Snapshots of Reform:

District Efforts to Raise Student Achievement Across Diverse Communities in California

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About PACE

Founded in 1983 as a cooperative venture between Stanford University and the University of California (Berkeley and Davis), PACE is an independent policy research center whose primary aim is to enrich education policy debates with sound analysis and hard evidence. PACE provides analysis and assistance to California policymakers, education professionals, and the general public.

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District Efforts to Raise Student Achievement Across Diverse Communities in California

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INTRODUCTION

Issues of student achievement, and in particular the achievement gap, have gained national attention with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Achievement Act of 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB cites as a key goal the closing of the achievement gap "between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers" (NCLB, 2001, Sec 1001).

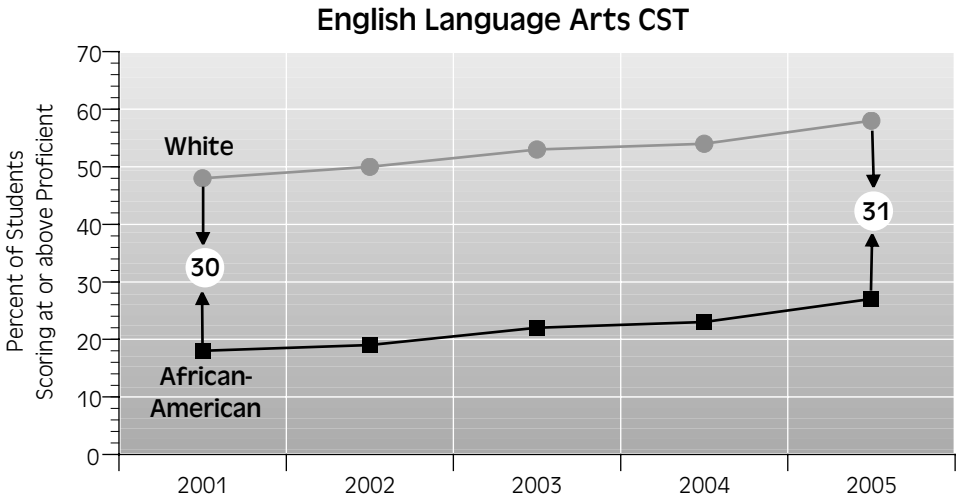
In California, policymakers and educators had already turned their attention to addressing inequities in student achievement with the passage of the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) in 1999. PSAA provided a framework for learning with curriculum standards, and set expectations for improvement through the Academic Performance Index (API). For the first time, schools were responsible for meeting achievement targets not just school-wide, but for racial/ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups of students. As a result, many educators became increasingly aware of gaps in their students' achievement across subgroups and the challenges in closing those gaps.

In California the inequities in student achievement are real and persistent, and are consistent across grades and across socioeconomic levels (Carroll et al., 2005). While subgroup performance continues to improve on the state's standardized assessments, the gaps between African American and Hispanic/Latino students and their White and Asian peers are either stagnant or in some cases are widening (EdTrust-West, 2005). African American and Latino students combined constitute the majority of the state's public school student population, yet they consistently perform lower than their White peers, who account for just under one-third of public school students. While student achievement within all subgroups has improved over the last five years, the gaps *between* these groups remain virtually unchanged (see Figs. 1 & 2).

Achievement gaps have real consequences for students, particularly those facing the challenge of passing the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), now a requirement in order to receive a high school diploma in California. The combined 2005 CAHSEE passing rates reveal significant discrepancies between White and Asian students and their African American and Latino peers. Passing rates for the Math exam were 80% and 86% for White and Asian students respectively, and 44% and 51% for African American and Latino students respectively. Results from the English Language Arts exam show similar inequities, with 83% and 75% of White and Asian students passing and only 54% and 53% of African American and Latino students passing (CDE, 2006).

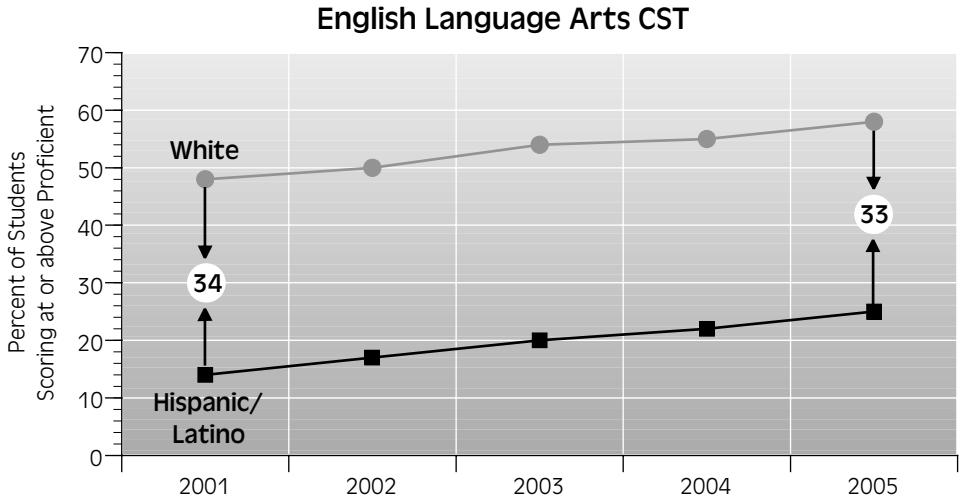
This report spotlights a variety of strategies that districts have found to be effective in raising achievement for diverse populations of students.

Figure 1 African American-White Achievement Gap



Source: California Department of Education, 2005

Figure 2 Hispanic/Latino-White Achievement Gap



Source: California Department of Education, 2005

In response to these disturbing trends, we find that some school districts in California are showing success in closing achievement gaps. This report spotlights the efforts of three districts to address inequities in achievement, and provides information about a variety of strategies that districts have found to be effective in raising achievement for diverse populations of students. We present a range of approaches in an effort to remind policymakers and educators that no one strategy is likely to be effective for all districts, and that much can be learned from an investigation of a combination of approaches.

About this Study

This research grew out of earlier work by PACE and our colleagues, examining teachers', principals', and district administrators' responses to state and federal accountability policies. One of the most important findings from that research was the critical role that the district can play in supporting school efforts to improve student achievement (O'Day et al, 2004; Woody et al, 2004). State policymakers and local educators responded to those findings by asking us for more details on the role of the district in improving teaching and learning. Within the context of the expansion of NCLB mandates to include district-level performance targets, the California education community was quickly recognizing the need to examine successful strategies for district reform.

Districts included in this research were selected out of a pool of districts throughout California that met the following criteria:

- significant diversity of student populations (each district had at least 5 subgroups);
- substantial growth on California's Academic Performance Index (API) for each subgroup over a three year period (2002-2005); and
- substantial narrowing of gaps in achievement across subgroups.

This generated a much smaller list of districts; we then explored in greater depth the reform efforts at each district in order to ultimately select the three spotlighted districts for our study.

The three spotlighted districts were selected for their distinctive approaches to reform. Lemon Grove was chosen as an example of a district employing specific intensive strategies to address educators' beliefs and attitudes about equity and student achievement. Long Beach was chosen to exemplify a district using data to inform district-wide decisions and instructional practices in an effort to close the achievement gap between low- and high-performing students. Finally, Ceres was chosen as an example of a district that has focused resources on an intensive program of teacher professional development as a means to address inequities in achievement.

A team of researchers conducted the site visits and data analysis. Data collection included interviews with key district administrators, school principals and teachers, observations of meetings and classroom activities. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol geared toward understanding the specific reform efforts of each district. We also analyzed documents such as district improvement plans, as well as other relevant research on these districts. Conflicting sources of information were investigated, and the final report represents an attempt to present multiple perspectives on the complexities of district reform.

At Lemon Grove, the superintendent and one assistant superintendent were interviewed first, followed by teachers and principals at three schools at varying points of implementation of the district's equity program. At each of the three schools we spoke with teachers directly participating in the equity program and those not directly serving in leadership positions related to the program. This provided perspectives of both reform enthusiasts as well as those not directly invested in the program.

At Long Beach, interviews and focus groups were conducted with each member of the district Executive Team, the head of the research department, and high school principals. In addition, our research team observed two "key results" walk-throughs at the high schools, as well as a presentation by the Executive Team about district initiatives.

At Ceres, interviews were conducted with the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, the director of curriculum and instruction (formerly director of professional development), and a program specialist. Focus groups were also conducted with the coaching staff, the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) staff, and teachers and the principal from one elementary school. In addition, a district-wide professional development session was observed.

Key Findings Across Districts Raising Achievement for Diverse Student Populations

A growing body of literature suggests that school districts play a central role in raising student achievement, serving as a source of support for school-level administrators and educators (Massell, 2000; Goertz, 2001; Marsh, 2002; MacIver and Farley, 2003). This recent research includes a handful of case studies that profile the role of district leadership in closing gaps in achievement, and that outline common characteristics or strategies of successful districts (McLauglin and Talbert, 2003; Snipes et al, 2002; Skrla et al, 2000; Koschorek, 2001). This literature is useful in providing a framework for understanding the strategies of the three districts profiled in this report. Not surprisingly, we find common strategies across our three spotlighted districts that are echoed in the broader literature on successful districts.

For example, a Council of Great City Schools report (Snipes et al., 2002) of three urban districts engaged in narrowing student achievement gaps finds strategies employed in Houston, Charlotte-Mecklenberg, and Sacramento similar to those found in our three spotlighted California districts. The authors cite such strategies as a coherent, standards-aligned curriculum, a system of accountability, and a focus on improving low-performing schools. Through school reform efforts over the past decade, California policymakers have already implemented many of these strategies. The research also cites more specific strategies that again we also found in our spotlighted districts. These include a professional development program that is aligned with district reforms, guidance around instruction provided by the central office, and data-driven decision-making made possible by the availability of early and ongoing assessment data.

Similarly, Just for the Kids and the National Center for Educational Accountability provide a "Best Practices Framework" of high-performing districts across the country. Two of the themes from their framework are particularly relevant in understanding the work of the districts profiled in this report. The first relevant theme of "capacity building" involves the development of strong instructional leadership, the alignment of professional development to the district's goals, and the nurturing of collaboration by grade or subject level teams to focus on student work. Lemon Grove, Long Beach, and Ceres districts all provide examples of these types of practices.

The second relevant theme is the "monitoring, compilation, analysis, and use of data." This involves the development of student assessment and data systems to monitor student and teacher performance. Ongoing, diagnostic assessments allow for a more refined understanding of performance, and the regular review of data allows educators to adjust practices to target student needs. Long Beach district provides an example of these types of practices.

District support for professional development and the use of data is echoed in a recent RAND report (Marsh et al, 2005) profiling three urban districts working to eliminate achievement gaps. These districts used a school-based coaching model similar to what we saw in Ceres Unified, with coaches available to help address an individual teacher's needs. The RAND districts also implemented data and assessment systems that allowed teachers to examine student progress and identify areas for improvement, similar to the system employed in Long Beach.

Research also points to district efforts to address the biases around race and socioeconomic status and student achievement. A report from the Annenberg Challenge (Rothman, Winter 2001/2002) reminds us that closing achievement gaps may take more than a shift in instructional policies or practices, it may take a shift in educators' attitudes. Just as we saw in Lemon Grove, the report profiles a district in Indiana that has instituted diversity trainings for staff to address negative perceptions of students of color. As a result, researchers found improved relationships among teachers and their students of color and a closing of the achievement gap.

The three districts spotlighted in this report share similar characteristics to other successful districts throughout the country profiled in recent research. It is precisely in examining the details of those commonlities that we can begin to understand district-level policies and practices that may improve student achievement for diverse communities of learners, and more importantly, how policymakers can support those efforts

Lessons Learned: Implications for State & District Policymakers

Through the introduction of a standards-based accountability system focused on subgroup performance, state policymakers have taken the first steps to address inequities in student achievement. Indeed, policymakers involved with the development of California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) hoped to provide a system that "sunshines the equity issue" (Woody et al, 2004). Curriculum standards and performance targets have provided the infrastructure to set high expectations for all students. However, it is the policies and practices of educators at the local level that build on this accountability framework and ultimately produce real outcomes for students.

State education policies alone can not achieve the intended goal of closing gaps in student achievement. Policies need to provide the necessary structures and support to allow districts to pursue strategies for improving student achievement. A recent analysis of the impact of state policies on the black-white achievement gap suggests that no "top-down" policy alone can account for a narrowing of the gap (Braun et al, 2006). Instead, the authors recommend policies that "directly support local reform efforts with demonstrated effectiveness in addressing the experiences of students of different races attending the same schools" and employ the "full use of all policy levers, rather than reliance on one or two" (pp. 64-65). The district strategies profiled in the following sections are examples of such local reform efforts, and remind us that no one reform can address inequities in student achievement.

This report highlights three districts in California serving substantial numbers of low-income and minority students that were able to reduce gaps in achievement. Each district has taken a different approach, yet all have achieved positive results. A closer examination of such districts is critical, as policymakers and educators face the challenges of an increasing number of districts identified for Program Improvement in the coming years [see sidebar]. Indeed, school-level improvement is unlikely to be effective and sustained without capacity and structure provided by the district (MacIver and Farley, 2003).

Policy Imperatives to Reduce Achievement Gaps

- In the 2004–05 school year, African American and Latino students combined constituted over half (54.8%) of California's student population, and nearly half (49.7%) of all students in California were eligible for a free/reduced-price meals program. The gaps between non-white and low-income students and their White and higher income peers are persistent, and have real consequences for the majority of students in California.
- In the 2004–05 school year, 141 districts were identified as Program Improvement (PI) status districts for consistently failing to meet performance targets for all students. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction's office estimates approximately 200–400 additional districts may be identified for PI in 2006–07 (Harris, 2006).
- Beginning in the fall of 2007, California must take "corrective action" for districts in their third year of PI status.
- State capacity to facilitate district reform is limited. Given the high estimates of PI districts, California policymakers will need to determine how best to support improvement. Thus they will need to address questions of which strategies to support and to what intensity, and on which districts to focus limited resources.

Our research in the three districts profiled in this report points to several lessons for further consideration, as policymakers and educators continue to address inequities in student achievement across California.

Coherence & engagement across all levels of the district promotes sustainability of reforms.

Each of the three districts profiled in this report are striving to change the culture of the district, and thus create sustainable reforms that ultimately are built into the structure of the district and are not tied to one person. These reforms are not merely seen as add-ons, but are the centerpiece of a shared vision across district administrators, school board members, and teachers and principals.

A report by the Council of Great City Schools (Snipes et al, 2002) cites several conditions for reform that we find present in our spotlighted districts, including a school board that shares a vision for improvement and that provides support for district reform. The administrators and teachers we interviewed in Lemon Grove, for example, were proud to tell us that their school board had granted full support of the district's equity program and that the board members had attended the program sessions. Both Ceres and Long Beach have implemented coherent professional development and data analysis reforms respectively, by engaging actors across all levels of the district to create systems from the ground up that were tailored to their needs. And perhaps most importantly, while each district has created a sense of coherency and engagement in their reform efforts, our interviews reveal a healthy amount of "productive conflict." As Fullan and his colleagues (2004) explain, "Successful districts must engage in a difficult balancing act. Successful organizations explicitly value differences and do not panic when things go wrong" (p. 44).

Alongside coherency and a commitment across all levels, each of these districts are determined to stick with their reform efforts in the face of shifting state and federal policies. These districts provide further examples of what other researchers have found, that any successful reform must be "built on broad-based support and structured to be better able to withstand the vicissitudes of economic trends and state politics" (Braun et al, 2006, p. 65). Lemon Grove, for example, made a decision to continue with their equity program, despite the fact that the district experienced

a drop in state assessment scores in the second year of the program. District administrators recognized this drop as a result of implementing a new curriculum unrelated to the equity program, withstanding pressures to make any changes to existing reforms, and have since seen scores rise again.

Limited resources need to be focused on the district's reform goals.

We found this notion of coherence across each of the three spotlighted districts in terms of funding as well. Each district employed a deliberate targeting of funding to their specific reform efforts. District administrators at Ceres and Lemon Grove in particular spoke of directing what little discretionary funds they had towards their respective professional development and equity programs. These districts did not necessarily have additional funds for the programs, but instead chose to focus their resources on a narrow and clearly defined set of goals.

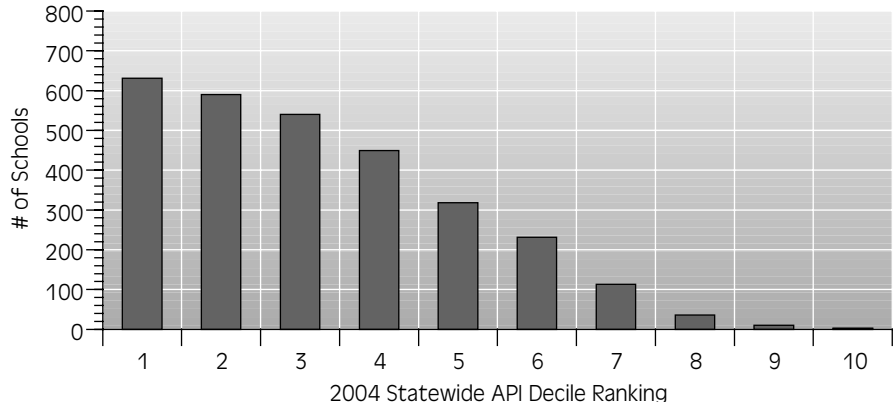
A recent study of districts in Kansas that have shown substantial gains in student achievement finds similarities to our three spotlighted districts in their tendencies to "align spending with strategic priorities" (Standard & Poor, 2006, p. 3). Given that most California districts have limited funding to spare as well as limited discretion over how those funds are directed, a matching of resources to specific reform goals is critical (Snipes et al, 2002). Ideally, state policies for resource allocation would provide a certain level of discretionary spending at the district level, to allow district administrators to direct funds toward reform initiatives and programs that meet the specific needs of their communities.

Low-performing districts serve very diverse student populations; reform efforts must address gaps in achievement across race and socioeconomic status.

The districts profiled in this report, like many of California's districts, all serve highly diverse communities of students. Each of the three spotlighted districts recognized that gaps in their students' achievement more often than not fell along lines of race and socioeconomic status. Each district was aware of student performance by racial and socioeconomic subgroups, and used disaggregated data to inform policies and practices. Although the three districts did not necessarily approach issues of race and socioeconomic status in the same way, all acknowledged the existence of inequities in achievement and were determined to narrow those gaps. Lemon Grove administrators, for example, felt that any reform efforts necessarily included discussions of race. Long Beach administrators, on the other hand, sometimes discouraged teachers from examining achievement data by race, wanting them instead to focus on gaps in proficiency.

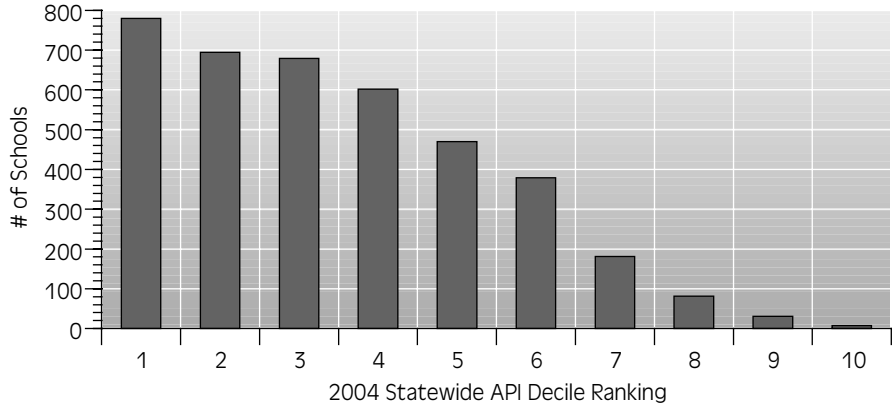
Both approaches have proven successful for the individual districts, again reminding us that no one approach is best for all districts. As we consider how the lessons learned from this report might inform future reform efforts in districts across California, it is critical to recognize that when we talk about districts in need of reform, specifically those in Program Improvement, we are talking about districts that serve very diverse communities, often with particularly high levels of economically disadvantaged and Latino students (see Figs. 3 & 4).

Figure 3 Distribution of Schools with over 50% Latino Students across Statewide API Rankings



Source: Tempes, 2006

Figure 4 Distribution of Schools with over 50% Economically Disadvantaged Students across Statewide API Rankings



Source: Tempes, 2006

Policy discussions around improving low-performing districts must acknowledge that issues of achievement are not simply issues of proficiency but are also issues of race and socioeconomic and language status. Policymakers should continue to support district efforts to examine disaggregated data to raise awareness of inequities in achievement and to understand the specific needs of their students. The California legislature has just recently reiterated its commitment to examining data by racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic subgroups by passing AB 2109. This bill, if approved by the Governor, would require districts receiving professional development block grants to analyze disaggregated data and design a professional development program to focus on improving achievement according to subgroup performance. Such policies recognize the relationship between race and socioeconomic status and achievement, and continue to provide support to districts to address those issues using strategies that meet the specific needs of their communities.

LEMON GROVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT:

Examining Issues of Equity to Improve Student Achievement

As discussed in the introduction to this report, California shows disturbing trends in student achievement, particularly for Latino and African American students. These students, who now constitute over half of our state's K-12 population, consistently score lower than their White and Asian peers on statewide assessments.

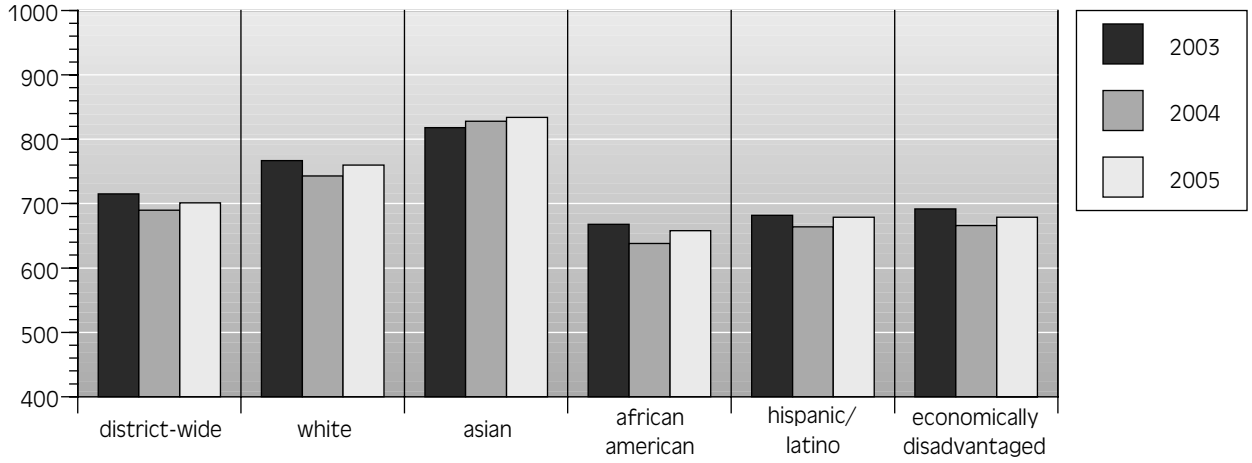
While these trends are hardly news in California or the nation, the recent implementation of accountability mandates have brought these issues of gaps in student achievement to the forefront of educators' minds. Both California's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) and the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) require schools to report assessment data broken down by racial/ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups. More importantly, for the first time, schools (and now districts) are required to meet performance targets for each subgroup. This disaggregation of data has brought an awareness of the discrepancies in achievement across groups of students. Specifically, the links between race and student achievement are no longer impossible to ignore.

Lemon Grove Elementary School District's equity program is distinctive in attempting to change educators' beliefs and attitudes about race and student achievement. The district, which is located just outside San Diego, has taken a deliberately race-conscious approach to addressing gaps in achievement, as opposed to focusing on race-neutral categories such as "below basic" students. This approach challenges the notion that educators can simply choose to be "color blind" in their classrooms, and thus unencumbered by biases and assumptions of race. Instead, Lemon Grove District administrators have encouraged their staff to explicitly examine race, recognizing that a teacher's attribution of achievement to racial or ethnic background may interrupt their ability to promote high achievement for all students (Kannapel et al, 1996).

Lemon Grove's Distinctive History and Context

Lemon Grove is the most diverse community in San Diego county and ranks among the most diverse in the state. In the 2004-05 school year, fully 40.5% of students identified as Hispanic, 25.7% as African American, and 23.5% White, with the remaining 9.5% of students identifying as Filipino, Asian, Native American, or multi-racial. In addition, 61.7% of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch and 20.1% were English Language Learners

Figure 5 Lemon Grove Elementary School District API Trends



Source: California, Department of Education, DataQuest, 2006.

(CDE, 2006). The community has changed dramatically in the recent past. While previously comprised of white professionals working in San Diego, the influx of more minority and low-income students presents considerable challenges for the district's schools and has forced a reexamination of traditional approaches to schooling. City leaders tend to be predominately white, including the city council and the mayor.

Lemon Grove has a history of high-profile racial issues. In 1930, 75 Mexican-American students went on strike in response to the school board's decision to move all Mexican-American students to a separate school. Eventually a group of Mexican parents organized and took the school board to court, challenging the right to build and maintain a separate and segregated school for Mexican-American children. In the spring of 1931, the Superior Court of California in San Diego passed a judgment in favor of the parents and ordered the school board to reintegrate the Mexican-American students.

The majority of teachers and administrators in Lemon Grove do not live in the community, nor do they reflect the racial diversity of the students. However, the superintendent stated that it was easy to recruit teachers, and noted that the district boasts low levels of teacher turnover. As a result, recruitment efforts are aimed at bringing in teachers of color.

The Lemon Grove Equity Program

When the superintendent took his post in 1997, he made addressing inequities in student achievement a district priority. Staff from one of the district's middle schools had recently attended a professional development session on equity and diversity issues through the County Office of Education. Participants reported that the training was a good way to understand the

foundational issues of equity in schools. The superintendent subsequently hired the consultants who organized the initial professional development session to begin providing the training to district employees. After attending the session himself, the superintendent began requiring every administrator, teacher, and staff member in the district to attend the training.

The main components of Lemon Grove's equity program include the district-wide training session, school-level equity teams that plan school-wide activities, and school-level CARE teams that participate in action research related to equity in their classrooms. In addition, each school has a PASS team that works to engage parents in the school. At the school level, all equity program activities are coordinated by a yearly equity plan created by the Equity Team.

All District Staff Attend Session on Equity & Diversity Issues

All district staff in Lemon Grove attend a two-day professional development session, designed and implemented by their equity consultants. This program departs significantly from traditional in-service trainings in that it is focused on participants' personal backgrounds and beliefs about race, and not on their teaching practice. The equity consultants' website describes the program as "a powerful and personally transforming two-day workshop designed to help teachers, parents, and administrators consider the implications of racism, exclusion, and prejudice on student learning. During the seminar, participants will engage in a thoughtful, compassionate exploration of racism and how it manifests today in our culture and in our schools" (http://www.pacificeducationalgroup.com/bd.html).

Overall, the majority of teachers interviewed found the session to be a positive experience, described by several teachers as "eye-opening." Others attributed the training to raising awareness about racial issues, opening up dialogue about race in the district, and sparking personal reflection about beliefs and assumptions about students of color.

Building a Common Language, Awareness, and Attitudes

A common language about equity and diversity permeated the talk of teachers and administrators in Lemon Grove. This common language included a common understanding of the nature of the achievement gap, a belief in having "courageous conversations," and seeing through an equity lens.

At its core, the Lemon Grove equity program aims to promote an awareness that gaps in student achievement between different racial groups are present at all income levels, combating the belief that the gap is purely a class issue. The program emphasizes that the achievement gap is a racial issue. As one principal explained:

> What Lemon Grove has done that is very cutting edge and very bold on their part is they've said, "We're not going to sidestep that issue, we're going to go out to parents and tell them we're concerned about it; we're going to say, 'We see it and it's clearly a racial issue.' "

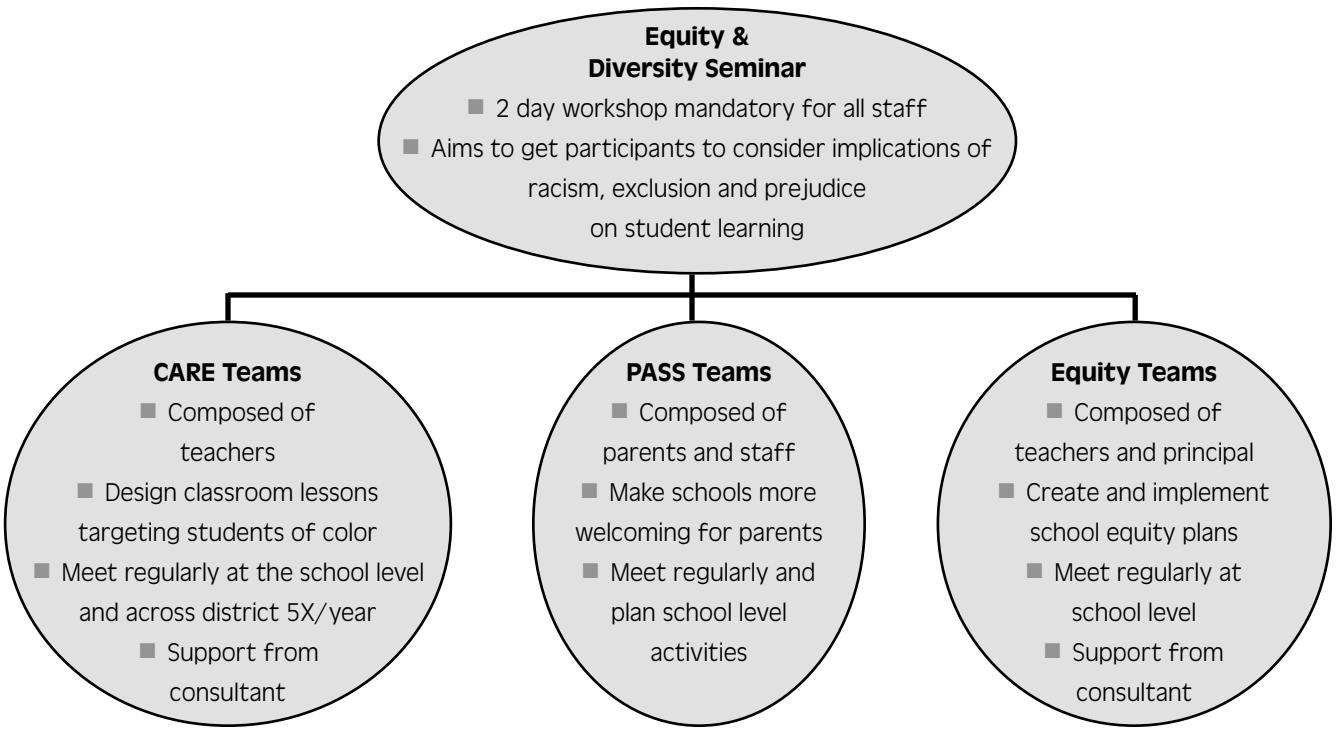
Another aspect of the Lemon Grove equity program is engaging in so-called "courageous conversations" about racial issues. The equity program argues that fear about having conversations about race and racism prevents educators from deeply understanding how the racial divide impacts schooling. The program seeks to open up conversations about how race impacts schooling. The courageous conversation is a cornerstone in the seminar and has made its way into the language of teachers. Some teachers expressed concern that this work has not gone far enough, and that conversations about race have remained at a surface level. However, district staff claimed there existed a readiness to talk about race as it relates to the education of their students.

All the principals we spoke with and many of the teachers mentioned that the equity program has helped them to "see though an equity lens" and consider how people of color would feel in a given situation. One principal said, "Everything I do now I look at...from a different perspective. I call it the 'equity lens' and it's kind of looking at everything through ...how, if I was an African American parent, how would I see this, or if I was a kid, how would I look at this?" One example provided by a principal involved noticing that the border on a classroom bulletin board only depicted white children. One school's equity team led a segment in a staff meeting that included a discussion of what the school would look like through the eyes of equity.

CARE Teachers Address Equity in the Classroom

The CARE (Collaborative Action Research for Equity) team teachers focus on their individual classroom to address the achievement of students of color, by making personal connections

Figure 6 Lemon Grove Equity Program



with students in an effort to engage them in learning. Approximately four to eight teachers participate in a CARE team at each school site. After the first two years of implementation, each school launched a second CARE team. The beginning groups engage in racial issues through discussion while the advanced groups use action research techniques to document and study their classrooms.

Lemon Grove's equity program is distinctive in its attempt to change educators' beliefs and attitudes about race and student achievement.

CARE teams meet several times each year with colleagues across the district and with equity consultants, and more regularly with their team at the school level. Team members design CARE lessons with focus students in mind—generally students of color who are not engaged in classroom learning. In regular meetings at the school site, teachers provide feedback on each other's lessons. Schools provide substitutes so CARE teachers can observe one another and provide feedback on CARE lessons in action.

Teachers report that CARE impacts their practice by exposing them to different teaching strategies and forcing them to examine their expectations for students. Overall, CARE promotes a belief that "good teaching is reflective of culture." When asked for an example of culturally relevant pedagogy, one teacher said her CARE group has been looking at how Hispanic and African American students may learn better when there is less competition and individualism in the classroom, and when students take a more active role in their own learning. Another teacher described "leveraging the real life experience" of students in order to help them learn the content standards.

In some schools, there is an effort to spread the lessons of CARE to other teachers in the school. For example, one district official spoke of a school where teachers share the strategies they learn in CARE with teachers in grade-level meetings. But one CARE participant reported not having many opportunities to share what they learn with staff due to time constraints. Teachers describe it as very personal work so they resist standing up at staff meetings to "preach" to their colleagues. Overall, sharing seems to occur through more informal teacher-to-teacher interactions.

Equity Teams Promote Equity School-wide

Each school in Lemon Grove has an Equity Team engaged in planning activities for the whole school. One equity consultant described the Equity Teams as an effort at the leadership level to change school culture. According to one teacher, the equity team's focus is to "first promote awareness and then get them (the staff) to integrate part of that awareness into our planning, our instruction, our approach, and interactions with students." The Equity Teams plan ways to disseminate strategies and information during staff development time. For example, some schools dedicate time during every staff meeting for an activity or discussion related to equity.

Most Equity Teams meet regularly with their principal and sometimes together across the district with the lead equity consultant. The equity consultant assists each team in developing a yearly school equity plan. Some Equity Team members reported looking at test score data to guide development of the plan. The Equity Teams' level of involvement seems to vary considerably between schools. One principal described the role of the Equity Team as an advisory council

that helps him know how hard to push the equity agenda with his staff. At another school the equity team does the bulk of the planning and implementation of equity activities with staff, with the principal taking on a less active role. Generally the members of the Equity Team are selected by the principal.

Teachers report that their work with the Equity Teams affects their practice in a variety of ways. Some teachers reported it having an impact on how they manage student discipline, because the team helped them to create an environment that was welcoming to all students. Overall teachers reported that the work of Equity Teams at the schools has helped them to recognize individual needs and provides the permission to treat students differently based on race. This may seem at odds with efforts to maintain consistently high standards for all students. One teacher addressed this concern by saying she thinks her standards are actually higher now. The same teacher mentioned a shift from trying to "fix" the students to trying to "fix" her instruction. Other teachers pointed to an awareness of racial issues and the ability to have conversations about race as tangible impacts of the equity work at their school.

PASS Teams Engage Parents

Another committee at each school, PASS (Partnership for Academically Successful Students) is composed of African American parents and teachers working, as one teacher put it, to "make the school a more welcoming environment for parents." Another teacher identified the PASS team as focused on addressing the "rocky relationship between African American communities and the schools." The PASS team at one school recently organized a fitness and nutrition night. At another school the PASS team is engaged in getting students to school on time through a system of monitoring and rewards. At a third school, the PASS team organized a group of parents who are available to mediate between parents and teachers when communication problems arise.

The district has also drawn in support from community advocacy groups to connect with Latino parents. A committee of Latino parents called the English Language Advisory Council offers parents education on ways to help their children be successful in school.

As a component of the equity program, the district also held community forums specifically for African American parents during the 2003–04 school year. In preparation for the forums, the district sent out letters and asked each teacher to call all of their African American parents inviting them to the first forum. At the meetings, parents had an opportunity to share their frustrations and desires with school and district officials. Around the same time, the district surveyed African American parents and discovered that many parents shared common concerns, such as parents reporting that teachers were not returning their calls.

Several respondents reported that the equity program is having an impact on parental involvement in their schools. One district official reported being pleased that several parents recently called the district office after parent conferences because they were frustrated with what was happening at their school. While the principal of the school was dismayed, the district official felt that this was a sign that parents were truly interested in what was happening at the school

and were now feeling empowered to speak up. The official felt that the changed relationship between parents and the district resulted from educators in the district saying, "We're not afraid to discuss race, we're not afraid to say to our African American families, 'We know we haven't been doing a good job, we want to do a better job, and we need your help doing it. Do don't get discouraged; continue to speak up.' " A teacher at one school reported feeling that the school campus seemed more open to parents. Another school was in the process of preparing a parent resource center on campus.

Challenges and Implications

Examination of the Lemon Grove equity program reveals a district deeply committed to equity, yet also facing a set of tensions produced by the district's specific approach to addressing inequities. These tensions are explored below, and following each is a brief discussion of implications for policy and practice that extend beyond the particulars of this program to broader efforts to address the achievement gap.

TENSION 1: Questions Without Answers

The equity program and related professional development efforts successfully built a common language in Lemon Grove, which sought to provide a foundation of common beliefs and understandings that would, in turn, support educators engaging in difficult conversations about the impact of race on schooling. This strategy departs significantly from traditional models of teacher development in which teachers are given concrete lessons or strategies to implement in their classroom. The equity program aims to engage teachers in dialogue in order to examine their own biases and assumptions about race.

However, some teachers described the experience as highlighting problems without giving them adequate strategies or solutions. As a result, some teachers end up frustrated because they do not know what to do. For example, a teacher at one elementary school said, "It's still in the process where...we have to teach them [students of color] differently, but I've never gotten the answer of *how* to teach them differently. That's what I'm still in search of." Another teacher described the reactions of staff members to her work on the equity team saying, "One of the problems sometimes with equity is that it isn't down. There's not a textbook you can open up and just do step 1. [Other teachers say] tell me what I have to do and I'll do it, but it's not that easy."

IMPLICATION: Build connections between broader conversations and classroom practice through ongoing professional development and collaboration.

If teachers are only confronted with questions without guidance or answers, they may fall back into racial stereotypes. For example, teachers receive the message from the equity program that they must differentiate instruction for students of different racial or ethnic groups. But without concrete research-based strategies, teachers may default to assumptions about students that are grounded more in racial stereotypes than sound pedagogical practices. Time should be built into the school day for ongoing teacher collaboration and professional development

around building teacher capacity to provide instruction that meets the needs of all students. Policymakers can support efforts to address equity through sustained support for professional development determined by educators at the school and district level.

TENSION 2: A Personal Journey

The approach to addressing the achievement gap, adopted by Lemon Grove through their work with the equity consultants, engenders a philosophy that says addressing equity is very personal work. Teachers are encouraged and supported in an effort to expose their personal biases and prejudices and to reflect on their personal history with race. In talking about CARE, one teacher said, "I think that not only has it helped me to see different ways of teaching and strategies, it has also helped me learn more about myself...as a person, my own stereotypes, my own beliefs." The program's theory of action is that teachers can not meet the needs of students if they do not examine and confront their own biases about student characteristics and capabilities. As the teacher above continued, "I think that's definitely made me a better teacher just because I understand the kids more. I feel that I can relate to kids of color and in new and better ways." Other teachers spoke of building a passion or a personal commitment to the work. For example, one teacher described her equity work saying, "This is not like a textbook. This is something that you can't teach to kids from a book; you have to put that feeling from within."

Yet, the personal nature of this work is difficult to implement in a professional setting. As one teacher commented,

> I think that the first year it was kind of confusing, because when you go to [the professional development seminar] you're not even allowed to talk about your classroom. It's more about your own experience. It's really helped me to reflect and...take it to a local and personal level...I think the district is really looking to get all of us examining ourselves and how we're contributing to the problem. And then once we've taken it to that personal level, we can bring it into our classroom."

But some teachers reported feeling uncomfortable with what the program, especially the seminar, expected from them. A few even reported feeling attacked or labeled as being racist simply because they are white. For example, one teacher said, "It [the training] was just very uncomfortable. Basically the message that he [the equity consultant] said was if you're a white male or if you're white, you're racist no matter what."

IMPLICATION: Create opportunities for educators to explore difficult topics in safe spaces.

As teachers pointed out in focus groups, conversations about race can be difficult and emotional, especially in a professional setting. In collaboratively examining individual beliefs and attitudes about race, teachers are vulnerable to exposure in front of peers and superiors. Therefore, district and school leaders need to create structures that provide an opportunity for teachers to engage in the work of having "courageous conversations" without fearing public exposure, embarrassment,

or antagonism (such as when teachers felt they were being labeled racist). The role of an outside provider in facilitating discussions about race may provide safe spaces for educators to engage in conversations without fear of judgment by superiors.

In addition, schools need to establish norms of confidentiality and support. Policymakers can support this effort by ensuring that teachers and administrators engage in this type of work earlier in their careers, as for example during teacher/administrator training programs. Specifically, administrator education programs should provide administrators with the skills necessary to create supportive professional communities within schools, and norms of collegiality and respect. In addition, policymakers may want to consider providing ongoing support to administrators who engage in equity related work by providing access to skilled facilitators.

The district plays a vital role in the success of the program, dedicating significant resources and ensuring time for teacher collaboration and professional development.

TENSION 3: Insiders and Outsiders

By making participation mandatory in the seminar and school based equity activities, the district sends a clear message that this program is a priority. Yet some staff members resent the program's mandatory status. Teachers reported opposition from their union about the trainings being mandatory. Other teachers reported resistance after hearing by word-of-mouth that the training was an "uncomfortable" experience. On the other hand, some teachers expressed support for the program being mandatory, making comments such as, "I know teachers, because I'm one of them. If you don't make it mandatory, a lot of them won't do it. And I think discussion (about how to close the achievement gap) needs to be at least opened up."

Making participation in the program mandatory both creates opportunities and threatens the success of the program. The district clearly conveys the importance of the equity work and takes responsibility for the program, in turn allowing school level administrators off the hook. On the other hand, making the program mandatory threatens teacher buy-in and may jeopardize efforts to change teacher beliefs and attitudes about race.

The equity program centers on the cultivation of teacher leaders to drive the district's equity agenda. The teachers participating in the Equity and CARE teams who we interviewed were generally enthusiastic about the program and committed to the work. Yet teachers who were not selected to participate in these leadership teams often represented different perspectives about the program. In general, they had less knowledge of the district's equity program and even the activities of the Equity and CARE team at their own schools. This raises concerns over whether the selection of special groups of teachers to participate in leadership teams cultivates a divide between them and those teachers not participating in equity-related teams, and in turns prevents full implementation of the equity program.

IMPLICATION: Cultivate teacher leaders while also engaging the entire staff in equity work.

School-level leaders—including principals and teachers—play a vital role in implementation of Lemon Grove's equity program. Yet without strategies in place for drawing in other staff members, the impact of the program is mitigated. Equity work must include opportunities to draw in a

wide group of staff members at each school. Districts should also consider the trade-offs posed by making programs mandatory, and perhaps consider offering incentives for participation as opposed to top-down mandates. Policymakers can support teacher leadership activities through incentives such as release time from teaching and career ladder salary structures. In addition, policymakers can ensure that administrators receive pre-service and in-service training in how to cultivate and support distributed leadership at the school level.

TENSION 4: A District Priority

When asked what role the district plays in implementing the Lemon Grove equity program, one teacher said, "They initiated it, they promoted it, and they enforced it." District leaders, principals, and teachers frequently spoke of the importance of the district in making the equity program a top priority and providing support for equity work at the school level. District support takes the form of vision and leadership, a standard of mandated participation in equity program trainings and activities, and tangible support such as funding. As one teacher said, "They put their money where their mouth is—they made it a high priority." Similarly a teacher at another school said,

> It's really a *huge* commitment on part of the district to keep that (equity) as a policy focus, to keep the profile front and center, to dedicate funds, considerable funds for implementing that program hiring consultants, giving sub time, teacher release time to be able to go (to CARE network meetings).

Other teachers applauded the district's commitment to the equity work even in light of the budget crisis of recent years.

However, the district's emphatic commitment to equity also drew some criticism. One teacher presented a negative side to the district's dedication to the equity program saying, "In this district, *everybody* knows what the focus is; in fact, the focus is so *apparent* that some folks feel that their autonomy within the classroom is being scrunched." A few teachers expressed concern that the district was not providing enough support, given the difficult and labor intensive nature of the work. Yet overall, respondents consistently reported the district's high degree of commitment to the equity program and the inspiration provided by the district with comments such as, "When I look at my leaders and I could see...day-to-day how they're dealing with things, it helps me to feel their passion or excitement about it."

IMPLICATION: Sustain commitment through financial support and leadership.

The district plays a vital role in the success of the Lemon Grove equity program. District officials are vocal proponents of equity work and support the cultivation of school-level leadership. In addition, the district dedicates significant material resources to the program by bringing in equity consultants, and ensuring time for teacher collaboration and professional development by funding substitute teachers to release teachers from instruction. Districts engaged in equity work must remain committed to it and secure stable funding sources. Policymakers can support school and district level work to address equity by devolving authority over some portions

of the budget to districts and especially to schools. Schools need to be able to make decisions about how to organize around collaborative work and ongoing professional development, and this may require creative approaches to staffing such as providing teachers with release time or common planning time.

TENSION 5: Persistence

The equity program is a long-term reform strategy that aims to change the beliefs and attitudes of district staff in order raise the achievement of all students. According to one district official, "It's definitely a path that we're on that's going to take a while to get there." But long-term strategies are potentially difficult to maintain when faced with the pressure to demonstrate gains each year under the No Child Left Behind Act.

At first glance, accountability and the equity program appear to have similar goals: addressing inequities in student achievement. But while standards-based accountability programs may shed light on the achievement gap, they do little to address teachers' attitudes, and specifically the differing expectations for different student subgroups that contribute to differential student performance. In addition, accountability-related efforts to standardize curriculum and instruction conflict with this program's efforts to promote differentiated instruction and connect with students at a personal level.

One teacher described a tension between the drive to cover all material on the state tests and the type of interventions promoted by the CARE team—such as making all lessons connect to the lives of students—which take more time. Teachers at two schools described a conflict between the district mandated language arts curriculum, described by one teacher as "very white in its technique," and the equity program's message that students of different races have different learning styles. This curriculum program was selected in accordance with the state's accountability program. In describing district goals such as "every child is physically, emotionally, and socially healthy" or "reach out to parents of color," one principal said the only measurable goal right now is test scores. In the end, schools are ultimately accountable for how students of color are doing on achievement tests. This pressure inevitably escalated, since Lemon Grove experienced a dip in results on the 2003–04 administration of the state tests. The district explained the drop in scores across all schools as a result of the introduction of a new reading curriculum that year. The district had a history of consistently high achievement for all subgroups prior to 2002 and has sustained that high achievement in the years following the shift in curriculum. However, this ultimately raises questions about whether the program can weather the current state and federal demands for immediate and constant improvements.

Despite a broader policy context that may not support Lemon Grove's strategy, educators expressed strong confidence in the sustainability of the program. While the people we interviewed consistently spoke of the importance of key district and school level staff committed to the program, there also seemed to be a consensus that the program would persist if the district experienced a change in leadership. Several teachers spoke of the commitment at their school to make sure the program persists.

IMPLICATION: Buffer schools from immediate pressure to raise test scores.

Efforts to influence educators' beliefs and attitudes require intensive long-term work. Yet schools are faced with yearly accountability targets and pressure to increase test scores. If district leaders are committed to this strategy, they must find ways to buffer schools from short-term pressure to raise test scores so that the strategies of the equity program are not overshadowed by efforts to orient instruction toward tests. If districts and schools are going to be given the freedom to experiment with programs that address inequities in student achievement, they must also be given time to implement strategies and not be expected to produce immediate gains in test scores. Toward this end, districts should engage in efforts to build a broad consensus of parents, educators, and the school board to resist outside pressure and maintain the equity program. However, in light of No Child Left Behind, districts will need to find ways to blend equity work with other efforts to produce gains in student achievement, as evidenced by the indicators included in the state's accountability program. Policymakers can support this effort by including multiple measures of student progress in state and federal accountability systems.

LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT:

Data-Driven Decision-Making to Improve High School Achievement

In August 2005, results from the first California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) were released. While there was much to celebrate—63% of the classes of 2006 and 2007 passed the math section; 65% passed the English—there was also much about which to be concerned, especially with regard to the achievement gap. Only 44% and 51% of the African American and Latino students, respectively, passed the math section, and 54% and 53% passed the English section. In comparison, 86% and 80% of the Asian and White students, respectively, passed the math section; 75% and 83% passed the English section. Additionally, only 50% and 51% of low-income students passed the math and English sections respectively, compared to 77% and 81% of higher income students. These stark discrepancies remind us that achievement gaps persist with the CAHSEE, and are accompanied by significant educational and economic implications for those students who do not pass the exam.

Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) is one district working to address these challenges. Their efforts reflect two interrelated trends in school reform over the past decade—an increased focus on high school performance and an increase in the use of data to inform school success.

LBUSD's data system is unique in its comprehensiveness and sophistication.

Federal and state accountability mandates focused on student performance have resulted in a heightened interest in student test data and "data-driven decision-making." A popular catch-phrase, "data-driven decision-making" refers to the use of data to inform a wide range of decisions made about curriculum and instruction, professional development, and student interventions. School-wide API scores and subgroup scores, along with individual student scores on various district assessments, all serve as measures used to determine school performance and to inform future decisions made at both the district and school levels.

Like many other districts, Long Beach Unified has followed these trends. However, the district appears to have taken a more holistic approach to reform, weaving high school initiatives and data analysis together with their own theories about curriculum and instruction. This approach is grounded in two key assumptions. First, for LBUSD, unlike most districts, data does not simply mean test scores; it also includes a range of surveys, teacher and principal observations, essays, etc. Second, the data is never treated in isolation; rather it permeates almost all of the

discussions and decisions at the district level. How data is collected, disseminated, and used speaks volumes to the degree to which data is used in shaping decision-making. Most importantly, their approach has resulted in success.

Long Beach Unified's Context and History

The third largest school district in California, Long Beach Unified serves one of the most diverse urban areas in the United States. Of the close to 100,000 students in the district in the 2004-05 school year, 49.7% were Hispanic, 18.2% were African American, 16.7% were White, 9.3% were Asian, and the remaining 6.1% were Pacific Islander, Filipino, Native American, or multi-racial. Approximately 65% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch and over 25% were English Language Learners (CDE, 2006). LBUSD overall met both its district and subgroup growth targets in 2003 and 2004.

Laying the Groundwork

Over the past decade, LBUSD has garnered national attention and a number of awards for its work, most notably, the 2003 Broad Prize for Urban Education. The district's rise to prominence began in the early 1990s under the leadership of Superintendent Carl Cohn. Despite a rapidly growing student population and budget shortfalls due to state and national recessions—a combination that would beset most urban districts—LBUSD rose to the challenge. During Cohn's 10-year tenure, the district more than doubled revenues from $423 million in 1993 to $972 in 2002 and instituted many new reforms. These included mandatory school uniforms (the first district in the country to do so), content and performance standards, a K–3 literacy initiative, and the Seamless Education Partnerships which helped the district build ties with local business leaders and postsecondary institutions.

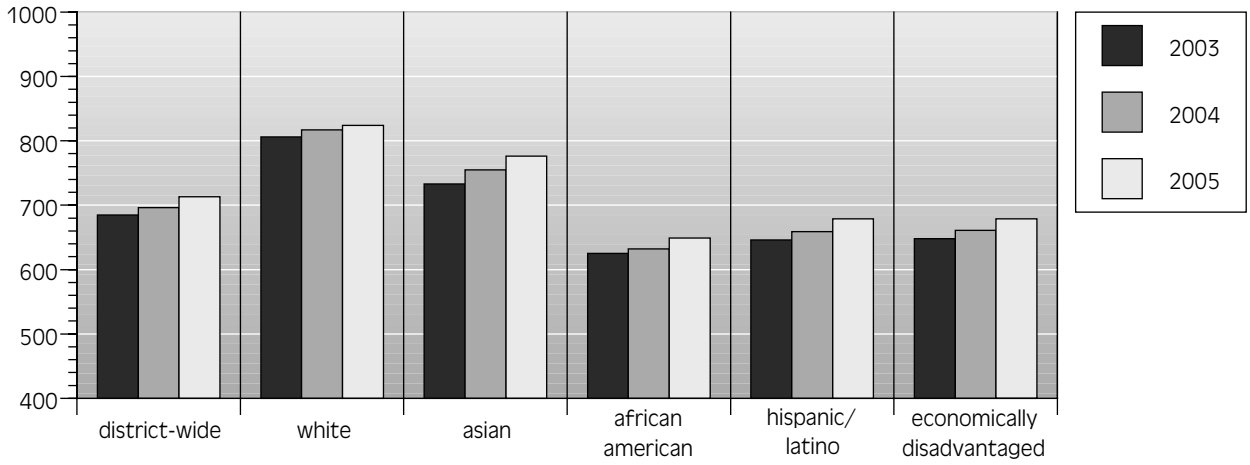
Most notably, however, the district began to focus more attention on data collection and analysis. The district built their capacity in this area by hiring an expert on assessment as the Assistant Superintendent of Research, Planning, and Evaluation, and by expanding the research department. Closer attention to student performance led to increased attention on instruction and student achievement. As one of the assistant superintendents noted,

> What's helped is when you show them data, it doesn't lie. I think that if we just came out subjectively and made comments based on observation it might be a little different, but when they see it on paper, and…we have so many examples on paper, sometimes it makes conversation easier.

Focus on High School Reform

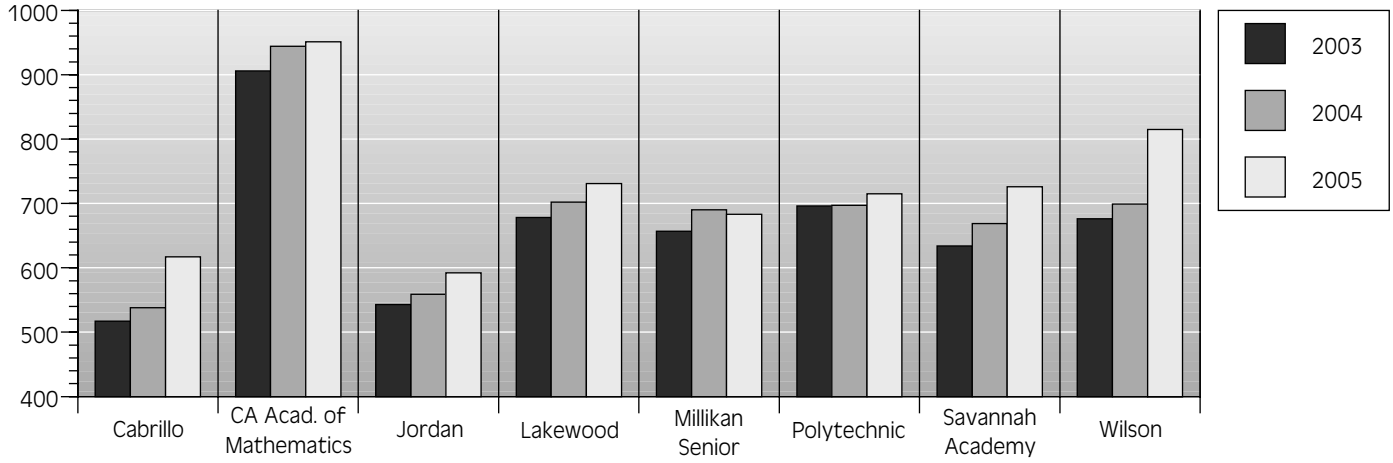
Most of the reforms implemented during Cohn's tenure focused primarily on elementary and middle schools. Cohn argued that improved high school performance would arise from having better-prepared students as a result of elementary and middle school reforms. While high school principals and teachers agreed by the late 1990s that students were more prepared for high school, still more needed to be done.

Figure 7 Long Beach Unified School District API Trends



Source: California, Department of Education, DataQuest, 2006.

Figure 8 Long Beach Unified School District High School API Trends



Source: California, Department of Education, DataQuest, 2006.

In 2002, Deputy Superintendent Christopher Steinhauser succeeded Cohn and shifted the district's focus to high schools. During his first year as superintendent, Steinhauser and other district officials developed LBUSD's High School Initiative, "Every Student, Every Day." In it, they outlined the district's goals for high school reform:

- Increase achievement of all students in the academic content areas.
- Close the achievement gap by accelerating the learning of the lowest performing students.
- Create a high school culture and climate among students and staff that supports improved achievement.
- Build high school leadership capacity to design, implement, and sustain reform and improvement efforts.

Use of Data to Improve Student Achievement

Rather than start from scratch, the district extended many of the reforms and initiatives implemented at the K–8 level to high school. These included:

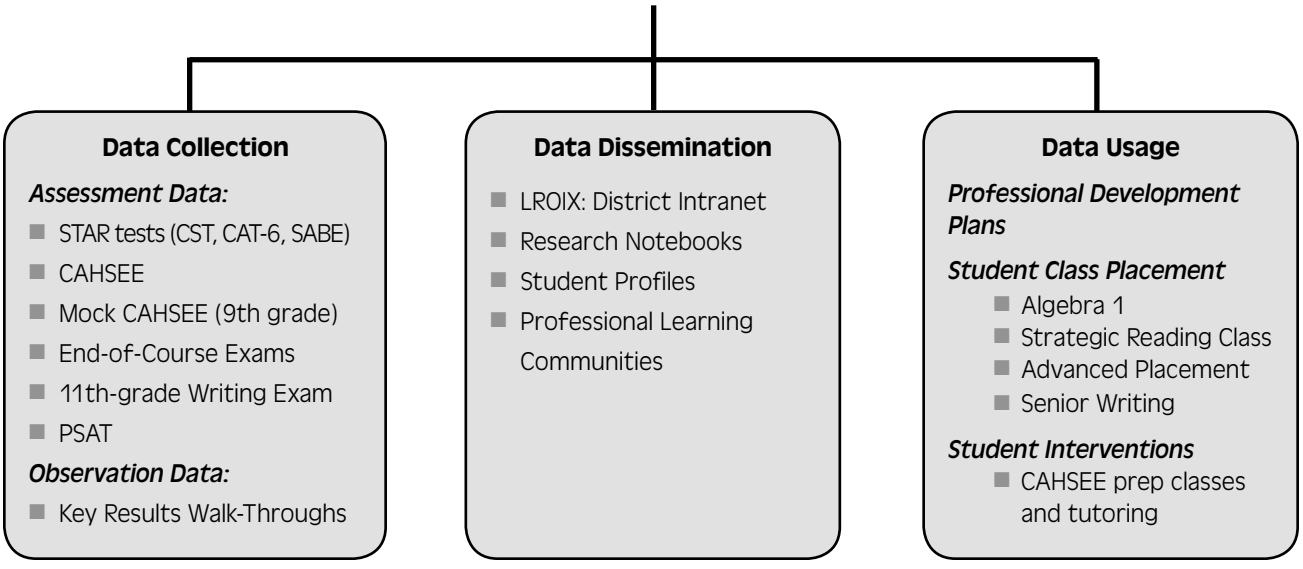
- professional learning communities for both principals and schools
- key results Walk-Throughs, where teachers and administrators visited each other's schools to provide to pointed feedback
- targeted intervention strategies for students below grade level.

Similar to the earlier grades, data—both test scores and observations—played a large part in the development and implementation of these initiatives. LBUSD's data system is unique in its comprehensiveness and sophistication.

Data Collection

The district and schools collect both quantitative and qualitative data to inform policy and practice, and rely on multiple measures to gauge and monitor school activity and student achievement. These measures are tied to specific indicators created by the high school principals to evaluate their school's progress on the four goals outlined in "Every Student, Every Day." The use of multiple measures provides a more accurate picture of student performance and helps better determine the effectiveness of particular interventions. For example, the district has abandoned interventions, such as Sylvan tutoring and Read 180, that did not appear to improve student achievement.

Figure 9 Long Beach Unified Data System



Assessment Data: State Tests, and District Assessments and Benchmarks

The district uses multiple tests and assessments to measure student achievement. These include the state STAR tests—the California Standards Tests (CSTs), the California Achievement Test (CAT-6), and the Spanish Assessment of Basic Education (SABE/2)—as well as the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE); the district's End-of-Course Exams (EOCs), 11th grade writing exam, mock 9th grade CAHSEE; and finally the PSAT. The district correlates its own assessments with the CSTs, providing teachers with an equivalent CST range for scores on the district assessments. The district also asks teachers to submit student data from various classroom assessments, especially those tied to mandated curriculum packages, every 6–8 weeks. These too are correlated with the standardized tests so as to help teachers target specific skills and areas of instruction that need to be addressed.

The use of multiple measures provides a more accurate picture of student performance and helps better determine the effectiveness of particular interventions.

Observation Data: Key Results Walk-Throughs

Schools also benefit from qualitative data generated from the Key-Results Walk-Throughs. Approximately 40–50 administrators and teachers from around the district participate in the Walk-Throughs at each high school three times a year. Department chairs, principals, coaches, and an outside facilitator also conduct Walk-Throughs every month. Departments choose key questions or areas that serve as the focus of observation during the walk-through. Participants provide feedback on these areas, which the high schools then use to improve practice and instruction.

The Key-Results Walk-Throughs help schools draw connections between the assessment data and actual instructional practices. As one high school principal noted,

> The [Key Results Walk-Throughs] are really eye openers that give your school [through] the eyes of representatives from the other high schools and from the central office, a chance to listen to and review your data with you and then walk through the classrooms and see if there's been any improvement on what the focus has been. I think that also helps them when we are looking at our different categories of students and where the gap is and how it's being closed. [It] is critical to what we do to.

For the data to be meaningful, it needs to provide an accurate and consistent measurement of student performance. Misalignment leads to confusion over what matters with regard to curriculum and instruction. While the district makes efforts to align and correlate the various assessments, it still remains a challenging process. According to the head of LBUSD's research department, "The biggest impact that you can make on closing the achievement gap is to get these classroom assessments that are part of the teacher's curriculum aligned with what the state is measuring and what's important to be measured."

Interestingly, while NCLB and the state tests are often highlighted as the most important due to the potential consequences tied to them, the district views the classroom assessments and End-of Course exams as the most valid forms of data since they are more directly tied to what

is happening in the classroom. However, the district has experienced discrepancies between results from the End-of-Course exams and the CSTs and student grades. This raises questions about how well the EOCs, which were developed before the CSTs, are aligned to the standards and the course curriculum.

Data Dissemination

With such copious data, dissemination becomes a challenging task. Deciding what to share with schools and in what form is crucial if the data is to be used effectively. Furthermore, how quickly principals and teachers can access the data is important if they are to address specific student needs and make changes to instruction in a timely matter.

Academic Profiles

At the beginning of the school year, the research department provides teachers with an Academic Profile of every student in their classes. Each profile gives teachers a complete history of a student's attendance record, language proficiency, scores on standardized tests and district assessments, as well as the interventions and extra support provided by the district. As a result, teachers are able to modify their lesson plans and instructional practices to cater to the needs of their classes and of individual students.

LROIX: LBUSD's Intranet

Most of the data is presented online through the district's intranet system, LROIX. The Research and Evaluation department reports student test results through "research notebooks" that can be accessed by all teachers and administrators in the district. All testing data is disaggregated to the district, school, classroom, and student levels. In addition, data from the CSTs is disaggregated by subgroup, proficiency level, and specific skills. Teachers can also disaggregate the data so as to identify the particular needs of the students in their classes and make requests to the research department for more specific reports.

It is important to note that unlike most school districts, LBUSD discourages teachers from looking at the data and the achievement gap through a racial lens. As the head of the research department explained:

> The achievement gap isn't a black-white thing. The achievement gap is the kids who are not proficient versus the kids who are…ethnicity is very often a proxy for lack of certain kinds of middle class educational experiences that keep kids at grade level…on the state standard [they are] going to take care of [the achievement gap].
>
> By focusing on proficiency, the achievement gap takes on a more complex meaning. The thing that everybody at all levels has told every school is that every school has an achievement gap and you have to address that issue. So even at your highest performing school you have a gap. It could be a gender

> gap, it could be an ethnicity gap, an SES gap…So addressing the achievement gap is going to look different at different places based on their needs.

As a result, while the data is disaggregated by subgroup, schools are encouraged to focus more on proficiency levels as a means of distinguishing students than other demographic factors. Interestingly, this approach differs dramatically from that of Lemon Grove and overlooks possible cultural differences among students that may influence the effectiveness of various teaching strategies.

Data usage

The primary purpose of the data is to help administrators and teachers develop policies and make decisions that will ultimately improve instruction and student achievement. They cannot move forward instructionally without feedback from the data.

Student Class Placement

Testing data is often used to determine class placements for students. For example, placement in Algebra 1 is determined by a student's proficiency level in math on the CST in eighth grade. Those that are Proficient take one year of Algebra 1; Basic students take a double period of Algebra 1 during the school year; and Below Basic students take Algebra 1 stretched over two years. Also, students who are a half-year to two years below grade level in reading must take a strategic reading class in addition to their regular English class. Furthermore, students that do not pass the 11th grade writing exam are required to take a rigorous writing class during their senior year. Finally, PSAT scores are used to identify students for Advanced Placement classes.

While the data is disaggregated by subgroup, schools are often encouraged to focus on proficiency levels as a means of distinguishing students.

Student Interventions

In ninth grade, students take a mock version of the CAHSEE in order to identify areas in need of improvement. Tenth grade teachers are given an in-depth analysis of the students' scores that pinpoints which skills have not been mastered so that they can target instruction more effectively before the students take the test again. The scores are also used to identify those students that need to participate in various interventions, such as summer CAHSEE prep or Princeton Review classes.

However, for the data to be used effectively, principals and teachers must see its value in their own work. For most of the high school principals, the data appears to play an important role in shaping school-wide decisions at their school. The district invests a great deal of time and energy in training principals to understand and analyze the data, so that they can then train their teachers on how to use the data in their classrooms. As one principal noted,

> One of the critical pieces in the district is that principals…[have] been really thoroughly trained in how to interpret and read data…I think that [it] is really pivotal in this district and that everybody now appreciates and knows data…If you don't appreciate and understand it you can't drive instruction and be the cheerleader you need to be and the instructional leader.

While the district has clearly invested a great deal of time and energy in building their capacity for data collection and analysis and in training principals, it is unclear if and how teachers are applying the data in their classrooms. The degree to which principals train their teachers on how to use the data and how much the teachers buy into using the data obviously varies from school to school.

For example, at one high school, the curriculum leader, department head, and teachers of each department review and evaluate the data as part of their summer curriculum institutes, where they plan the curriculum for the following school year. However, according to principals in the district, some teachers are resistant to using the data, and complain that there is too much testing and not enough professionalism and trust in their work. The principals added that some teachers overlook the tests, particularly the CAHSEE and CSTs, if their students are doing well academically. For example, they noted that teachers who teach AP classes often see little connection between the CAHSEE, STAR tests, and the AP even though there are correlations among the exams, according to the district.

However, for the data to truly inform and improve instruction and ultimately affect student achievement, it is crucial that teachers see its importance and are able to understand and use the information in their classrooms. As one high school principal noted, it is critical that teachers understand the connection between what they teach and what is being tested. Teacher buy-in is also important if they are to encourage students to take the exams seriously. One principal noticed a difference in how smoothly the CAHSEE administration went from one year to the next, citing a change in the teachers' attitudes about the test, which was the result of getting early teacher buy-in with regard to the test.

Assessment data is only useful to the degree that it actually affects instruction. Teachers must have the skills to interpret and apply the data effectively if it is to have a positive impact on instruction and student achievement.

LBUSD serves as an exemplar of how data can be used effectively in closing the achievement gap. Data collection, dissemination and usage are an integral part of district operations and inform a myriad of decisions made by the district. This comprehensive approach makes "data-driven decision-making" more than just a catch-phrase, but a crucial strategy in improving student achievement.

CERES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT:

Engaging Teachers in Professional Development to Improve Student Achievement

The current emphasis on educational reform and high-stakes accountability requires teachers to make significant changes to their existing practices in order to meet higher standards (Ball and Cohen, 1999). This current emphasis raises the bar for effective professional development since it is considered an essential mechanism for deepening teachers' content knowledge and developing their instructional skills (Porter, Garet, Desimone, Yoon, and Birman, 2000). Research on effective professional development models has converged on several factors that contribute to teacher learning such as increasing teachers' subject matter knowledge, creating communities of practice, and acknowledging the role of teachers' beliefs (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Borko, 2004; Wilson and Berne, 1999). Further, Richardson (2003) suggests that the learning opportunities offered to teachers should include the following characteristics: be school-wide; be sustained and include follow-up; have administrative support; be adequately funded; and develop buy-in from participants.

Ceres Unified School District (CUSD) employs many of the notable characteristics considered necessary for effective professional development. This section profiles the district's efforts to increase educators' capacity to teach to high standards and to improve student learning through professional development.

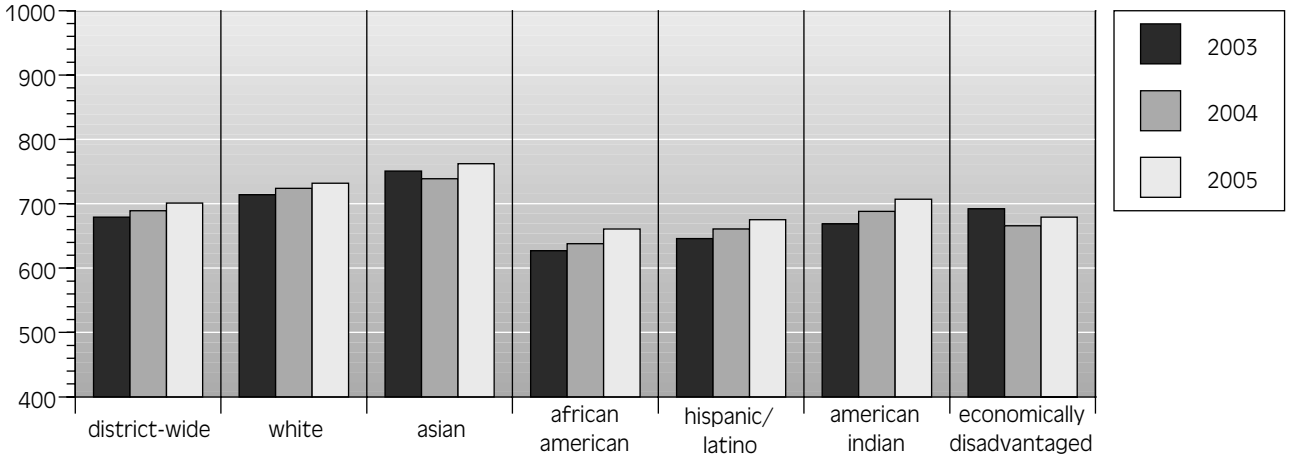
District Context

Ceres Unified School District is an urban fringe district located near Modesto in California's Central Valley. The district enrolls over 10,000 students in their elementary, middle, and secondary schools. The district encompasses an ethnically diverse group of students; in the 2004-05 school year, 53% of students identified as Hispanic, 33.8% as White, 5% as Asian, and 3.1% as African American. Nearly 60% of the student population qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 23.5% were English Language Learners (CDE, 2006).

Student achievement in the district has climbed steadily since 2002. Each year student performance, as reflected in the API, has demonstrated growth in each of the district's significant subgroups.

During the 2004–2005 school year, 97% of the district's teaching staff was fully credentialed, compared to the statewide average of 93%. The district employs only 3% of its teachers on

Figure 10 Ceres Unified School District API Trends



Source: California Department of Education, DataQuest, 2006.

emergency credentials or waivers, while 4% of the state's teachers fall into that category. In addition, the average years of teaching experience for the district's teacher workforce is 14 years, with an average of 11 years teaching within the district. This is over the state average of 13 years of teaching experience and an average of 10 years teaching in a single district. These statistics suggest that the teacher workforce in Ceres is a relatively veteran faculty with high retention rates, as evidenced in Ceres' history of investing in its teachers and their learning and development.

History of Professional Development

Since the 1990s, Ceres has been known for what teachers describe as its "rich tradition of lots of staff development." Teachers described the district as an "in-service district" that has always invested in teachers' professional development. One teacher explained,

> From the very beginning when I started, they've always had in-services with the teachers. And they've had different programs and different ways of presenting them, some before school started, some while school was on. And they are continuing to do that.

An assistant superintendent echoed that sentiment:

> I think the current philosophy within the district, that is embraced highly, is that we all need to grow and we all need to learn. We all have areas in which we need to improve, and ...we can't expect kids to make progress if we don't ourselves engage in ongoing learning. So staff development of some sort is a key focus in the district at all times.

The fact that Ceres is highly committed to teacher learning and development was mentioned in all the interviews that we conducted. Veteran and novice teachers, as well as district administrators, spoke of the ways the district supported and encouraged teachers' learning opportunities.

Bringing Focus to the District's Professional Development

While Ceres clearly has a long-standing commitment to staff development, the district has made significant improvements in the last few years to provide a more focused program aligned with district-wide goals of improving student achievement. Prior to 2002, Ceres offered a menu list of learning options, or what the superintendent described as "smorgasbord" training. The professional development opportunities were provided by the district or by outside educational organizations and teachers could decide whether or not they wanted to attend. This created a "haves or haves not" scenario, according to the director of curriculum and instruction, who said "some people went to a lot [of professional development activities] and some people went to just a few things."

As a result, Ceres teachers reported that the district's professional development program seemed to lack coherence or purpose. One teacher explained, "Before, we had lots of professional development but there was somebody from here that did their thing and somebody from there that did their thing. There were a lot of outside people that go away and you never see again. Nobody really knows what they said." Another teacher agreed. "There was a little bit here and a little bit there and nothing was mandated one way or the other that you had to do it that way." Consequently, learning opportunities varied considerably throughout the district.

In an effort to provide coherence to the district's professional development, the superintendent reported that a lot of hard work went into bringing the teachers together. He felt it was vital to have every teacher present for staff development in order to increase "the power of the staff development getting into each classroom." Thus, he embedded staff development days into the teacher contracts and developed a coordinated approach to teacher learning. Many teachers reported that the professional development they receive currently is of a much higher quality than before because it is focused. Said one teacher, "It's not the latest trend that comes along; it's research-based. It's known to be successful." Another commented, "I feel like the development that goes on is not wasted. It's not duplicative."

The superintendent views teacher quality and ongoing teacher learning as inextricably linked in efforts to raise student achievement.

Additionally, the district's professional development has provided space and time for teachers to work together. Often it brings together grade level teachers to work on one topic such as differentiated instruction. This allows the teachers to collaborate, share ideas and materials, and find out what's going on at other sites. One teacher remarked, "They always set a pretty decent block of time aside so that we really have... time to work together as a whole group and then work together as site groups....We can take what we're working on and really use it."

The superintendent views teacher quality and ongoing teacher learning as inextricably linked when faced with the task of raising student achievement. He stated, "When all is said and done

and the doors in the classrooms get shut, it's about the teacher." Thus, the district works hard to hire quality teachers and then to support teacher development and learning through a focused staff development program.

District leaders attribute rising student achievement to three major shifts. First, the district, led by the current superintendent, created a coherent vision for addressing the achievement gap. The vision led to significant changes within the organizational structure of the district. This, in turn, led to the development and implementation of a coaching model of teacher learning

Vision

The current superintendent assumed leadership of the district in 2001. One of his top priorities became the development of a strategic plan to raise student achievement and meet the needs of all the students in the district. The director of curriculum and instruction recalled,

> One of the first things the superintendent did was he convened a task force that first year and they wrote a strategic plan….It prioritized the goals of the district. And I think there are 22 goals now, but the main thing is they have faithfully from the board down, followed that priority list.

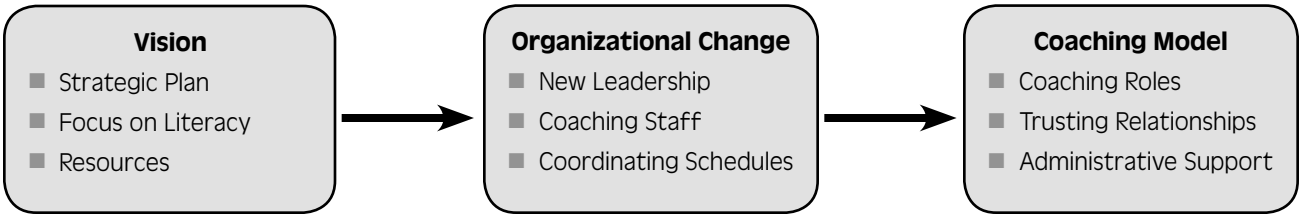
References to the strategic plan were repeated in many of the interviews with district administrators and teachers.

In addition, it seems that the strategic plan is a living document. The plan is reviewed each year, and based on the district's progress on its goals, the goals are reprioritized as needed. A teacher reported that the strategic plan has focused the goals of the district and its employees. It has "helped us to kind of coalesce and focus our efforts on what we're trying to do with our students." A program specialist added, "The strategic plan is not just words, it's there for a reason. It's followed."

Literacy, Literacy, Literacy

The development of the district's strategic plan led to prioritizing the district's goals. As a result, the number one priority of the district became increasing student achievement in reading, language

Figure 11 Ceres Professional Development Reform Model



arts, and writing. The choice to prioritize reading achievement was based on the perspective that reading is the building block on which all other subjects rest. An assistant superintendent explained, "Reading is definitely the basis for student success. If they can't read, they can't do math, they can't do science, they can't do social studies."

Teachers in the district are well aware that literacy is the number one learning priority. When asked what was going on in the district that was making the students' achievement scores go up, one teacher replied, "Good teaching practices and a focus on literacy." Another teacher stated simply, "Literacy, literacy, literacy." Another teacher summed it up by saying, We know that [literacy]...is the goal the district has been pushing."

Ensuring Adequate Funding

The superintendent backed up the district's commitment to literacy development for all students by allocating sufficient resources and funding to it. Initially when the district realized that the cost of their textbook selection was more than they had anticipated, the district's literacy priority fueled the administrators' decision to find a creative solution to the funding problem, which they ultimately did. In addition, teachers are provided with whatever materials are needed to make the district's literacy priority an attainable goal. As one teacher remarked, "It definitely has to take an investment from the district. …They've really tried to give us everything that they thought was essential to making the program work."

The district has also invested in substitutes to teach classes while classroom teachers attend district-sponsored professional development. According to the superintendent, the district pulls together federal funding, state categorical funding, and district general funds in order to provide teachers with high quality staff development. From his perspective, "The bottom line is, we cannot produce results if we don't spend what we have to spend in staff development. So when she [assistant superintendent of educational services division] says she has to have it, or she needs it, we have to provide it."

Changes in Organizational Structures

New Director of Professional Development Leads the Charge

In 2001, once the current superintendent stepped in, this prompted a "changing of the guard." The superintendent brought in new leadership and created new management positions, including the director of professional development. This had the effect of focusing district attention on professional development that was aligned with the needs of its students. As one teacher noted,

> In my mind, that's when things started to change. So I would say it came from the top down. It was his [the current superintendent's] vision. He hired the director who was basically told, "It's your job to improve the academic standing of our schools" and the director came up with his plan and they supported it.

Organizing the Coaching Staff

In response to the superintendent's charge, the director of professional development instituted a coaching model similar to the BTSA program to support teachers' ongoing learning and development. The program's coaching staff support teachers' development, which in turn helps raise student performance. Teachers with complementary skills and backgrounds were chosen to be a part of the coaching team. Throughout the district, the coaches are known for their ability to work with children. One teacher explained, "These are people who have been in the district forever." Another teacher added, "They've been in our classrooms and they know those grade levels and they focus on them. That's where they put all their energy. It makes a big difference." According to the superintendent, the coaches are teachers on special assignment who do nothing but coach, model lessons, go in and watch lessons, and give teachers feedback. "It's not evaluative, it's peer to peer."

Coordinating Schedules

Once the district's new professional development program was in place, other changes followed soon afterward. While at one time the district employed track scheduling, the administrators chose to move to a traditional schedule. This move aligned more closely with the district's push towards a district-wide professional development program. With all schools on the same schedule, teachers could now attend the same professional development trainings at the same time. This allowed for collaboration among grade-level teachers across the district.

The district also implemented a new meeting schedule. This organizational change has provided more opportunities for ongoing staff development. Throughout the district, every Monday afternoon is now reserved for a school site staff meeting or a grade level meeting. According to the director of curriculum and instruction, the idea was to build a common structure that allows teachers to get together as a group on a regular basis to talk, share ideas, and problem solve issues. As a coach explained, "It's guaranteed every other week you're going to have department or grade level time available, where before it was like two half days a year at the elementary [level] and that was it... unless you wanted to meet after school on your own time." In addition, the district-wide meeting schedule provides coaches with opportunities to present short in-service trainings during those meetings. This has increased the frequency and consistency of learning opportunities offered to teachers.

Coaching Model

The director of curriculum and instruction envisioned the coaching model as a vehicle for instructional change. He believes that providing classroom teachers with coaches can improve teachers' skills and their practice. Significantly, the coaching model is not evaluative. It is strictly viewed as a support mechanism for teachers. The coaching model was instituted in 2003 with one coach. Since then, the model has expanded to include six full-time coaches, with each having their own specialty: technology, K–2, 3–6, Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), English Language Development (ELD), and secondary focus. The coaches meet regularly with each other and the director of curriculum and

instruction to talk about the needs of the teachers and students in the district. These meetings contribute to the planning of the district-wide professional development that is offered to the teachers.

Coaching Roles

Modeling

Modeling lessons are a large component of the coaching model. The theory behind modeling lessons is that observing others can be a powerful opportunity for learning, and that it enables teachers to receive more targeted, individualized support. As the teacher watches a coach demonstrate a model lesson, the teacher may gain insights into good teaching practices and strategies. In addition, observing a coach model a lesson sometimes validates challenges the teacher is having in the classroom As one principal reported, many new teachers take advantage of the opportunity to work with coaches, who they perceive as a "safe person" to call when they need help. Coaches also can help new teachers get up to speed more quickly in the teaching profession.

The success of the coaching model can be attributed to administrative support from the highest level.

Making Materials

The coaches are in place to support the teachers and their work in the classroom. For many, this support often takes the form of helping to create teacher-made materials to supplement the district's curricula. For example, one teacher explained how she and a coach made picture vocabulary cards for each grade level to accompany stories in the reading program. These materials have proven particularly helpful for teachers working with English language learners.

Breaking Down Walls

The district's professional development coaches often become the conduit to other teachers throughout the district so that eventually everyone benefits. As the director of curriculum and instruction explained, "There's a lot of great things happening in our own classrooms. And it's getting that message out and then sharing it. That's breaking down the walls. And I think the coaches are helping to do that." Through coaches and teachers sharing materials and ideas, individual teachers receive praise and recognition for their creative endeavors and hard work. A coach commented,

> Within the district, the communication level has really gone up. And [with] ideas or things that they want to share or things that we're sharing with them, [when] we come across a good idea for a particular grade level, we'll send it to *all* teachers in that grade level. So they all have access to it.

The Ceres website extends the ways in which the coaches share teachers' work and ideas. Creative lesson plans, ideas, and teacher-made materials are placed on the website. Consequently, much more cross-school sharing ensues. In addition, the technology coach reported that he receives emails from teachers in other school districts who comment on the usefulness of the teacher ideas.

Teacher Site Visits

The coaching model provides teachers opportunities to see other teachers teach. The coaches organize small groups of teachers to take a tour of four or five classrooms throughout the district. The teachers are provided a substitute and released for the day to visit their colleagues' classrooms. After the tour, the teachers spend the afternoon talking about what they saw, their own practice, and ways to incorporate new ideas and strategies. The director of curriculum and instruction explained that the "reason we like taking them in our own district is we want them to see that whether you go to a high socioeconomic school or a low one, that the challenges are the same and that there are gifted teachers in your own grade around here that you can email or ask for ideas." The coaches agreed that the teacher site visits can be a very validating experience. Seeing someone else teach the same way or struggle with the same issues demystifies teaching. This empowers the teachers to go back to their classrooms and say, "That's something I can do" or "I can modify that this way."

Trusting Relationships

Building Trust

A key component of the coaching model is trust. To begin, the coaches must be invited into the classrooms. The director of curriculum and instruction stressed, "If you don't want them to come in and model a lesson or give you feedback, no big deal." Once the coaches are invited in, anything that is talked about is strictly confidential. A coach shared her perspective: "The teachers realize that we're not coming in and evaluating them. We're not judging… They invite us in because they know it's not going to somehow end up on an evaluation someplace."

However, getting teachers to view the coaches as not part of the administration was difficult at first. A coach relayed that the biggest challenge can be battling perceptions that since you are a coach and housed in the district office, now you are one of them. He stated, "I think...the hardest part at the beginning is building that trust level....Depending on the group you're at, it takes a long time to earn that. And you do it one person at a time." In order to combat misconceptions of their role, the coaches make it a point to spend generous amounts of time at the school sites talking with teachers, eating lunch with them, becoming more familiar to them.

Furthermore, the coaches, teachers, and administrators agreed that the success of their coaching model hinges on the fact that the coaches are well-respected teachers who have taught in the district. As a result, the coaches are perceived as peers. One teacher reported, "These teachers have been in the classroom and they know what it's about." Another teacher added, "They are people who have been around for a long time and I think that really is the buy-in that a lot of us have right now. They're people that have been in the district and have been in the classroom."

Listening to Teachers

Trust is also developed by listening to teachers. The district administrators seem to hear and highly respect what the teachers have to say. In turn, many teachers said they felt the district listened carefully to their views. As one coach confirmed, "I believe the district really listens to what teachers and students need, and tries to meet those needs in the best way possible." This

was evidenced at a district-sponsored professional development session that was observed by our research team. During the workshop, the teachers were encouraged to write comments, questions, and suggestions on index cards. At the lunch break, the director of curriculum and instruction stopped by to have lunch with and talk to the teachers. Before he left the session, he gathered the index cards. He returned at the end of the day to address the teachers and to respond to their comments and questions. For those questions for which he did not have an immediate answer, he stated who he would contact to discuss the issue and gave an estimated time frame for how long the teachers would have to wait before they received a response. It was clear that the teachers felt heard. One teacher reported, "What most teachers say about him [the director of curriculum and instruction] is that he also listens to us."

Administrative Support

The success of the coaching model can also be attributed to administrative support from the highest level. The coaches reported that their work is not just backed by the director of curriculum and instruction, but also by the assistant superintendent above him and the superintendent above her. From their lead, support for the coaching model has spread to the site level administrators too. A coach noted, "I know from previous experience that if the site administrator is not going to support it, it's not going to make any difference how much money you want to throw at it." As a result, this degree of administrative support allows coaches and teachers to work around the weaknesses they perceive in their selected literacy curriculum. Therefore, the curriculum is not rigidly implemented. Teachers and coaches are given autonomy to do what they feel is in the best interest of their students. Further, as a nod towards uniform support, all of the district administrators went through the same 40 hour AB466 training as the teachers. This left the teachers feeling well supported and feeling as though the administrators better understood their work.

Conclusions

Ceres Unified School District's distinctive history as an "in-service" district has laid the groundwork for the innovative approaches they are employing in efforts to raise student achievement for all students. The district's coordinated vision has led to changes in their organizational structure that eventually resulted in a creative approach to ongoing teacher learning and development—the coaching model. While we are unable to say that the three-year gains the district has made on their API scores is a result of the district's coaching model, it must be taken into account. Thus, there are potential lessons to be learned from Ceres.

Yet there are challenges for replicability. For one, Ceres is a small district. The effects of scaling up this model for a large district are unknown. In addition, while we encountered an overwhelmingly positive response from teachers and administrators about the coaching model, we did not speak to every teacher and administrator. Thus, we do not have a definitive sense of how much the coaching model has permeated teachers' classrooms, since it is predicated on the notion that the coaches must be invited in. Consequently, we do not know how struggling teachers who do not seek coaching help receive ongoing professional development.

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