameters firmly in place, the district is beginning to let schools fly on their own and try new things. Highline believes that school-initiated innovation is necessary to get the kind of student achievement that the district is seeking.

So although everyone has had to embrace the work, different schools have been able to do it differently. To secure buy-in and demonstrate what could be accomplished, some schools used funds to take a core group of teachers to places like San Diego and New York to study in residence in schools that have an established embedded-coaching model in place.

Shorewood Elementary Principal Holcomb, for example, took the core of her staff to a San Diego

> In Highline, the high school is not the last bastion for adults who do not want to change—it is the place where . . . teachers are most deeply involved in examining their practice.

school for an intensive visit. Each teacher from Highline was paired with a San Diego teacher, and Holcomb teamed up with the school's principal. "It's really been an effective way to take my staff to a different level with the work and buy into it," Holcomb says. "All the teachers collectively moved forward and really committed to professional development sessions where we've been able to add two to three days in August on top of their regularly scheduled district days for our own internal professional development, which collectively takes us to a whole different place. There was a huge shift in thinking."

As schools grow more sophisticated in their use of content-embedded coaching, they are designing their own models. According to one principal, "The external coach is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for powerful instruction to become the norm schoolwide." Some schools are planning models in which a proven teacher leader will be released for two to three periods a day to bridge the gap between external coaching and daily instructional improvement. Others are working to develop their own internal coach for each of the small learning communities in their buildings so that they can take the rigorous intellectual work that coaching prompts and extend it beyond literacy to other content areas.

To sustain the work, principals believe that they will have to "grow their own" coaches. Schools will need district support for release time for teachers who are learning to be school-embedded coaches.

Shared Accountability

A base for shared accountability is built directly into Highline's professional development model. Principals and teacher leaders can see at every Literacy Leadership session that central office staff are also required to learn and master every new piece of content and pedagogy that will be passed on to teachers. The mandate for district leaders to learn alongside school staff has paid off. Most principals report a message from the central office saying, "We are in this together."

Principals are required to have their finger on the pulse of teacher needs by knowing and tracking the next instructional steps that the coach identifies for each teacher. In the same way, central office executive directors who supervise principals keep detailed matrices on next instructional steps for each teacher and work with the principals to ensure that they are providing each teacher with the supports, models, and coaching to move to the next level. Although the relationship is not evaluative, a tight connection

Studio Residency at Bow Lake Elementary

Literacy consultant Lyn Regett is in deep conversation with a bright-eyed 5th grade boy, Ahmed Singh, and his teacher, Jason Dodge. The conversation takes place not in Dodge's classroom, but in Bow Lake Elementary School's faculty meeting room. The three-way conversation is being closely observed by Bow Lake's principal and the principal of Valley View Elementary, two other Bow Lake teachers, school-based instructional coaches from both Bow Lake and Valley View, a district-level instructional coach, and the central office executive director responsible for supervising half of Highline's elementary principals.

At the moment, everyone in the room is a learner, and the literacy consultant and the student are their teachers. This is a Studio Residency, with the host school being the "studio," the place where teaching and learning are modeled, and the visitors from Valley View in the role of "residents."

"Today we are here to have a conversation about how you make sense of nonfiction books," says Regett. Then, speaking directly to Ahmed, she adds, "Mr. Dodge said that you read a fictional story about German concentration camps. How would you go about learning more about concentration camps in this book?" Ahmed begins to leaf through the pages of *V Is for Victory: America Remembers WWII.*

Ahmed scans the pages and finally lights on a section about Mussolini. He makes a connection: "He [Mussolini] was like Hitler; he wanted to make a great empire," says Ahmed. Ahmed is not getting the information he needs by scanning. With some support from Regett, Ahmed moves on to the table of contents and then the glossary. Ahmed chooses a section from the table of contents and flips to the page listed. Regett asks, "Why did you choose the section entitled 'Evil Forces'?"

"I guess because Hitler was evil, and he started the concentration camps," Ahmed replies.

"Ah, Amhed!" Regett exclaims. "I see the strategy you are using. You have formed a theory, haven't you? You don't know exactly where to go in this unfamiliar book, but you know something about Hitler—that he was evil; and so you are inferring that a section about evil would be a good bet for finding out about Hitler's concentration camps. Great thinking! Go ahead; test out that theory. Let's see what happens."

And so the session continues. About 10 minutes later, the group thanks Ahmed. "Glad I could help out," he says, with a broad smile on his face that reveals how truly proud he is of his reading.

The group dives into processing the session on a number of levels. First, Dodge notes all of Ahmed's strengths as a reader, as well as the things he can almost, but not quite, do. These will guide Dodge's next instructional steps with Ahmed. Next, the team of teachers and the coach use the data they just collected to plan how they will design a guided reading lesson for the 5th grade class. Finally, they launch into a meta-discussion of how they can use or modify the process they just witnessed to assess skills of all their students and the new strategies they learned to guide students in the exploration of expository text.

In the lead-up to Ahmed's visit, Regett explained the "big ideas" that the session was aiming for:

- "Knowing about students as learners is essential."
- "Knowing about the reading process is essential."
- "Selection of an instructional approach that best meets the students' needs should be based on evidence."

She explained that the data gathered from the interaction with Ahmed would help inform decisions about how to group students most effectively.

During the conversation with Ahmed, the adult observers—from the teachers to the executive director for elementary education—hung onto the child's every word. They were learning not only about this child as a reader, but also about the different techniques that must be mastered if teachers are to gain a fuller understanding of their students as individual learners. ◀

links the principal and the coach. According to one teacher, "It is the principal's responsibility to follow through with what the embedded coach has been working on. My principal expects to see how I have been progressing on next steps. At the same time she gives me support to get to that next level."

Shared accountability is not "shared" unless high expectations accompany equally high supports. According to Principal Fosberg, "Although the district was prescriptive, they have demonstrated that they are in it for the long haul and will provide whatever supports are necessary."

Aligning Policies and Structures with the Goal of Instructional Leadership

The district has worked hard to align policies and structures with the goal of achieving quality instructional leadership. It exponentially increased the time that executive directors are in schools serving as

4th Grade Reading Achievement Growth Among English Language Learners

NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS   LIMITED ENGLISH

PERCENT MEETING STANDARD

86.4 — 81.3

GAP: 60.5   GAP: 34.9

46.4

25.9

ADJUSTED GROWTH*: 20.5%

2005   2006

YEAR
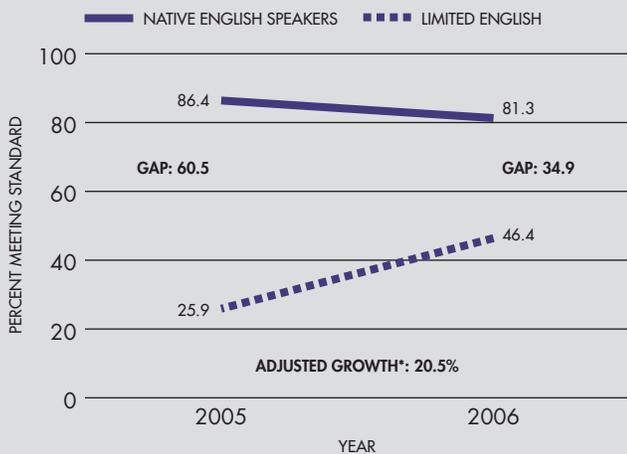
4th Grade Reading Achievement Growth Among Hispanic Students

WHITE   HISPANIC

PERCENT MEETING STANDARD

86.4 — 81.3

GAP: 38.5   GAP: 18.5

62.8

47.9

ADJUSTED GROWTH*: 14.9%
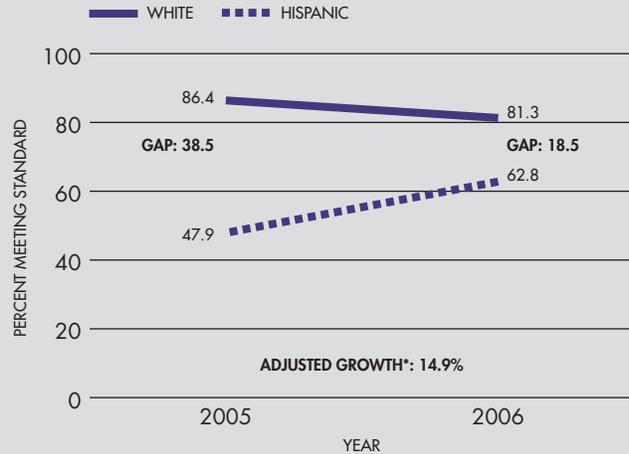
2005   2006

YEAR

Highline's diligent work in improving instruction is beginning to result in signs of growth in previously underserved populations. This growth, if sustained over time, will narrow the longstanding performance gaps between the district's largest population groups—white and Hispanic students, and native English speakers and English language learners.

WASL data from 2005 and 2006 show an increase of 20.5 percentile points in reading performance among English language learners when compared with native English speakers. Similarly, the data show an increase of 14.9 percentile points in reading performance among 4th grade Hispanic students when compared with white students. Although

significant narrowing of achievement differences has not yet been detected districtwide on standardized achievement tests at the upper grades, leaders are confident that if they stay the course and continue to focus on instruction, these improvements will extend to the upper grades as well. ◄

instructional leaders by developing the role of "student placement officer" to deal with parent and family concerns. Executive directors report that as a result, 95 percent of the parent complaints and concerns never reach them—freeing up valuable time that can now be focused on instruction.

Central office recognized that if principals were to serve as true instructional leaders, it needed to carefully scrutinize what it asked principals to do and how principals spent their time. With this in mind, Highline holds sacred the hours between 9 and 11 a.m., when principals are required to be in classrooms and may not be called away for meetings. In addition, central office leaders are being very intentional

about looking at the extent to which principals are being called upon to serve on district committees. The goal is to balance the buy-in and insight that comes from having principals participating in planning processes and the power that is generated at the building level when principals are freed up to do the hands-on work needed to improve instructional practice.

Central office has worked to streamline communications so principals have significant lead time to respond to its requests. The frequency of general staff meetings has been reduced from once a month to once every two months. Principals have noticed the change. As one principal said, "The time that people are called together is intentionally shorter and more focused. Now it seems like we turn every meeting

into a professional learning opportunity—they will have selected an article for us that relates to what we are doing. Expectations are higher, but so are supports."

Capitalizing on Every Opportunity for Adult Learning

Highline leaders take their theory of action very seriously: If everyone in the system is learning deep content and pedagogy, student results will improve. They seize every opportunity to infuse adult learning into the system.

The summer school model is an excellent example. Highline maximizes student and teacher learning every summer by placing 25 to 30 at-risk students with a team of three teachers, including a lead teacher.

Atlanta, GA:

Mobilizing the System Around Instruction

By the late 1990s, Georgia Governor Roy Barnes and corporate leaders in Atlanta had become fed up with declining student achievement in the Atlanta Public Schools (APS). Shortly after Beverly Hall accepted an offer to become the new superintendent of APS in July of 1999, Governor Barnes showed up unannounced at the school board office to congratulate her and to say to the board members, "I'm behind this lady, and I'd like you to give her an opportunity to succeed."

SUPERINTENDENT:
Beverly Hall

DISTRICT SIZE:
51,000

At that point, about one-third of the district's schools were among the lowest performing in the state. Thirteen of the state's 20 lowest-performing schools were located in Atlanta.

The system serves 51,000 students, 71 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Shortly after Hall's arrival in Atlanta, a survey of all constituencies districtwide revealed that even the majority of kindergarten teachers felt that their students would not finish high school.

Hall was Atlanta's fifth superintendent in 10 years. Ever since the schools had been desegregated, the district was legally structured according to state charter to not allow the superintendent to have authority over financial operations. The disconnect between system leadership and financial authority was one among a number of factors leading to a revolving-door superintendency.

Criterion-Referenced Competency Test	Percentage Who Meet or Exceed Standard 1999–00	Percentage Who Meet or Exceed Standard 2004–05
4th grade math	43%	70%
4th grade reading	47%	83%
4th grade English/language arts	57%	82%
6th grade math	46%	57%
6th grade reading	52%	70%
6th grade English/language arts	40%	64%
8th grade math	36%	49%
8th grade reading	60%	69%
8th grade English/language arts	47%	68%

However, even faced with widespread low student achievement and institutionalized apathy stemming from a leadership void, Hall recognized some distinct advantages that made Atlanta ripe for positive change. Not only were the city's corporate leaders and the state's governor clamoring for improved achievement; they were prepared to provide political backing to a new leader serious about improving student performance. The district was fiscally sound, and taxpayers had recently approved a special-purpose sales tax that would allow for upgrades in facilities districtwide. The schools were well managed and safe places; in short, although expectations and academic achievement were low, the climate within schools was not dysfunctional. Furthermore, the school board was ready for political change.

Since Hall's arrival, student achievement and expectations have risen across the board, and in what had been some of the lowest-performing schools, the progress has been dramatic. The table on this page captures some of the districtwide results.

Theory of Action

In October 2006, the Council of the Great City Schools awarded Hall its Richard R. Green Award, which is considered the nation's highest award for urban educators. But seven years after Hall launched Atlanta's noteworthy turnaround, district leaders and educators are not resting on their laurels. Ask nearly anyone in the system what the district is aiming for and you will hear the same message: "APS 2007—100 percent of schools meeting or exceeding 70 percent of their achievement targets, while closing the gap." The "targets" are for attendance, enrollment, and scores on standardized tests and AP and International Baccalaureate tests.

Early on, Hall developed a theory of action for improved student achievement that was simple and to the point: Combat the pervasive disbelief in children's potential by quickly demonstrating that children can achieve. What was her strategy for improving performance in a district with low expectations? Her

approach was fivefold: (1) deeply know and understand the data; (2) employ only principals who can create a school climate in which teachers collaborate around instructional improvement; (3) invest heavily in professional development that is centered around quality classroom practice; (4) use research-based practices (including comprehensive school reform models) to improve school quality, targeting the lowest-performing schools for the most intensive support; and (5) retool the entire district to support instruction and leadership in the buildings.

All along the way, however, there were political issues that needed to be addressed. In fact, Hall says, "I think it's a combination of political acumen and instructional leadership that has allowed me to survive long enough to get some things done."

Political Groundwork

Beverly Hall understood that she could not lead the system to where it needed to go as long as her position continued to be stripped of budgetary authority. She met regularly with the CEOs of major Atlanta-based corporations, including Coca-Cola, UPS, Delta, Home Depot, Sun Trust Bank, Georgia Pacific, Georgia Power, Cox Communications, and BellSouth. As a result of her conversations with the CEOs, the district began looking at the issue of school governance.

Hall says they looked nationally at best practices in this area before convening a commission to tackle the issue. The commission recommended changes to the legislature, which voted to establish a school system governance charter for APS in which the superintendent alone reports to the board of education, and the superintendent is given full authority over the district budget and finances.

Another governance issue that needed addressing early on concerned the behavior of board members themselves. In the vacuum created by the revolving-door superintendency of the previous decade, board members had become involved in the day-to-day business of the district.

Over time, the board did assume a more disciplined role, recognizing the ineffectiveness of board member intrusion into issues of district operations. Board chair Kathleen Pattillo says that one key factor in this shift was the leadership that Hall brought to the district. "She has a vision that gets disseminated and communicates hope that the vision can be realized. There's a high level of expectation and a consistency that we didn't have before." Another contributing factor was training in board governance that new members received from the Broad Foundation. These courses emphasized the distinct but cooperative roles played by superintendents and board members.

Hiring the Right People

In Atlanta, if you sign on to be a principal, you sign on to be your school's instructional leader. Hall estimates that about 90 principals have been appointed during her time in Atlanta. Some openings were created through attrition; some principals opted out because of the new expectations and the pressure of a new accountability system. These openings created the opportunity to hire individuals who were focused on instruction. District leaders believed that it was easy enough to provide training in the management side of leading a school, but what they really wanted were principals who understood quality instruction and could lead effectively, so that all children could learn.

Because of the history of instability in the Atlanta superintendency, virtually no leadership team was in

place when Hall came on board. It took more than two years to assemble a senior-level leadership team. It was this team that began to aggressively examine people in key positions and to determine whether or not those individuals were the right ones for the job. They conducted national searches for many positions.

School Reform Teams

Early in her tenure, Hall brought McKinsey and Company Consulting into the district to look at the organization and provide feedback. The McKinsey consultants helped the district's senior leadership team design a decentralized approach to bring support closer to schools. The district instituted School Reform Teams (SRTs), an approach that Hall had begun developing when she was superintendent in Newark, New Jersey, but without sufficient resources to realize much of their potential. These support teams are housed not in the central office, but in schools or buildings within five regions of the city. Four of the five SRTs support clusters of approximately 20 K–5 and 6–8 schools, and the fifth SRT is devoted exclusively to high schools and alternative schools.

On site within each School Reform Team office is an executive director, who serves as the instructional leader for all schools in the SRT cluster, and a cadre of model teacher leaders (MTLs), who, according to Deputy Superintendent for Instruction Kathy Augustine, "came straight out of the classroom and were at the top of their game in specific subject areas."

The role of the MTL has evolved. Before the formation of SRTs, some outstanding math and science teachers were released from classroom duties to work out of central office on an initiative funded by the National Science Foundation. They received high-quality training in math and science, but little train-

ing in facilitation, coaching, or school support. When SRTs were organized to support schools, these former math and science teachers, along with teachers in other content areas, became the first MTLs. Through ongoing evaluation, feedback from school sites, and training, Atlanta has been able to hone the role of MTLs so that they provide maximum service and support to classrooms. Now, although MTLs may be hired for expertise in a particular content area, they receive extensive professional development in other content areas so they are able to serve as curriculum and instructional generalists. According to one SRT executive director, Michael Pitts, "We can't afford to have people who are siloed in their knowledge. Everyone—and that means me, too—must be multiply-certified and -skilled so that we can offer schools total support."

Model teacher leaders do not adhere to a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting the schools in their SRT zone. Although all schools receive support, it is more heavily concentrated on struggling schools.

But even with the executive director and MTLs providing continuous instructional support out in the field, school leaders were still getting the runaround from central office when it came to noninstructional needs and issues. In response, the district assigned individuals from each central office division to serve as critical connectors based at each SRT. Now SRTs not only provide direct instructional support, they also broker all central office functions, so that a school makes one call for facilities, technology, transportation, nutrition, legal services, human resources, and other supports.

According to Yolanda Chaplin-Brown, principal of Hill Elementary School, the SRT is now truly "a one-stop shop. Red tape is significantly reduced. Everything is structured so that teachers and students have better teaching and learning experiences."

Atlanta is keeping a running tally of the effectiveness of the SRT concept. When last surveyed, model teacher leaders received an effectiveness rating of 92 percent from school-based staff.

Comprehensive School Reform

Beverly Hall clearly came to Atlanta with strong notions about what was needed—a focused approach to improving reading and math, and a

"We can't afford to have people who are siloed in their knowledge."

strategy for implementing comprehensive approaches to school reform. She met with corporate sponsors and members of the local philanthropic community the day before her job officially started. And she arranged for the board chair of Newark's Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), a comprehensive school reform program, to be present at that meeting along with others associated with Project GRAD. They presented data around the success the model had been achieving. In three years, APS raised $20 million in support of its own Project GRAD.

District leaders in Atlanta believed that Project GRAD could deliver on a core aspect of their theory of action—namely, the need to demonstrate that students in low-performing schools could, in fact, achieve at higher levels. The low-performing schools in Atlanta were concentrated in the SRT 1 and SRT 2 zones. Schools in these zones were required to adopt Project GRAD. Project GRAD includes intensive professional development for staff through a combination of the approaches used by Success for All,

Move It Math, Consistency Management, Cooperative Discipline, and a family support program.

Other schools were given a 2004 deadline for adopting a comprehensive school reform (CSR) design. In the case of consistently high-performing schools, the option was available to develop a reform model of their own. Other CSR designs adopted by schools in Atlanta include Co-Nect, Core Knowledge, Success for All, America's Choice, Modern Red School House, and International Baccalaureate.

Hall says that when she came to work in Atlanta, never having worked in the South before, she called up her friend Gerry House, who was then superintendent of Memphis City Schools, and arranged to shadow her for a few days. During that visit to Memphis, a district that had previously adopted CSR designs, they talked about what had and had not worked in the design-adoption process. Based on these conversations and Hall's own experience of beginning to bring CSR designs into Newark, she set up the Atlanta initiative so that schools had limited choices, had an established rubric to use in the selection process, and had to obtain at least 75 percent buy-in of staff members for a chosen design. Because all but six Atlanta schools are Title I schools, Title I funds are the primary resource for funding the CSR designs.

Common Pedagogy

Although school support is customized and the district has distinct school reform designs in place, some non-negotiables cut across the system. The district recognized the need for immediate professional development in reading and standards-based instruction, even while schools were in the process of researching their CSR designs. APS contracted with the Consortium on Reading Excel-

lence (CORE) to train all teachers and principals in reading strategies across the curriculum. They launched a comprehensive professional development initiative on teaching to the standards. In addition, every school engages in common training in standards-based curriculum and assessment development, including Understanding by Design and Concept-Based Units.

School Reform Teams have the pivotal role in connecting the dots across the various reform models in place within and across regions. The SRTs provide the common professional development to design teams from each building. Because they are intimately aware of the particulars of each reform model, MTLs are uniquely prepared to situate new learning in the context of the school and the specific reform model within each building. Model teacher leaders carefully coordinate these district-wide initiatives to allow schools to make the connection between common standards, content, and pedagogy and the specific CSR designs. After MTLs provide the professional development to the school-based design teams, it is then the school's job to decide how the school team will carry the message and the learning to all staff within the school. MTLs are always available to help schools plan and deliver all-school retreats. They also help schools disaggregate and analyze their student performance data and use this data to conduct model lessons and embedded professional development in deficit areas. This delivery model aims to ensure that best instructional practices are used with fidelity across the district.

Model teacher leaders observe instruction in every classroom every year using a common protocol. SRT executive directors do walk-throughs of all schools. The result is consis-

tency—a common language and common standards of practice across a district that employs several different school reform designs.

Data-Based Decision Making

To improve in Atlanta, schools have had to learn the art and science of using data for continuous improvement. Data is disaggregated and made very public not only in school hallways, but also on the walls of the SRT offices. The APS research, planning, and accountability office sets targets for each grade and subject area on the Georgia state test and the fall and spring benchmark tests. However, the targets are individual growth targets that challenge each teacher, grade level, and school to improve against itself.

SRT executive directors and MTLs work with school staff to use the data to inform day-to-day instructional decisions. By using the data to change practice, many teachers have come to see their work as the continual improvement of their craft as measured by student learning.

Aligning Central Office

Aligning systems in service of instruction is a constant preoccupation in Atlanta. The district has connected Human Resources and Finance through its "enterprise system," a technology-based system that facilitates the flow of data between departments. It has put individual education plans online. It has created a comprehensive classification system and job descriptions that describe each position in terms of service to the schools.

Three to four years into the work of aligning systems and implementing best business practices in the service of instruction, "we were still not satisfied," says Hall. "We were still getting surprises from the community and the field. We were still getting criticized for being top-heavy, or having a higher per-pupil

expenditure than the outlying counties." Even though much had been accomplished, district leaders sensed that they were still relying on labor-intensive practices that did not support their goal of helping schools to improve student performance.

To look even more deeply across central office functions, APS contracted with Deloitte Consulting to conduct an audit. Deloitte analyzed the nuts and bolts of every central office department and position. The audit revealed that APS would have to move beyond isolated departmental ways of working if it was going to systemically improve instruction. Three years ago, APS established an office for systemically managing all change-related work that had to be done. The district adopted project management as the tool for becoming systemic about change.

The district has found a way to avoid the "project-itis" that often places competing demands on schools by using cross-functional teams to plan, launch, and implement all major initiatives that affect schools. What is different now? Instead of a roomful of curriculum and instruction staff sitting around planning a literacy project or a professional development agenda that later is stalled by various human resource, financial, and facilities concerns, as well as a lack of understanding of what individual schools need, each project is staffed from the outset with a cross-departmental team representing all relevant district functions.

Planning is now strategic, targeted, and short term, and each act of planning produces a deliverable. Each new project begins with a project charter that formally authorizes the project, identifies a project manager, outlines the project mission and purpose, requests staff time in terms of specific hours necessary to achieve the project mission, provides

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cost estimates for the project, and identifies specific funding sources.

By adhering to the project management templates, planning does not become a career in itself—as many strategic-planning efforts have been prone to do. Each project must identify leading and lagging indicators that provide built-in, ongoing evaluation of the work in progress. According to Adrian Epps, director of science and mathematics initiatives, "Project management is a structure that disciplines us and requires us to constantly be reflective and results-oriented about our work."

How do leaders at central office respond to the tension between thoughtful strategic planning and the pressing need not to lose another student to ineffective instruction? Alicia Derin, the district's executive director for teaching and learning, offers this response: "Everyone is clear here that project management is not an end in itself. It has been a huge cultural change to get projects to end on time."

Project management is the tool that has prompted the cross-functional work that is becoming a way of life in Atlanta. Accountability for working cross-functionally is now built into employee evaluations, with a portion of the evaluation based on performance on cross-functional teams. District staff are becoming accustomed to doing two kinds of work at once: work within their division, for which they are accountable to their line supervisors; and work beyond their division on cross-functional teams, for which they are accountable to the project manager, who frequently is from outside their division.

QIQS

In August 2003, APS entered into partnership with the Panasonic Foundation. An early focus in the partnership work was a project known as Quality Instruction Qual-

ity Schools, or QIQS. What started out as a project evolved into a full-blown program. In project management parlance, a *project* has a specific focus and a limited time frame, but a *program* is more like an umbrella covering multiple projects and may not be confined to a limited time frame but could go on indefinitely.

QIQS began as an effort to more clearly understand and describe the core business of the district—that is, high-quality instructional practices in high-quality schools. The thought was that the project would culminate in a document capturing what research and best practice have to say about quality instruction and quality schools.

In time, the team that worked on this project realized that such a document would have to be huge and that its heft would represent an obstacle to its being used by teachers and principals. What was needed, among other things, were frameworks and the ability to drill down and look at particular characteristics for specific grade levels and in specific content areas. QIQS was more than a project or a hard-copy document could contain. It was even more than a program, for, as Derin says, "QIQS is the primary reason that we exist. It defines our instructional program, how we build buildings, do finance, and employ people."

QIQS has taken tangible form as a portal on the district's Web site, where its purpose is summarized in these words: "The goal of QIQS is to identify, define, and analyze research-based best practices and characteristics for all APS schools. QIQS will help schools assess and monitor progress, define gaps, and deliver resources so that all schools will Accelerate, Perform, and Sustain student achievement."

Through this Web portal, a teacher, for example, can look up "phonemic awareness" and read a

short definition, a summary of research, and a description of assessments; and find strategies, pertinent standards, related texts, and links to related Web sites. The teacher can also view a video of a classroom teacher in action, working with students to develop phonemic awareness. The same sorts of resources are available for a broad array of instructional topics, and QIQS will continually evolve.

Keeping Grounded

"One of the things I try to make sure of is that we're not in la-la land at the central office, creating structures or thinking of things that the schools don't understand," says Hall. One key way she prevents this problem is to hold monthly meetings in her office with randomly selected groups of principals. In these meetings, Hall asks two questions: (1) What are you finding most helpful from central office and SRTs? (2) What should we be doing differently or better to help get you to your goal of improving student achievement?

Hall says that for the first couple of years, principals did not fully trust her. Now, she says, they see the meetings as their opportunity to give her constructive, unvarnished feedback. After these meetings, she reports back to them what she heard, and the "low-hanging fruit" issues are addressed immediately. "On the systemic issues, where they have such good thinking," says Hall, "I also use that to help inform the agendas for the weekly senior cabinet meetings." At the end of the school year, Hall meets with her cabinet for a full day to talk through issues that principals consistently raised over the course of the year to determine the level of progress.

Beverly Hall also does a lot of listening out in the community. She holds "living room chats" in the

homes of parents, where groups of 10 or so parents will come together. "I sit for an hour and a half," she says, "and I listen." She says that the contrast in what she's hearing now in comparison to her first year is a "sea change." The first year she got an earful about what wasn't working, and now she's more likely to be asked if more computers can be made available at the local community center, because kids have so much homework to keep up with.

Challenges Ahead

What is next for Atlanta? A math initiative. High school transformation. Middle school transformation.

Careful examination of APS data shows that math scores are consistently lower than scores in reading and writing. District leaders found that schools are using more than 30 different programs to teach math. There is no common scope-and-sequence curriculum for teaching mathematics. Among subject areas, Atlanta teachers are the least skilled in mathematics and are not demonstrating effective teaching in higher-order math skills.

Mirroring the project management process used to improve literacy, leaders have already completed the first phase of planning for a districtwide Math Initiative. According to Adrian Epps, the Math Initiative project manager, the district is using the project implementation and monitoring process that worked for reading as they roll out the Math Initiative in fall 2006. Principals say they are ready for the challenge. Success breeds success, and Atlanta plans on capitalizing on the successes in literacy to transform achievement in mathematics.

District leaders have also come to recognize that high school and middle school achievement will not square with the district's aspirations unless high schools and middle schools are first transformed. High school transformation is already underway at the Carver High School campus, which has become the home of five small secondary schools, each focused on a theme and on meaningful learning experiences. Each school has its own principal, but the schools share athletics and band.

As the district pursues these major initiatives, it is trying to stay attentive to systemic implications by using the matrix approach to teaming. The Math Initiative Team, for example, includes the leaders of the Middle School Transformation Team and the High School Transformation Team. And the same goes for the other teams. This brings the learning of one project to bear on another, but it is also a way to head off unintended consequences that tend to develop when large systems make large changes. ◄

Highline, WA

Working within this low adult-to-student ratio, teachers learn, model, and practice new instructional strategies and reflect together on the best ways to reach each child. Highline has made it as financially attractive as possible to have the best teachers teaching summer school.

According to Alan Spicciati, executive director of secondary education, summer school now has a purposefulness that did not exist in the past. "We are very intentional now about matching the learning with the learner." In this way, the neediest students are receiving the highest-quality teachers and the most challenging instruction. Likewise, the teachers are "learning forward" and bring a higher caliber of instruction into their classroom in the fall.

Leveraging External Partnerships to Build Capacity

Now five years into the work of improving instruction, Highline has become more sophisticated in charting its course for improvement. The district is in partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Panasonic Foundation. The CEL work is focused on building instructional capacity throughout the system; the Gates work is focused on high school reform; and the work with the Panasonic Foundation is aimed at systems change.

Working with three external partners brings the risk that differing theories of action and approaches to intervention could increase systemic "noise." District leaders are finding it essential to actively and strategically manage their partnerships. "When you don't know much you let external partners lead you," says Assistant Superintendent Jackson. "Now we are making some of our own decisions because we tend to know our context better than anyone; we are beginning to trust ourselves more." For example, the decision to separate elementary and secondary professional development was a district decision.

Markholt, the CEL project director for Highline, thinks the system is well on its way to sustaining continuous instructional improvement as the district's core business. "They are developing expertise and focus on instruction in the system, and if they can hold fast to that, instead of being subject to political whims, they will make it." ◄

Endpaper

Closing Achievement Gaps

How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children? If your answer is "More than one," then I submit that you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that pupil performance derives from family background instead of school response to family background. We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.
—*Ronald Edmonds, Harvard University*

Nearly all educators are familiar with Edmonds's battle cry: "All children can learn." We also know that certain things must be in place for this to happen, including, but not limited to, exposing students to consistently high-quality instruction, varying instructional approaches to match the learning styles of students, differentiating instruction to meet the range of student performance levels that are present in the classroom, providing high-quality preschool programs, engaging families and communities in school improvement and student support, and continually ramping up the investment in teacher capacity to employ best instructional practices in all content areas.

Schools and school districts—including Highline and Atlanta, featured in this issue of *Strategies*—that effectively implement these and other high-leverage strategies with fidelity are getting results. Although few districts have completely closed all their achievement gaps, many have made significant strides in narrowing gaps between groups of students, and they have done so while raising the performance level of all students. The challenges of closing achievement gaps in the United States have less to do with knowledge than with will and intensity of focus and investment. It appears that our historical failure to educate generations of children continues to be an acceptable outcome. Why else would we tolerate such a waste in human potential?

This is shameful, and it is time to reject the myths that provide excuses for action. It's time to stop blaming the victims, relying on nonschool factors to excuse our performance in schools, and accepting the poppycock that closing the achievement gap is a problem without a solution.

The "will gap" is a chief barrier to generating the focus, energy, and resources needed to overcome the prevailing belief system that doubts the ability of poor children, children of color, and children with limited proficiency in the use of English to master rigorous academic content and the ability of responsible adults to make a difference in the conditions inside and beyond the schoolhouse required to support gap-closing strategies and interventions. Edmonds's question "How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children?" is as pertinent now as it was when he raised it back in 1979.

The evidence continues to mount—including that presented in this and previous issues of *Strategies*—that schools, school districts, and communities acting on their will and passion to make a difference in the outcomes of all students are raising the ceiling on overall student performance levels and narrowing gaps at the same time.

- Ron Edmonds's pioneering work resulted in the identification of schools serving the most isolated, marginalized, and impoverished children and families that have been successful in their efforts to increase student achievement. (See "Revolutionary and Evolutionary: The Effective Schools Movement," by Lawrence W. Lezotte.)
- James Comer's breakthrough work with many high-poverty schools using the School Development Program to anchor their improvement efforts has been carefully documented and points the way to the resolution of problems not successfully addressed in many schools that fail to improve outcomes for their children.
- Jeff Howard, founder of the Efficacy Institute, has several decades of research and frontline experience supporting the notion that "smart is not something you are; smart is something you can become." Howard argues that efficacy, coupled with effective effort, high expectations, high-quality curriculum, and good instruction, are ingredients to promote high achievement.
- Robert Moses's Algebra Project, which has challenged more than 10,000 learners in nearly 30 school districts, has made success in algebra possible for a large number of students who might have been destined to a minimum, basic-skills experience in mathematics.

The list goes on and on (see publications by Robert Marzano, Douglas Reeves, Linda Darling-Hammond, Lauren Resnick, Belinda Williams, Joseph Johnson, Gerry House, Ron Ferguson, Mike Schmoker, and many more), making it clear that we know what needs to be done.

Visit the Web site of the Education Trust (www.edtrust.org), an education advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., to learn about schools and school districts that have increased the performance of students many others claim are hard to teach. A lot of information is available to us today that was not available to educators of prior generations. The research base for teaching and learning has improved dramatically over the years, and descriptions of best practices are more readily accessible as a result of advances in technology.

It's important to acknowledge, however, that substantially changing instructional practice and instructional outcomes requires a good deal more than acquaintance with current research. Without intensive, ongoing, on-the-job modeling and feedback, progress in raising the quality of teaching and learning will be gradual at best. To pursue this kind of approach comprehensively requires a level of investment that far exceeds what is generally found in district professional development budgets. And this is where will, discipline, and passion come in—will and discipline to make continuous instructional improvement the systemwide focal point, and passion to aggressively build capacity and monitor student performance using a variety of high-quality formative assessments.

Poor children, children of color, children with limited English-speaking proficiency, and all other children adversely impacted by disadvantage are as capable as any other children in our society. They can succeed in school and master rigorous content.

There can be no tolerance of alibis, excuses, or exceptions! Yes, many influences need to be addressed to wipe out the impact of being economically disadvantaged in a privileged, affluent society. This is important work and would make the job of educators somewhat less complicated. However, as school leaders, we cannot permit the failures of society to hinder our response to the pressing needs of children and youth.

School leaders across the country know and understand that our work grows out of a moral imperative to create a fair and just society. Mission-oriented educators, working with parents, communities, and other strategic partners, have contributed to the development of a body of knowledge of what schools can do to be more effective in closing achievement gaps. ◀

—*Larry Leverett,*
Executive Director,
Panasonic Foundation