Center for American Progress

Common Strategies for Uncommon Achievement

How Districts Enable and Support High-Performing Schools

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Introduction and summary

What does it take to improve a school? What kinds of programs, systems, and people need to be in place for educational outcomes to improve overall? These and other questions continue to vex policymakers who—along with researchers, reformers, and advocates—pore over data and case studies looking for tools to transform schools into places where all students achieve. Sadly, there is no silver bullet. But there are features and structures of schools that have shown improvement that can help educational leaders see a path forward.

One way to consider how to design plans for school improvement is to start with the success stories—focusing on how educators brought about positive change. This report intends to do just that by considering the performance of districts and schools of an entire state—in this case, North Carolina—focusing on some of those that improved and then teasing out the approaches that leaders in these districts used to foster success.

The report features three effective school districts in North Carolina. The districts vary in terms of the types of students they serve, where they are located, and the number of schools they oversee. The districts include:

- Catawba County, a rural district serving a student population of more than 17,000 students, around half of which were income eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches in the 2011-12 school year

- Montgomery County, also rural but with a smaller student population than Catawba (around 4,000 students), and where more than 70 percent of its students were eligible for subsidized lunches in the 2011-12 school year

- Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, an urban district, with one of the largest student populations in the state (around 50,000 students), and where about half of the students were eligible for subsidized lunches in the 2011-12 school year

More information on these school districts is given in Table 1 below.

District demographics, 2012

District	Total number of students[1]	Percent low income[2]	Percent black or Hispanic[3]	Number of schools[4]	Rural/urban, 2010 to 2011[5]
Catawba County	17,139	51%	17%	28	Rural-fringe
Montgomery County	4,144	76%	50%	11	Rural-distant
Winston-Salem/Forsyth County	52,612	55%	50%	80	City-midsize

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports - Student Accounting," available at http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/accounting/data/ (last accessed June 2013); National Center for Education Statistics, "Elementary/Secondary Information System."

Despite the superficial differences, these three districts share the fact that they have a districtwide commitment to supporting teacher collaboration, and many of their schools perform much better than comparable schools in the state.

But how did some of the schools in these three districts post such notable achievements? The case studies we share in this report focus on the high-performing schools in the districts and answer two basic questions: How did these principals work with their teachers to improve school performance? What roles did district leaders play in supporting principals?

There are three themes that emerged from the study of these districts. Leaders in districts' central offices, such as superintendents and other members of their leadership teams, worked hard to ensure that their principals, other school administrators, and teachers adhered to the following routines:

• Principals and other school administrators observed teaching frequently in classrooms.

• Teachers discussed student performance and instruction in focused meetings.

• Teachers used research-based instructional techniques.

These three activities are common to high-performing schools,[6] and the cases outlined below remind us that school improvement is about supporting teachers to do their best work in their classrooms. When district leaders engage with educators to promote routines such as those listed above, they demonstrate the power that focusing on the core of education—teaching and learning in classrooms—can have on student achievement.

Strategies in common

The three North Carolina school districts in our report share many characteristics with the highest-performing districts elsewhere in the United States. Although there is no so-called gold standard when it comes to determining a district's effectiveness, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation—which has as it stated goal "to dramatically transform urban K-12 public education"—has developed one comprehensive approach to identifying outstanding urban districts.[7] Each year the Broad Foundation identifies 75 districts serving sizeable populations of low-income students from which it selects four finalists and then one winner each year. The winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education have demonstrated high performance on many measures, including improvements in student achievement and closing achievement gaps. Over time the Broad Foundation has harvested a set of "best practices" from these award-winning districts.[8] The three routines described above are commonly found in some form in Broad Prize districts.

Furthermore, the three strategies that the districts used to improve teaching have been studied and documented in the research literature and elsewhere. Although each strategy may need to be adapted to the specific school environment, these are common in many districts. Let's examine each in turn.

Principals and other school administrators observed teaching frequently in classrooms

Principals at high-performing schools in our featured districts visited teachers' classrooms regularly to observe their teaching, sometimes devoting a great deal of their day to this task in order to gather critical information about what teaching looked like in classrooms. Observing classroom teaching is a necessary step to improving school performance, according to research on school improvement.[9] School improvement requires multiple aligned strategies,[10] but there is nothing more important to student learning in school than the work of teachers in classrooms.[11] In this report's featured schools, principals and other school administrators used information gleaned from classroom visits and from talks with teachers to make decisions about how to better support effective teaching.

Teachers discussed student performance and instruction in focused meetings

Teachers in each of these schools began to talk about teaching regularly in small-group settings. In all featured districts, these meetings took place weekly. Meetings stayed on track because each team had a designated facilitator who directed the discussion. Furthermore, principals and other school administrators would attend these meetings regularly to monitor and provide advice and support.

District leaders set minimum requirements for how often teachers should meet and what they should talk about at those meetings. The discussions centered on teaching practice and data pertaining to what students were learning. In some instances, district leaders would set specific parameters for how meetings should progress by providing schedules. In all cases, a teacher or a teacher coach was responsible for facilitating these discussions.

Teachers used research-based instructional techniques

Of course, teaching is a profession requiring skills to match techniques to subject matter and students. District leaders expected teachers to use research-based teaching practices, and school leaders paid special attention to observing whether teachers were using these techniques in their classrooms.

Identifying high-performing North Carolina schools

This paper looks at three effective school districts in North Carolina, which were identified by the performance trends in their schools.

Two of the three featured districts were selected based on how many schools met what the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction termed "expected growth." For each student, North Carolina calculates how much the student's score changes relative to their previous test results on the state's assessments. A school is determined to have met expected growth when the average of all of these changes is zero.[12] In Catawba and Montgomery counties, the proportion of schools meeting expected growth increased 10 percentage points between the 2007-08 and 2011-12 school years. Districts were eligible for the study if they had

at least 10 schools in 2012. Out of 71 eligible districts, nine districts met these criteria.[13] In Catawba County, 78 percent of schools were at expected growth in 2008, and 89 percent were at expected growth in 2012.[14] In Montgomery County, 80 percent of schools were at expected growth in 2008, and 100 percent were at expected growth in 2012.[15]

The study also features one large district. Winston-Salem/Forsyth County was selected based on its size and the performance of its students.[16] The county is one of the largest five districts in North Carolina.[17] Four of these districts were recruited for this study, and all had a large number of schools improve more than the state average.[18] Of these four, only Winston-Salem/Forsyth was able to commit to participating in this research. Between 2008 and 2012 half of Winston-Salem/Forsyth schools (40 out of 80) had improved student proficiency rates on state tests more than the state average change of 13 percentage points.[19] Across all schools in the district, the average change in student proficiency over these four years was 12 percentage points.[20]

Three districts and how they improved their schools

The case studies included in this report explore how one school in each district improved and how the district contributed to that particular school's progress. Every school is different, but the cases presented herein illustrate some ways in which these districts have supported the efforts of school leaders to drive instructional improvement.

The time period for this study included the school years 2007-08 to 2011-12, but it is important to note that the cases featured below include some activities that took place prior to the 2007-08 school year, and one principal was in place before the 2007 school year commenced.

The case studies included in this report rely on interviews with directors for district human resources, principals of high-performing schools, and superintendents from these districts. The report appendix lists the names of those interviewed for this project.