

# Introduction

**In the pages that follow, common themes clearly emerge about the characteristics of high-achieving organizations both inside and outside education. These organizations focus on clear standards, and they have developed procedures to assess progress toward these standards. They 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. Consistent with this, evidence was found in each of the districts to suggest that the concept “all children can learn” has moved beyond rhetoric. Staff members are expected to do whatever it takes to ensure that each student is achieving.... Finally, the districts profiled are similar to other high-performing organizations in terms of their use of the knowledge base to ensure that their efforts are headed in the right direction (Cawelti and Protheroe 2001, 2).**

The primary goal of educators in every public school and district across the country has always been to provide a solid educational foundation for all students. Such a foundation is key to students’ eventual success in higher education, the workforce, and, in a broader sense, their adult lives as citizens and heads of their own families. In recent years, however, school success has increasingly come to be measured by results on standardized assessments, and the public expectation is that all children should meet state-established standards.

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The No Child Left Behind Act not only has raised the bar, it also has made explicit the standards for school success and mandated consequences for schools that do not meet them. Thus, thousands of schools and districts are grappling with the need to significantly, and rapidly, raise student achievement as measured by high-stakes assessments. They are looking for answers—a roadmap—to guide their improvement efforts. Their efforts to improve might also go more smoothly if they are better prepared for “speed bumps” experienced by other districts.

The stories of successful districts profiled in this report make one point crystal clear: *school districts can have a profound and positive impact on school improvement efforts*. But many of them will have to make substantial changes in the way they do business. This report provides solid direction on what needs to be done—and how.

## Studies from the Corporate World

A substantial number of studies have been conducted over nearly three decades to identify factors describing individual schools that have defied the odds by accomplishing high levels of achievement while serving significant numbers of children from low-income or minority families. But until recently little research has focused on school districts as the locus for improvement efforts.

For information about efforts to improve larger systems, educators often turned to research done in the corporate world. Perhaps the most famous of these studies was conducted by Peters and Waterman (1982), who studied 62 companies that ranked high on six measures of long-term financial health. The study contributed to a revolution in many American businesses that responded to the findings describing several characteristics of successful companies. Among Peters’ and Waterman’s key findings were that the high-performing corporations:

- were “close to their customers” and listened to what customers or clients said about their products and services;
- had a “bias for action”—they tried new ways of doing things, then tried other alternatives if necessary; and
- shifted responsibility for improving quality to the “workers” themselves—those dealing directly with clients and customers.

*The Fifth Discipline*, by Peter Senge (1990), is another work that was originally written for the corporate world that has had substantial impact on education. In particular, his concept of the learning organization translated well to the under-

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standing that schools had of themselves. However, the primary theme in his book—the importance of taking a systems view—was overlooked by many.

**From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole (Senge 1990, 3).**

A more recent and also popular study by Jim Collins (2001) took another look at companies operating successfully in a competitive, global economy. In Collins' view, a key element of the companies' success was developing a culture that encouraged people to develop new ideas, test them, and then try something else if the first new approach didn't pay off.

## The School District Studies

However helpful these studies about high-performing systems in the business world have been to educators, it has become increasingly clear that more direction is needed for districts focused on school improvement. Research studies on school districts seem to have their genesis in several common themes.

First was an increasing understanding that while not all the lessons learned from corporate studies might be directly applicable to education, there was one important key element: The corporate research focused on high-performing *systems*, complex organizations with many interrelated parts. School districts, and in particular large districts, could certainly be viewed as systems facing challenges similar to corporations. And if very large corporations could improve significantly through a system-wide initiative, logic said that school districts could as well.

Second, the pressure of state standards-based reform and accountability required, in some cases, substantial improvement by hundreds of schools statewide. Some of the state accountability systems brought with them a new resource. For example, the Texas assessment system reported results disaggregated by major racial/ethnic groups and for poor students. Trend data were also available so that progress—or the lack of it—could be tracked from year to year. These sets of data both jumpstarted improvement efforts and provided a way to identify schools and districts achieving rapid and substantial improvement.

Finally, it was quickly recognized—by both school districts and researchers—that more radical and intense efforts were needed than the typical school-by-school improvement. The Learning First Alliance study summarized in this report calls the high-poverty schools recognized in earlier studies for their student achievement gains “isolated islands of excellence.” Cawelti and Protheroe, authors of another study summarized here, agree this approach to school improvement has proven too slow and urge more attention be given to school districts as the locus for reform, because: “If reform activities are undertaken . . . one school at a time, it will be a long time before student achievement reaches ‘world class standards’ in all of the more than 14,000 districts in this country” (2001, 5).

On a positive note, some school districts have taken a much more aggressive role in school improvement efforts. And as the state accountability programs identified districts in which improvement was evident across many schools, researchers began to ask if key factors could be identified in these high-performing *systems*. If the factors could be reliably identified and replicated, the process of improving student achievement on a broad scale could be accelerated.

This report represents an effort to synthesize the findings of four recent studies that focused on school districts as the locus for school improvement efforts. These studies do not present a picture of school systems that had been high-performing on a long-term basis. Typically, such systems tend to be located in suburban America, monitored closely by their middle-class parents and school boards, better supported financially, focused on the college-prep mission, and serving a far less diverse student body than do many large districts. Instead, these recent studies looked for their data to districts serving high percentages of children who typically do less well than White, middle- or upper-class students—and were *improving*.

In the following sections of this report, findings from the four studies of school district improvement are summarized. These reports are:

- *Urgency, Responsibility, Efficacy: Preliminary Findings of a Study of High-Performing Texas School Districts and Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts*, reports summarizing results from a two-phase study conducted by the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin.
  - *High Student Achievement: How Six School Districts Changed into High-Performance Systems*, a report summarizing a study conducted by Educational Research Service with support from the Laboratory for School Success, a regional laboratory of the U.S. Department of Education located in Phila-
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delphia. Six districts serving significant numbers of low-SES children were studied.

- *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement*, a report summarizing results from a study conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools. Three urban districts, with part of another, were studied along with comparison districts doing less well in their efforts to improve student achievement.
- *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*, a report summarizing findings from a study conducted by the Learning First Alliance. Five high-poverty districts were studied.

#### **Studies conducted by:**

- Charles A. Dana Center of the University of Texas at Austin
- Educational Research Service and the Laboratory for School Success
- Council of the Great City Schools
- Learning First Alliance

## **Improvements in Student Achievement**

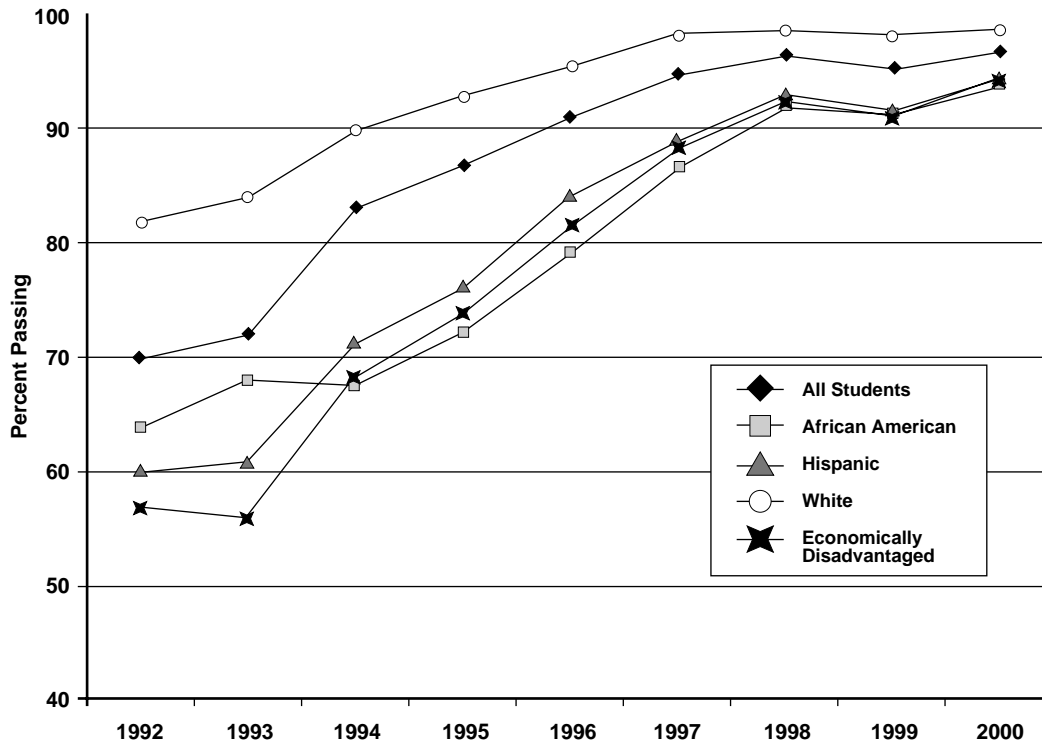
While this summary of the district-focused research is too brief to provide detailed student achievement data from all the districts studied, the following highlights provide a picture of their often-dramatic improvement:

- In the San Benito, Texas, district, the percentage of students passing the math portion of the Texas assessment increased from 67.2 percent in 1994 to 90.9 percent in 1999 for White students, from 50.3 to 86.7 percent for Hispanic American students, and from 47.1 to 85.5 percent for economically disadvantaged students (Dana Center study).
- In Wichita Falls ISD in Texas, the pass rates for mathematics increased from 68.5 (1994) to 93.1 (1999) percent for White students; corresponding

pass rates for Hispanic American students were 40.7 and 87.2 percent, and for economically disadvantaged students, 43.0 and 84.3 percent (Dana Center study).

- Figure 1 (see page 7) demonstrates the dramatic progress made in the Brazosport, Texas, school district in eliminating gaps in reading achievement between subgroups of students. This elimination of the gaps in reading achievement was replicated in mathematics and writing. At least 95 percent of the students in each subgroup received a passing score on the state tests by 2000 (ERS/LSS study).
- In the Twin Falls School District in Idaho, scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills at the fifth-grade level in mathematics rose from the 55th percentile in 1995 to the 89th percentile in 1999, and a similar pattern was seen at the other grade levels (ERS/LSS study).
- In Ysleta ISD in Texas, all 49 schools were in the two lowest-performing categories in 1993, but by 2000, 43 of these schools had moved to either the Recognized or the Exemplary category (ERS/LSS study).
- In the Barbour County, West Virginia, school district, student scores at the third-grade level on the SAT-9 tests in Total Basic Skills rose during the 1997-2000 years from the 47th percentile to the 65th percentile (ERS/LSS study).
- In the Houston Independent School District, SAT-9 reading achievement at the fifth-grade level improved substantially from 1998 to 2001. In 1998, 46.7 percent of students overall scored in the lowest quartile; by 2001, this had been reduced to 31.7 percent. Almost half (48.7 percent) of Black students were in the lowest quartile in 1998; this had dropped to 32.6 percent in 2001. Results for Hispanic American students showed a 17.8 percent reduction in the number scoring in the lowest quartile. Finally, there was a 10- to 12-point reduction in the gaps between White and minority achievement (CGCS study).
- Between 1998 and 2000, Sacramento, California, fifth-grade reading scores falling in the lowest quartile fell from 46.2 percent (in 1998) to 41.6 percent (in 2000), with a reduction in the gap between the scores of Black and Hispanic American students, compared with White students (CGCS study).
- Between 1995 and 2001, the percentage of Black students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District, North Carolina, scoring in the two lowest categories on the Grade 5 math test fell from 58 percent to 27 percent, while

**Figure 1.– Percentage of Students in Grades 3-8 and 10 Passing the TAAS Reading Assessment, 1992-2000**



for White students it fell from 18 percent to 5 percent, a significant improvement for both groups as well as a reduction in the gap between them (CGCS study).

- In Aldine, Texas, the percentage of Black students who passed the math portion of the Texas assessment increased, from 65 percent in 1994 to 94 percent in 2002, with corresponding pass rates for White students—84 and 96 percent. This also resulted in a significant reduction in the gap between the two groups (LFA study).
- Kent County, Maryland, increased the proportion of students scoring “satisfactory” on Maryland assessments and was the highest scoring district in the state in 1999 and 2000 (LFA study).

- Between 1999 and 2002, the percentage of second-grade Hispanic students in the Chula Vista Elementary School District, California, scoring at or above the 50th percentile on the Stanford-9 increased from 37 to 55 (LFA study).

Although the standards established through each of the assessments used vary in terms of both content and rigor, it is clear that the districts profiled demonstrated their ability to improve learning opportunities for their students.

### Using This Report

This report is intentionally research based and will require thoughtful reading, but it is also intended as a guide to action. As you read the stories of districts beating the odds, mark passages you find interesting or thought provoking so that you can easily return to reread them. Jot down notes, questions, or personal action items in the spaces provided at the end of each chapter.

These activities also are not intended to be solitary ones. One of the most important lessons learned from these districts is the power of collaboration among staff members and of involving all stakeholders in developing a vision and goals for the district. Share this report with others in your district or—better—provide copies to key staff members. Then discuss the implications for your schools and district of the lessons learned through study of these successful districts. Finally, customize the lessons in developing an action plan for your district.

All of the districts profiled would agree: their improvement efforts were hard work. But their success stories also prove that, with district-level leadership and support, the magnitude of school improvement required by NCLB is possible.

