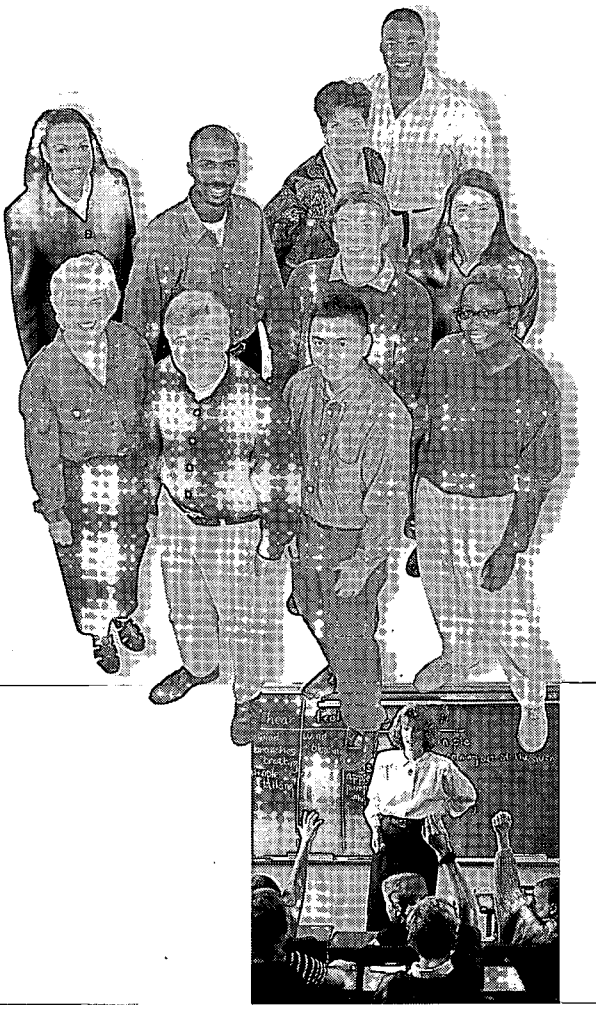
DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 445 146 UD 033 743

TITLE	The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement.
INSTITUTION	National School Boards Association, Alexandria, VA.
ISBN	ISBN-0-88364-229-8
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	74p.; Overview by Anne Wright. Case studies by Judith Brody Saks. Other contributors were Adria L. Thomas and Donna Harrington-Lucker.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Community Involvement; Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Secondary Education; *Participation; *Planning; *School Districts

ABSTRACT

Community visioning and strategic planning were studied as two forms of community engagement that could best address student academic achievement issues. Fifteen school districts were selected on the basis of engagement of internal (teachers, students, administrators) and external (parents, business leaders, and youth service organizations) entities. Profiles based on information these districts submitted show their community engagement and student achievement efforts. These data are supplemented by information from telephone interviews and questionnaires completed by district superintendents and school board presidents. Overall, the experience of these 15 districts shows that, while difficult, public engagement does not need to be intimidating. Whether urban, rural, or suburban, these districts are rich with examples of how to transform frameworks, management practices, and trends into reality. Case studies describe the activities in each district. Part 3 contains a list of 38 resources for community engagement. (SLD)



THE COMMUNITY CONNECTION

National
School
Boards
Association

Case
Studies
in
Public
Engagement

THE COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Case Studies in Public Engagement

Overview by Anne Wright, NSBA Manager of Surveys, Studies, and Evaluations

Case Studies by Judith Brody Saks

Other contributors: Adria L. Thomas, NSBA Director of Research, Training, and Member Services, and Donna Harrington-Lueker, an independent education writer.

ISBN 0-88364-229-8

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PREFACE

Schools are vital to a community's social and economic well-being, and the public knows it. Citizens have vested in their public schools the important responsibility of preparing young people to take their place in society. They expect the schools to provide an educational program and a learning environment that encourage students to achieve. They expect the schools to prepare students to succeed in postsecondary education and in the workforce — and to play a productive role in civic life.

Because the stakes are so high, it is essential that communities be involved in determining the quality of their schools and setting their future direction. How this can be done is the focus of this publication. We set ourselves the task of helping readers translate the dialogue on student achievement and public engagement into action. Our approach was to build on existing research and to study districts that are working hard at engaging internal and external publics to improve achievement. We discovered an array of interrelated engagement activities, but we chose to concentrate on involving publics in district strategic planning. That approach, we believe, offers districts the greatest opportunity to have a meaningful impact on student achievement and on the future direction of their schools. District strategic planning — with its visioning, goals and objectives, strategies, measures of progress, and continuous review and improvement — also provides a systemic approach to issues, thus avoiding what one educator termed "random acts of achievement."

Convening the community for student achievement is a process that requires a focus on achievement and thoughtful management of strategic planning and engagement structures. To keep planning and engagement focused on achievement, the districts we studied used a framework that mirrors what we term the Key Work of School Boards. That framework is reflected in the districts profiled in this report and is further validated by two National School Boards Association student achievement research publications. One, *Reaching for Excellence*, reports on a stratified random sample of urban, suburban, and rural districts, and the other, *Raising the Bar*, is an extensive literature review of achievement practices. The key works model that was distilled from these publications and the district practices described in this report can easily be incorporated into any district's strategic planning process to help publics focus on critical student achievement issues.

Several other important trends in managing strategic planning and engagement also emerged from the district studies. Among them are:

- The need to define appropriate roles, responsibilities, and decision-making parameters
- The need to provide for balanced representation of publics on committees, task forces, and focus groups
- The importance of building on and leveraging familiar avenues of participation, such as standing and ad hoc committees, site/school-based councils, board meetings, and forums
- The benefits of public engagement.

This report discusses these trends and presents specific strategies for sustaining community involvement and overcoming roadblocks to engagement.

The report is presented in two parts. The first is an analysis and discussion of the issues, trends, and frameworks that emerged from an examination of district practices. The second consists of district profiles that are rich in detail, creative ideas, and practical solutions.

In the course of preparing this publication, we learned that engagement and student achievement are essential to building public confidence and that there is much good work being done in these areas. We hope you'll find important and useful information here that will help you convene your community for student achievement.

Sincerely,

Anne L. Bryant

Anne L. Bryant
Executive Director

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

Increasingly, educators are recognizing the need for community engagement in public education. This increased emphasis on engagement arises in response to public opinion polls that show high levels of interest in student achievement and in response to research that suggests a growing gulf between the public and its schools. For example, the Kettering Foundation report *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* indicates that people feel disconnected from schools. The challenge this publication set for itself was to determine how to reconnect the public with the public schools and address concerns about student achievement through community engagement.

The many forms of public engagement are illustrated in the Annenberg Institute for School Reform publication *Reasons for Hope — Voices for Change*. Engagement ranges from parent participation to enable student success to community visioning and strategic planning to enable district schools to succeed.

For the purposes of this report, community visioning and strategic planning were selected as the forms of engagement that could best address student achievement issues. There were several reasons for this:

- First, these two activities encompass planning for the future of a district's schools, thus offering the public the greatest opportunity to have a meaningful impact on important student achievement issues.
- Second, the opportunity to help define and plan the future direction of schools can do much to reduce or eliminate feelings of disconnect because it gives people a chance to participate in making choices about the kinds of schools they want.
- Third, the strategic planning that is required to make the community's vision for its schools a reality provides a systemic approach to student achievement issues rather than an ad hoc approach of addressing issues as they arise. A systemic approach implies greater alignment of resources to achieve the goals and objectives that emerge from the planning process.
- Finally, these forms of engagement offer school boards numerous opportunities to provide leadership on student achievement and to fulfill their representative governance roles. It is the school board that represents all the constituents in the district, and it is the board's responsibility to develop consensus around student achievement.

But how does engaging the community for student achievement become a reality? To better understand the process, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) called on Regional Education Laboratories, its Federation Members, and organizations involved in community engagement for examples of districts doing exemplary work in this area. A total of 15 districts were selected to be profiled on the basis of the following criteria:

- Engagement of internal publics such as teachers, students, and administrators, and external publics such as parents, business leaders, and youth service organizations in district strategic planning processes
- Quantitative indicators of improved student achievement, including state and district test scores; percentage of students taking college admission tests, Advanced Placement courses/tests, and algebra in the eighth grade; percentage of students going on to college or other postgraduation alternatives; percentage meeting state mandates; dropout and school completion rates; and promotion and retention rates

The profiles that appear in this publication are based on information the districts submitted describing their community engagement and student achievement efforts, along with material from telephone interviews and a superintendent and board president questionnaire.

We emphasized strategic planning at the district level rather than planning at the school level because research indicates that district strategic planning permits better integration of school and district improvement plans. This emphasis is not intended to diminish the importance of school-based planning or management or the avenues it offers for community participation with regard to student achievement. However, research such as the NSBA report *Reinventing School-Based Management*, an exhaustive review of the literature on this topic, reveals that "school-based decision making is often viewed as an isolated innovation, or as one innovation among many, but only rarely as a systemic change process requiring the redefinition and realignment of all elements within the system." The districts profiled in this report are all rich with examples of school-based participation and planning, but that planning is done within the context of district goals and districtwide oversight.

Recognizing an Opportunity

Although the 15 districts profiled in this publication cannot be described as a representative sample, they were identified for their engagement work and can be thought of as bellwethers that afford insights into convening the community for student achievement.

The challenge this publication set for itself was to determine how to reconnect the public with the public schools and address concerns about student achievement through community engagement.

The districts are located in different parts of the country, vary in their demographics (urban, suburban, and rural), and have varied histories, but they all faced the challenges of building public support for their schools and improving student achievement. In the past, some of these districts had engaged in school improvement on an as-needed basis and involved the public when an issue arose or if the public brought a particular issue to their attention. Others involved parents in school activities but offered few avenues to participate in district planning initiatives. As a result, members of the public in these districts did not feel connected to their schools, and plans often did not produce the desired results.

Rather than be discouraged, these districts saw such situations as opportunities to review and improve their engagement and planning practices. The superintendent and board took the lead in involving internal and external publics in district strategic planning. Their efforts built on foundations such as the interests of local community leaders and stakeholders and state requirements for school site councils and strategic planning. One district saw the change from an appointed to an elected school board as an opportunity for the board to fulfill its representative governance role and make public engagement one of its top priorities.

Process and Structures for Engagement

Once the opportunity to improve a district's engagement and planning practices is recognized, a process and structures for engagement need to be identified. The process is strategic planning, and the structures include standing and ad hoc committees, site councils, board meetings, special open forums and meetings, focus groups, and surveys.

When the superintendents and board presidents of the districts profiled in this report were asked what three pieces of advice they would give a district just embarking on convening the community for student achievement, at the top of their lists was the need to keep planning focused on student achievement.

While a variety of strategic planning models exist and are used by districts, NSBA has identified eight key areas called the Key Work of School Boards that can be incorporated into any planning model to help keep the focus on student achievement. These eight key areas are:

- **Vision:** Is there district and community consensus on achievement objectives? Are there clearly defined expectations for what students should know and be able to do?
- **Standards:** Are there clear standards for student performance, and are they communicated to students, staff, and community?
- **Assessment:** Are assessments tied to standards and understood by students, staff, and community?
- **Alignment:** Are resources aligned to ensure students meet standards?
- **Climate:** Is there a positive learning environment for student and staff success?
- **Collaborative relationships:** Are there collaborative relationships with educational, political, business, and community leaders to develop a consensus and environment for student success?
- **Accountability:** What measures exist to evaluate the performance of all school staff members, administrators, and the school board against student achievement objectives? Are results reported to the stakeholders?
- **Continuous improvement:** Is a process in place to adjust the strategic plan on the basis of data and community input?

The strategic planning initiatives of the districts profiled in this report incorporate these key areas. Indeed, their impact is often seen in the strategies that districts have used to improve student achievement and the measures used to determine progress and accountability. The Key Work of School Boards in the broader context of the board as leader in creating a vision, creating an environment to achieve the vision, implementing a results-oriented accountability system tied to the strategic plan, and building public support for the plan is discussed further in *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Public Engagement*, the companion piece to this publication.

Reaching Out to Various Publics

The districts in this study involved a wide variety of publics in strategic planning around student achievement. Moreover, examination of their strategic planning efforts reveals a process framework that includes creating or revising the district vision for its schools, identifying goals and objectives, identifying strategies to reach goals and objectives, identifying measures of progress and accountability, and reviewing plans for effectiveness and continuous improvement. The types of publics that participated in strategic planning are summarized in Figure 1, which also illustrates the extensive scope of public involvement in the planning stages outlined above. Much of the variance in engagement levels can be attributed to the special skills of specific publics and community needs. Districts also provided communities with a wide variety of avenues for participation, and they tended to reach out to both internal and external publics. Some examples of their outreach efforts include inviting representatives from "every possible group and organization to define education and community needs and solutions"; holding separate focus groups for teachers, administrators, parents, students, and business/industry; conducting parent and student satisfaction and climate surveys; expanding committee memberships; using minority advisory committees; developing extensive communication programs; and creating a district database of parents and community members.

Avenues for participation were organized into six major categories, and districts were asked to indicate which avenues were open to various publics. It turned out that districts provided multiple opportunities to participate. Most variance in participation opportunities is the result of the appropriateness of a method of communication. For example, fewer districts used board meetings or surveys as avenues of participation for higher education, relying more on advise/consultation, committee representation, and forums. The results of the questionnaire are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Engagement of Publics in District Strategic Planning Stages (Past Five Years)

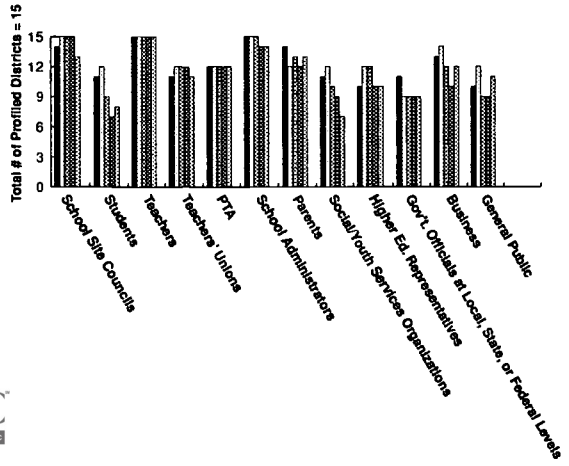
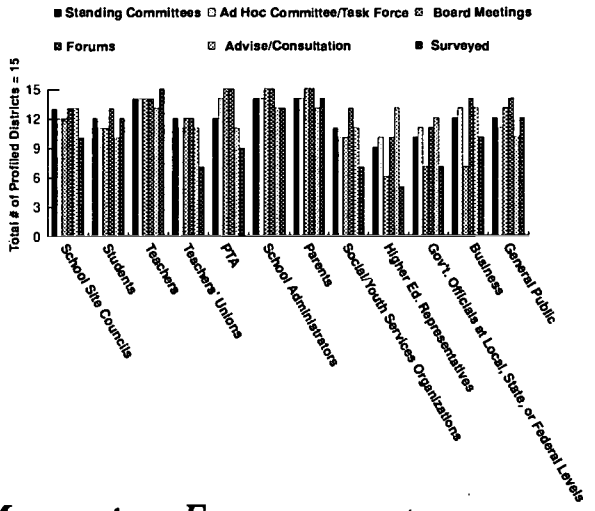


Figure 2: Avenues for Participation in District Strategic Planning (Past Five Years)



Managing Engagement

There is more to community engagement than broad participation, though. If a district is to avoid confusion, clarify expectations, and keep the focus of strategic planning on student achievement, a number of other factors need to be in place to help manage public engagement to ensure that it is meaningful. Based on the surveys districts were asked to complete and the information provided in forms and interviews, we identified several factors that were important to the management of engagement and making participation a success. These factors were:

- Board of education and superintendent support for community engagement
- Definition of appropriate roles, responsibilities, and decision-making parameters (who and/or what body has final decision-making authority)
- Clarification of what is expected of participants
- Balanced representation of publics on committees, task forces, focus groups, and other groups to understand expectations and needs
- Selection of a strategic planning process/model that provides guidance on pubic engagement and a framework for identifying key student achievement issues
- Engagement training for staff, administrators, and board members
- Sharing of information among publics to ensure informed, data-driven discussions and decision making and emphasizing research-based strategies/solutions
- Communication among planning groups and with the public, including newsletters, web sites, forums, and progress and accountability reports.

The districts profiled in this report are rich with specific examples of these management factors and suggest how to implement them on different scales — urban, suburban, rural.

It should be noted that broad participation does not mean every public needs to be on every committee, included in every survey, or asked to provide advice on every issue. Some planning stages, such as creating a vision for district schools and setting goals need, to be broadly inclusive because they define community needs, expectations, and achievement goals. At these stages, surveys, focus groups, and open forums are common avenues of participation. Out of necessity, identifying specific strategies to improve achievement requires a more focused approach, however. For example, fewer individuals can be included on task forces charged with the goals of making district standards more rigorous or addressing the needs of at-risk students. Participation is limited by the size of task forces and the expertise or perspectives they may require. While making every effort to include representatives of groups that hold a particular stake in the issue, districts might appoint staff curriculum specialists, officials from youth organizations, site council members, and parent and business representatives to these task forces.

Broad participation is not the only way to ensure that participants are representative of the community. Districts can establish policies to ensure that participation on standing and ad hoc committees, task forces, and other groups is representative. School site councils can be leveraged to enhance community representation. For example, the schools in the profiled districts have site councils that play an important role in the development of school improvement plans. It is therefore critical to involve council representatives in strategic planning. In turn, council representation leverages public participation, because most school councils have rules requiring that appointed or elected council members be representative of the community.

In short, engaging internal and external publics for student achievement does not require radical structures or thinking. Districts can build and expand on existing foundations and engagement practices based on community needs.

Most important, districtwide strategic planning does not imply that all planning is centralized. The profiled districts used strategic planning to develop frameworks for vision, goals and objectives, strategy, and accountability. Schools within the districts coordinated their planning efforts within those frameworks while working to meet the needs of their schools. Often school administrators, site councils, and others involved in developing school improvement plans use many of the engagement management practices described earlier. Thus, opportunities for participation at the school level can have a multiplier effect on district engagement initiatives.

Sustaining Engagement

All the superintendents and board presidents of the districts included in this report were asked what factors were critical to sustaining engagement initiatives. Their most frequent answer to this open-ended question was communication, which took several forms:

- Listening nondefensively
- Letting all publics know that the board, superintendent, and staff are committed to community engagement
- Specifying participants' roles and responsibilities and proper avenues for keeping in touch
- Providing feedback to publics to indicate their input is appreciated and is being used and that their investment of time and energy makes a difference
- Reporting to all publics on the strategic plan and progress made on goals and objectives.

Respondents cited other factors important in sustaining public engagement, including a focus on student achievement issues; balanced representation; good board/superintendent relations; a strategic planning framework for community engagement; training; setting realistic goals and objectives and realistic time lines to achieve them; and empowerment at the school level to develop and implement improvement plans.

Outcomes

To be profiled, districts were required to have indicators of improved student achievement as previously outlined. Although no attempt is made in this report to show a causal relationship between engagement and student achievement, superintendents and board presidents were asked to what degree they attributed improved achievement to public engagement initiatives. They rated engagement's contribution on a three-point scale with 3 equal to "great contribution," 2, "moderate contribution," and 1, "small contribution." The results indicate a strong link: Engagement received high scores and on average was considered to have made a great contribution (2.8) to student achievement.

The benefits of public participation in strategic planning are not limited to student achievement. Other frequently experienced benefits are:

- Better understanding of the community's expectations for its students
- Better understanding of the needs of the community
- Increased public confidence in district schools
- A clearer vision for district schools
- Clearer goals and objectives
- Identification of strategies to achieve goals and objectives
- Better alignment of district resources with goals and objectives
- Improved alignment of district and school plans
- Greater public support for student achievement initiatives
- Greater continuity of student achievement efforts
- Greater support for district funding initiatives.

Most districts reported these benefits, and board members and superintendents gave public engagement in strategic planning much of the credit for their occurrence — average contribution marks were in the range of 2.6 to 3.0.

The districts profiled in this report also illustrate strategies that were used to improve student achievement based on district and community needs. Some of the more frequently used approaches are listed below:

- Review of academic standards
- Curriculum audits/reviews
- Alignment of curriculum with standards
- Alignment of assessments with standards
- Teacher development — understanding standards,research-based teaching practices, and data-based decision making
- Timely student remediation programs
- Development of collaborative relationships with universities; youth, social, and health services agencies; religious and business groups.

Insights on Getting Started

Superintendents and board presidents in the selected districts also cited the strategic importance of building a commitment to engagement among staff, administrators, board members, and the public. As one respondent put it, districts need to incorporate a willingness to "heed what you hear" into commitment building, and they need to make engagement purposeful by involving publics in "carefully planned activities designed to find incremental solutions and results that are frequently reported." Another essential aspect of building commitment is giving credit where credit is due. One respondent summed it all up with the statement: "Think of engagement as the start of a long-term relationship."

Overcoming Difficulties

Districts encountered a variety of obstacles once they decided to follow the public engagement path. The existence of obstacles is not surprising; what is more important is the district's willingness to address these problems to improve engagement practices and student achievement. Listed below are examples of difficulties and districts' responses:

- Need for leadership: In the past, one district tended to accept politically negotiated solutions to issues even when the solutions did not address the district's needs. Now the school board and superintendent insist on making decisions that are sound from an educational point of view rather than politically expedient. Their efforts to build consensus around educational solutions have won them respect, and more people are willing to participate in appropriate ways in the decision making that drives the district's work.
- Institutional policies, traditions, and culture that run counter to engagement: One district provided training and pilot projects to convince teachers, administrators, and board members that power and influence could be gained by engaging other publics. As the issues that arose in the pilot projects were successfully addressed through new approaches to planning and problem solving, the value of convening the community became apparent. To avoid skepticism, the district took care to have equitable inclusion of all stakeholders in the strategic planning process, and participants were given meaningful work to do. To obtain greater union support, another district involved union representatives in consensus building around student achievement issues.
- Distances (both geographic and emotional) resulting from integration or busing initiatives and economically deprived communities: One district offered students and parents more choice among schools and petitioned for unitary status from the federal court. The district proposed a clustered-choice option for student assignments to help provide diverse educational opportunities for all students. Other proposals included a single student-assignment plan for the

entire district and no forced division of neighborhoods, especially those that were already naturally integrated. To address economic issues, another district developed a shared vision of world-class schools and illustrated that investment in schools resulted not only in better schools, but in a revitalized community and significant urban renewal.

- Lack of time: Districts offered alternative meeting times and locations and provided child care to encourage participation among families with young children. To ensure continuity and productivity on committees and task forces, the districts took care to identify people who could commit sufficient time to the task.
- Loss of public confidence: In one district, there was an outcry for accountability and a demand that all students have access to high academic expectations that were clearly defined and well-communicated. To win back trust, the district revised its academic standards, created an oversight committee, established partnerships, and encouraged local school councils and the superintendent's council of community advisors to address concerns about student achievement.
- Funding/lobbying for student achievement strategies: One district created a committee consisting of superintendents from more than half the districts in the state whose purpose was to form a united front in working with the state legislature on educational funding. Another revitalized a county council of PTAs using staff member presentations to help keep council members well informed. That district also subsidized the insurance that individual school PTAs had to carry and worked closely with the leadership of the county council to lobby for specific legislative issues.

Roadblocks and responses to them will vary from district to district. However, some overarching themes became evident as responses to difficulties were reviewed. These themes are:

- Be visible
- Be responsive
- Communicate
- Work to find solutions.

Conclusion

Overall, the experiences of these 15 school districts show that, while difficult, public engagement does not need to be intimidating. Whether urban, rural, or suburban, these districts are rich with examples of how to transform the frameworks, management practices, and trends discussed in the previous section into reality and should be explored for their variety and potential for application.

The 15 districts profiled are: Anderson School District One (South Carolina); Bay Shore Union Free School District (New York); Durham Public Schools (North Carolina); El Centro Elementary School District (California); Gwinnett County Public Schools (Georgia); Hood River County School District (Oregon); Houston Independent School District (Texas); Long Beach Unified School District (California); Pinellas County Schools (Florida); Romulus Community Schools (Michigan); Shawnee Mission School District (Kansas); St. Louis Park School District (Minnesota); St. Mary's County Public Schools (Maryland); Sunnyside Unified School District No. 12 (Arizona); Vancouver Public Schools (Washington).

CASE STUDIES

How 15 Districts Put Public Engagement to Work

ANDERSON SCHOOL DISTRICT ONE

South Carolina

Until the early 1990s, Anderson School District One did public engagement on an "as-needed" basis. But as the South Carolina district became one of the fastest-growing school systems in the state, it realized it needed a more formal, consistent, and inclusive process to involve community members in its mission and to prepare students to compete in the region's fast-changing economy.

Until the early 1990s, public engagement in South Carolina's Anderson School District One, a rural school system located along Interstate 85 between Charleston and Atlanta, Ga., was on an "as needed" basis. When the school board and administration wanted the community's opinion and participation, it asked for it; when the community perceived a problem or need, some of its members stepped forward to raise the issue. But, as the district, which now has 7,300 students, grew by 4 percent a year and became of one the fastest-growing school systems in the state, it faced issues that were more complex. The school district realized it needed a more formal, consistent, and inclusive process to involve community members in defining a vision and mission for the schools that would raise student achievement levels and better prepare students to compete in the region's — and the world's — fast-changing economy.

In 1990, under the leadership of school board chairman Joe Pack, the district began to explore the best way to develop a process for strategic planning. In 1991, Superintendent W. R. Christopher initiated a Total Quality Management (TQM) initiative — a philosophy and set of practices, derived from the business world, that were designed to improve quality and increase productivity. Under the TQM philosophy, organizations must create a clearly defined sense of purpose and must work continuously to improve their products. An organization can improve when it recognizes the strengths of its staff members, encourages innovation, and bases its decisions on facts rather than opinions. A key part of the process, as Anderson School District One defined TQM, involved learning how to use teams to make decisions.

"As superintendent, I was looking for something a little different to bring us together and to have participatory decision making," Christopher recalls. A $50,000 grant from the county's business-education partnership allowed the district to bring in outside trainers to teach school board members and teachers the process of teamwork. The training lasted for at least two years on a continuous basis.

Not surprisingly, not all the district's educators raced to embrace this new initiative. In fact, many staff members viewed the early training in TQM, which set the foundation for public engagement, with skepticism. Some of the district's educators saw concepts such as customer focus, continuous improvement, and data-driven decision making as business-sector principles that did not apply to public education. Concepts of participatory decision making, in which administrators had an equal say with parents, staff, and students, ran counter to established autocratic leadership styles, Christopher says. Considerable training and practice in pilot situations was necessary to convince some administrators that they could gain power and influence by relinquishing their authority, which was based chiefly on positions and titles.

Involving Stakeholders

The strategic planning process that developed from the TQM training focused attention on the need to involve all stakeholders in decision making. As the board and staff came to believe that a shared vision was essential for meaningful change, they embraced the process of shared decision making as the key to systemic improvement. District leaders, however, still faced a challenge: to convince some participants, who were accustomed to win-lose confrontations, that a decision-making process that relied on consensus was viable. Most participants were not used to spending the time strategic planning required, nor were they accustomed to respecting a process that gave all stakeholders an equal opportunity to contribute to plans and solutions, Christopher says. By insisting on a respect for the process and on the equitable inclusion of all stakeholders, the school board and administration were able to change attitudes and operating styles. As new approaches to planning and problem solving successfully resolved some early issues, the value of engagement with publics both within and outside the school system became apparent.

Anderson School District One operates under a consensus-based and commonly understood strategic plan that drives all district-level initiatives and budget decisions and prescribes all staff development.

As a result, Anderson School District One developed and began to implement a shared decision-making model based on the following principles:

- All strategic decisions (those that establish or alter the direction of operation) should be made with meaningful involvement of internal and external publics.
- All needs assessments and resulting action plans should be conducted with the involvement of all stakeholder groups.
- All plans that significantly impact working and/or learning conditions should be made by participatory stakeholder groups.

Acting on those principles, the school board in 1991 authorized the formation of stakeholder teams to study and improve four pilot areas of school system operation: office practices, parent involvement, transportation, and guidance. Each team had 12 to 15 members, including business representatives, parents, students, staff members, and board members. The district administration was careful then, as it is now, to involve all social and economic groups, achieving and underachieving students, all categories of staff, and satisfied as well as dissatisfied patrons. Gender and ethnic balance are also considered in team formation.

The Team as Improvement Tool

The four teams were so successful and the four operational areas so improved that stakeholder teams became the district's primary tool for improving the school system. The school board, community, district administration, and school staffs found such satisfaction in this decision-making model — and in the results it produced — that it became the accepted mode of operation, Christopher says. Over an eight-year period, participatory stakeholder teams have been used at district and school site levels to develop curricula, modify schedules, reform leave policy, develop grant proposals, modify graduation requirements, and develop employee evaluation systems, promotion/retention guidelines, and a variety of other innovative programs. At any time, typically more than 10 standing and 10 ad hoc stakeholder teams function at the district level and at individual school sites. Not even the superintendent is exempt: He served on a team to make secretaries more effective.

Anderson School District One operates under a consensus-based and commonly understood strategic plan that drives all district-level initiatives and budget decisions and prescribes all staff development. A renewal plan, which reflects the needs of internal and external stakeholders, drives the operation of each school. Because the plans are owned by stakeholders, they are smoothly carried out and most interim goals are achieved, Christopher says. Staff, students, and community share a vision for the school system: "The mission of Anderson School District One, in partnership with students, parents, and community, is to develop well-rounded, productive members of society by providing challenging and diverse educational experiences which meet individual needs and capitalize on the unique qualities of everyone." Broad involvement and openness to ideas has generated an organizational culture that values a positive school climate, high levels of student achievement, and a sense of community, Christopher adds.

The strategic planning teams are ongoing, because the strategic plan, which must be submitted to the state department of education each year, is revised annually. Fifty percent or more of the members of those teams, as

well as others involved in strategic decisions, are from the external public — a guideline that has proved invaluable in fostering community support for building programs, increased academic standards, and other system initiatives. External publics include parents, retirees, volunteers, service agency representatives, media representatives, community and civic leaders, university and community college representatives, and law enforcement agency officials. The district's more than 40 business partners are typically represented on all planning and action teams. Additionally, each school's renewal planning team is the school's Improvement Council, which by law must be composed of at least 50 percent nonstaff members and a majority of elected members.

Teams addressing specific operational areas, such as employee evaluation study teams, are formed primarily of internal stakeholders, but they always contain representatives who have concerns and/or expertise in the specific operational area under study. Internal publics always include students, teachers, administrators, counselors, and media specialists. Because all employees of Anderson School District One are considered educators, planning and decision-making teams include custodial, secretarial, food service, maintenance, and transportation personnel.

School board involvement and efforts that are aligned and coordinated at all levels have been the keys to the district's strategic planning processes, Christopher says. Board members often serve as members of strategic teams and planning groups. Strategic plans are widely distributed and linked to a variety of operational tasks, such as budget decisions, staff development plans, and employee evaluation criteria. All initiatives are coordinated and must be consistent with the district's overall plan and with school site renewal plans. In all cases, the board hears reports and findings of planning and action teams. For example, the team that conducted a technology study has asked the board to approve its report, which outlined a technology plan for the school district for the next five years.

"The biggest thing we have learned is that teams can be very time-consuming, certainly not the most expedient way, but they are an effective way to make decisions," says Christopher. Not only do teams generate new ideas, but they have also "accomplished our goal of becoming more effective."

The district's public engagement process, he says, has resulted in a great many school site and district-level accomplishments. In recent years, for example, every instructional area has been evaluated and revised, resulting in a standards-driven curriculum and high achievement levels. Service learning, dropout prevention, character education, volunteer tutoring programs, case management teams, summer remediation, preschool parent training, and other initiatives have been instituted with community support and have produced the results envisioned by the strategic planning process, Christopher says. Operational areas that traditionally spark controversy, such as leave policy, employee evaluation, and grade retention, have been evaluated and restructured without incident, he adds.

As a result of stakeholder participation in planning and decision making, changes occur more smoothly in Anderson School District One than in many school districts and are often less expensive to implement. The school system can operate very cost effectively because, typically, there is little or no resistance to initiatives that result from participatory decision making, and less training and orientation are needed to implement changes. Although Anderson One has a lower-than-average tax base, it leads the state in a number of student achievement measures — even with a lower-than-average per-pupil expenditure ($5,165 in 1996-97, the latest figure available) and a smaller-than-average administrative staff (seven professionals, plus secretaries).

As a result of stakeholder participation in planning and decision making, changes occur more smoothly in Anderson School District One than in many school districts and are often less expensive to implement.

One of the most significant results of public engagement is the confidence that this community — a mix of professional and blue-collar workers — has developed in the school district. Because most community members have served on district or school teams or participated in other ways, they trust and support the school board, administration, and teachers and understand the rationale for daily operational decisions, Christopher explains. The community's trust has created an atmosphere of support and stability that contributes to employees' job satisfaction and directly benefits students. As an example of this support, the community passed two bond referenda in the past eight years. The most recent one, in March 1999, calls for $19.6 million to build two new elementary schools and additions to an existing elementary school, bringing the total number of district schools to 14.

Measurable Results

The district's process of shared decision making has led to a wide variety of initiatives and changes that have raised student attendance and test scores and lowered dropout rates. The changes are apparent even in the earliest grades, with consistent increases in first-grade readiness scores. In 1998, 90 percent of entering first-graders scored "school ready" — a substantial increase over the 76.8 percent who were ready for school in 1992. Christopher attributes this increased readiness level to several initiatives that were developed and improved through public participation. They include an expanded child development program, a parent and family literacy program, in-home parent training, therapeutic child care, a kindergarten program for four-year-olds, and an expanded kindergarten program for five-year-olds.

> What is necessary are "leadership and staff who not only know that engagement of the public is critical but who work hard to make certain that engagement is taking place."
>
> —*W.R. Christopher, Superintendent Anderson School District One*

In 1997, two-thirds of all the district's schools were recipients of state school incentive awards — with Anderson School District One being one of only three South Carolina districts to achieve that status. Again, Christopher says, the academic gains that made these awards possible stem directly from increased academic standards and school improvement strategies that were developed as part of the district's strategic planning and school renewal processes.

In 1998, Anderson One posted its highest scores ever on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT); the district's average composite score of 1019 exceeded the national average for the first time. Forty-four percent of eligible students took the SAT. Only four years before, in 1994, the district's average composite score had been 874. "We are doing a better job of teaching the skills being tested on the SAT," noted Christopher in a press release issued when the scores were announced in September 1998. "Teachers in all grade levels are requiring students to solve problems, think critically and reason," he said. "These kinds of classroom activities are not sporadic, but routine throughout the day." And these activities are based, he says, on three years of increased academic standards that were implemented by curriculum, grade level, and subject area teams.

The school district's dropout rate has steadily declined from more than 3 percent in the early 1990s to a low of 1.59 percent in 1997. Summer remediation, tutoring programs, and the tracking of at-risk students contributed to this decline. Grade retentions have dropped from 7.5 percent in 1996 to 5.0 percent in 1998 — a result of improved teaching strategies and at-risk student services such as tutoring and summer remediation. At the same time, because of a variety of strategies implemented to improve student attendance, attendance rose from 95.8 percent in 1990 (when Anderson One ranked 50th in the state in attendance) to 96.9 percent in 1998. The latest figures are projected to rank Anderson One in the state's top 10.

High school students at Anderson One are beginning to think about their future careers differently, recognizing that they have numerous options to consider after graduation. The percentage of district graduates entering postsecondary training increased from 66.3 percent in 1996 to 69.6 percent in 1998 as a direct result of more than 1,000 individual parent-staff Career Planning Conferences each year. The Career Planning Conference initiative was developed and implemented by a participatory team of stakeholders and supported by inclusion in district and school renewal plans.

Even in a relatively small and homogeneous district like Anderson One, public engagement is a process that cannot be taken for granted; it requires continuing effort. To make public engagement happen in the first place and to sustain it over the long run, a school district has to "walk the talk," says Christopher, in describing the lessons he has learned. What is necessary are "leadership and staff who not only know that engagement of the public is critical but who work hard to make certain that engagement is taking place," he says. And everyone, he adds, has to commit to the process to make it work.

For more information, contact W.R. Christopher, Superintendent, Anderson School District One, at (864) 847-7344. The district's Web site is at http://www.anderson1.k12.sc.us.

BAY SHORE UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

New York

The Bay Shore Union Free School District has developed a public engagement process that has bound the school system and its community into a true partnership. The superintendent and board of education in this New York district were determined to use the school system as the catalyst to ignite the process of community change and revitalization.

The Bay Shore Union Free School District has a wonderful location on the Great South Bay of Long Island, 45 miles east of New York City. The community, which calls itself the "Heart of the South Shore," is proud of its history, traditions, and bountiful recreational, cultural, and educational opportunities. First a popular resort area, Bay Shore became a prosperous suburban community at the end of World War II. But a decline in the town's fortunes and an evaporating tax base have taken their toll. Bay Shore's once-fashionable Main Street deteriorated as local businesses failed and crime and vacancy rates grew. And the school system, long recognized for outstanding programs in a number of areas, suffered as well. When Superintendent Evelyn Blose Holman took the helm of the 5,000-student suburban district in 1994, she faced teacher union strife and a poor public perception of the schools.

Holman and the board of education quickly recognized, however, that the school system was the common thread that united Bay Shore and its neighboring community, Brightwaters. They determined to use the school system — which had the facilities, manpower, and desire to garner community support — as the catalyst that would ignite the process of community change. The ultimate result: a public engagement process that has inextricably bound the school system and its community into a true partnership that has given new life and hope for a better future to all Bay Shore residents, young and old. The school district's motto reflects its new vitality: "The Future Begins Here."

Annual Summit Meetings

With full support from the school board, Holman began by gathering together a few community leaders to discuss the issues the town faced. The group decided to arrange a "town meeting" to better communicate the status of the community's fragmented rejuvenation projects and the efforts the schools were making to educate their young people. The original planning committee included representatives from a wide variety of agencies and interest groups, such as local realtors, clergy, hospital administrators, the Chamber of Commerce, town government, Rotary and Lions Club, YMCA, senior citizens, and student government. A Steering Committee set January 30, 1995, as the date for the town meeting, dubbed the Bay Shore Summit. A carefully planned media blitz immediately following winter vacation helped publicize the summit throughout the community.

In preparing for its first town meeting, the school district and steering committee could not predict what level of participation to expect. "We didn't know whether to make 50 cups of coffee or 500," recalls Barbara Fishkind, the school district's coordinator of schools and community services. The actual turnout surpassed all expectations, as 1,200 people filled the high school auditorium to capacity to discuss the revitalization of the Bay Shore community. The summit spearheaded the movement to improve the quality of life in the town, to better meet the needs of children, and to aid in the transition of the downtown area.

Attendance at the annual town meetings has increased each year. The 1999 meeting attracted close to 1,400 people, filling the auditorium and three other rooms as well. Superintendents and school board members from neighboring districts attended, as did two staff members representing the school board in Marietta, Ga. That school district had first heard Fishkind speak about the Bay Shore Summit — which won a 1996 Magna Award for excellence in school governance from the American School Board Journal — at a National School Boards Association convention. "People are calling us daily to copy our model," adds Fishkind. "But you can't copy it. It has to develop from a town's needs. This is really a grass-roots effort."

After the first summit, action subcommittees were formed to organize the community for change. The committees ranged from a Bay Shore beautification committee, whose goal was to find ways to enhance the natural beauty of the area, to a downtown redevelopment committee, which was expected to involve local citizens in decision making about ways to improve the downtown business area. A code enforcement committee, noting that rising school enrollments were a direct result of ille-

gal multi-dwelling homes in town, assisted town government in enforcing existing codes. A cultural arts committee was asked to help develop a cultural arts center in the downtown area that would involve students and staff.

The Summit Council, an umbrella organization, was formed so that the community could speak with one voice, Fishkind says. Because Bay Shore itself is not incorporated, the Summit Council functions as a kind of unofficial structure that represents community views. Made up of the presidents or chief executive officers of 33 major organizations, the council, which meets monthly, has its own bylaws and elections. Superintendent Holman represents the Bay Shore public schools on the council.

Because the school system promoted the reunification of the town, it has received a great deal back — the community has given financial and other kinds of support.

Bay Shore residents recognize that the school system has been the driving force behind change. "People are saying that if it weren't for the schools, these changes wouldn't be happening," notes Fishkind. "The superintendent is a master at making connections and building bonds between people." Because the school system promoted the reunification of the town, it has received a great deal back — the community has given financial and other kinds of support. This community backing in turn supports student achievement efforts, says Assistant to the Superintendent Christina DeGregoris.

As one example of Bay Shore's strong school-community connection, 300 children, equipped with gardening gloves, rakes, hoes, plants, and shovels, helped with the 1999 "Bay Shore Beautification Big Help Event." Under the leadership of the chair of the Summit Council's beautification committee, children and adults planted hundreds of seedlings on a county road near a gateway to the community. A Suffolk County legislator arranged permission for the plantings. Home Depot, a major hardware store, donated materials, and other stores made contributions to the event. "When you have schools, businesses, and community agencies working together, the results are astounding," Fishkind said in an article in the school district's newspaper. "It's becoming a way of life here in Bay Shore."

Flexible Planning and Action Committees

The district's goals are closely tied to the needs of the community, and the district views its strategic planning process as a dynamic, constantly evolving process that is not set in stone — nor even set down on paper. It has no written long-term plan. In formulating its plans, the district reviews the needs of the community each year at the annual summit and through surveys of parents, students, staff, and community members. A survey distributed at the first annual town meeting in January 1995 led to action plans and committees. At the fourth annual summit in January 1998, a second questionnaire was distributed (and also published in the district's newsletter). The results of that questionnaire were tabulated and distributed to the appropriate committees for action. Decisions that affect school policy are brought back to the board of education. The school system has school-based management teams; many of these team members also serve on the various planning committees of the Summit Council.

Eleven school-community action committees meet monthly at school district headquarters, and Fishkind, a district employee, coordinates the meetings. Committee decisions, projects, and outcomes are reported in the district newsletter and at various meetings — such as those held by the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Lions Club, and school board — throughout the month. Additional groups, such as the Bay Shore Arts Endowment Fund, also meet and help to develop curricula, programs, and special events. Residents, government leaders, school staff, business owners, and student representatives sit on the committees. Notices are sent, minutes are kept, and annual reports are filed. More than 800 names appear on the district's "key communicator" list.

The many committees working to improve the quality of life for Bay Shore residents reflect the demographics of the community, explains Fishkind. The various ethnic, racial, and religious groups living in Bay Shore's diverse community are well represented. For example, the Summit Council's membership includes the chairman of the Clergy Association and a representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

When publicizing events, the school district goes beyond what Fishkind calls the "lunchbox express" in order to reach out to as many constituents in the community as possible. Because only 32 percent of the public has school-age children, the district finds it imperative to use varied and creative means to communicate, and to communicate on a regular basis. Vehicles for communication include church and synagogue pulpit announce-

ments, notices in the public library, banners across Main Street, articles in the district's monthly newsletter and on its Web site, talks at local service clubs, and periodic notices to local neighborhood associations. The school district also hosts a yearly breakfast for local realtors to give them materials and information about the schools, their programs, and staff. District leaders note that realtors no longer say, "location, location, location" but "education, education, education!"

DeGregoris says that some student achievement strategies have evolved from the work of the Summit Council, planning meetings, and annual summit meetings. Curricula have been revised to reflect higher standards, and student tutoring programs in churches and other community facilities help prepare students for state tests. A federal grant has supported the use of the same portfolio software in nonpublic schools as in public schools, so that private school students can make an easier transition to public schools.

A community center gives children a chance to do their homework. Extended day programs, vacation remediation, Saturday school, and a summer school program also support student achievement.

The Wellness Center, which offers weight-lifting and other physical activities that attract students, opened in April 1998 at the Bay Shore Middle School. Two local hospitals each gave $20,000, and local doctors donated $15,000 worth of exercise equipment for this interdisciplinary facility, which also has state-of-the-art heart monitors and computers. The Bay Shore Wellness Alliance, a consortium of educators, hospital officials, and community health care workers dedicated to helping students understand the positive effects of healthy lifestyles, is considering additional sites for other wellness centers.

The district has seen many other gains as well. Every school budget has been passed on the first vote since the public engagement process began, and an $18.3 million bond issue that allows for building expansion and technology enhancements was overwhelmingly passed. Contract negotiations with the teachers union, which formerly had been filled with strife and strike, have been fair and smooth. A community page in the monthly school newspaper has been positively received and has increased readership. Local realtors report that housing prices have gone up and that prospective buyers are requesting to live in the Bay Shore school district, Fishkind says. More than 100 private school students have transferred back to the public schools.

Increased Student Achievement

Student achievement has also continued to rise. In 1994-95 Bay Shore had three schools with a passing rate of less than 90 percent on the New York State Reading PEP test. In 1996-97 and 1997-98, however, all elementary schools had a 90 percent passing rate. The percentage of children passing the Math PEP has remained consistently high, with close to 100 percent passing in 1996-97, and 100 percent passing in 1997-98. Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores improved more than 100 points in the last two years, ranking Bay Shore above state and national averages.

The school district is planning a number of changes that should continue to increase student achievement. The restructuring of the high school day from eight to nine periods will provide more time-on-task for students who need extra time to meet new graduation requirements. Enhanced Advanced Placement offerings will provide additional challenges for students. The addition of the Intel/Westinghouse Research Program will enable students to hone their research skills and enter this nationally recognized science competition. The expansion of the district's successful Comprehensive Summer School Program for remediation and enrichment will reach students at a younger age in order to close any achievement gaps. To meet New York State's new higher standards, Bay Shore also offers Saturday programs, vacation help, and weekend SAT preparation.

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Finding money to make the improvements Bay Shore needs has sometimes been a difficult challenge, but the district hired a grant writer on a consultant basis to seek new funding sources. Since hiring him, the district has received more than $1 million in grants. The establishment of school-business partnerships has also brought money into the system. With the help of the Business Advisory Board, the Wellness Alliance, Arts Endowment Fund, and the annual Bay Shore Summit, the district has reaped the benefits of working with private industry, says Fishkind. The Bay Shore Arts Endowment Fund, instituted to enhance direct student participation in the arts and related sciences, has funded a number of projects. They include an artist-in-residence at the high school, the purchase of electronic keyboards at the middle school, and out-of-school performances and trips to theaters in New York City or to the Jones Beach State Theatre.

The quality of life in the community has also been continuously improving. The Touro College of Health Sciences opened in downtown Bay Shore, allowing more than 500 students to enjoy the community's shops and restaurants before and after classes. The restoration of the town's first firehouse, which will house an artist-in-residence, is underway. The Bay Shore Community Center, which opened recently, offers after-school tutoring classes, a drop-in lounge, and a summer day program, as well as dances, computers, arts and crafts, adult discussions, and teen support. A Bay Shore Community Corporation has been established to revitalize some of the community's neighborhoods, and a proposed Long Island Aquarium, now in the design and development phase, received a $1 million grant. Summer band concerts will be held in a handsome new Band Shell. Fishkind says Bay Shore music students will have the chance to perform with professional musicians.

Superintendent Holman recommends that school districts embarking on engaging the public should listen to the public and the staff, in both formal and informal ways. "Talk to students and the community," she suggests. Use questionnaires, and do your homework. Bring all who are involved together and give people constant feedback through newsletters and meetings. Meetings need to be well planned, she says. Keep them short, and assign jobs so that no one's valuable time is wasted, she adds. Holman also suggests that school districts keep strategic plans "fluid" to allow board members and administrators to react to the changing needs and priorities of the community.

For more information, contact Barbara Fishkind, Coordinator of Schools-Community Service, at (516)-968-1251. The school district's Web site is at http://www.bayshore.k12.ny.us.

DURHAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

North Carolina

One of North Carolina's largest and most diverse school districts, the result of a merger of city and county districts, needed to identify common goals and find ways to achieve them. Community engagement, a long-standing tradition in Durham, was the key ingredient in the district's evolution to a unified, high-functioning school system.

Less than a decade ago, the Durham (N.C.) Public Schools faced a major challenge: merging the city and county school districts into one system. How could the new district — which includes rural tobacco farmers, city dwellers with urban problems, and university professors and doctors in Research Triangle Park — identify common goals and find ways to reach them? How could the new district determine which policies and practices to keep and which to change? How could it move forward quickly to raise student achievement?

Community engagement, a long-standing tradition in Durham, was the key ingredient in Durham's evolution to a unified, high-functioning school system. The district that emerged from the consolidation process is diverse. Its 29,000 students are ethnically and socioeconomically varied; 56 percent of the students are black, 35 percent are white, and 4 percent are Hispanic; 40 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The district recognized that its paramount task was to involve all its stakeholders in creating a shared vision and mission for the new school system. That process had to be fully representative and sensitive to the needs and desires of a wide range of parents, students, staff, businesses, and community residents.

When talk of merger surfaced, a Merger Issues Task Force held a series of forums to promote community involvement. Local community leaders, in cooperation with school officials, initiated discussions in an attempt to gain consensus on key issues. An elected seven-member school board began to put several structures in place to ensure public participation in school district and school planning and to ensure that decisions were not dominated by one district or one faction. For example, on the district level, every meeting of the school board includes a public comment period, and all action meetings of the board are aired in their entirety on local access cable television — a requirement of the original merger plan. The board holds special hearings in conjunction with every budget adoption and before creating or altering a school attendance zone.

An Inclusive Budget Process

The budget process is a good example of Durham's comprehensive approach to community involvement. In developing its proposed $225.3 million budget for 1999-2000, the school board and superintendent actively sought the community's advice, since decisions about what the budget would include affected a diverse group of community representatives. The budget process began in November 1998, when the superintendent, board chairman, and two senior staff members met with Durham county executives to establish basic budget understandings. After a base budget and a growth budget were determined by December, the Budget Advisory Committee — a group of some 30 community representatives, business people, parents, and school officials — met to help the school system set budget priorities. In the months that followed, Durham budget officials — working with the community's input as well as with enrollment growth projections, estimated revenue, and other data — presented preliminary proposals. The superintendent and assistant superintendents reviewed and discussed the proposals and fine-tuned the budget document before presenting it to the school board in April 1999.

The school district posted the budget proposal on its Web site and placed it in school libraries and at other locations so citizens could examine it. In their budget message to the community, Superintendent Ann Denlinger and Board Chairman Kathryn Meyers said that the requested increase would serve one main purpose: to retain and attract high-quality instructional staff by offering salaries that are competitive with other school districts. "Durham citizens must know that they receive a solid return for their investment in our system. They must feel confident that the district is being a responsible steward of their tax dollars," they said. "Accountability to the community we serve is crucial in determining our resources and how we make the most effective use of them."

Other Areas of Engagement

Durham seeks the community's contribution in many other areas as well. For example, to allow comment on the district's long-term capital improvement campaign,

each high school will host a forum for parents and other citizens who live in the school's feeder zones to discuss how the plan will affect each school in that particular zone. While any citizen can attend and speak at any of these forums, the district hopes that, by focusing attention on one area of the county at each forum, each school's needs will be addressed. These discussions should result in a plan that the entire community can support, says Michael Yarbrough, the district's media relations coordinator.

The school district also conducts focus group interviews within the community, usually in conjunction with a program evaluation of some area of school operation. Most recently, an evaluation of the district's vocational education program gave business leaders and parents the chance to express their opinions in focus group interviews.

By board policy, each school has a self-governing Site-Based Decision-Making Committee (SBDM), which must include parents and representatives of the certified and classified staff, and may include other members of the general school community. The 15 members of each school's committee are elected, ensuring that various publics will be adequately represented on any working committee subgroup. The SBDMs exist in addition to PTAs, which flourish at most of Durham's 45 schools. A district-level SBDM oversight committee, which includes community representatives as well as a board member, coordinates the SBDMs, whose roles have been redefined to allow them to participate in both policy development and implementation. Increasingly, they are involved in reviewing and modifying board policy and in other issues that touch on school governance and management.

By board policy, each school has a self-governing Site-Based Decision-Making Committee (SBDM), which must include parents and representatives of the certified and classified staff, and may include other members of the general school community.

In fact, after extensive involvement of the SBDMs at each school, the board of education adopted a vision statement that is printed on every school board agenda, embossed on the wall of the board room and invoked consistently by teachers, principals, and parents. That statement reads: "Durham Public Schools will ensure that all students achieve at highest potential regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Each student will make continuous progress and be at or above grade level."

That vision led to the heart of the school system's reform efforts — five initiatives that form the structure of the budget and the actual work of the schools. These initiatives include a focus on early literacy efforts (grades K-3); the education of academically/intellectually gifted students; the creation of special programs for disaffected students; special attention to the needs of students who drop out of school; and magnet schools. The district reports its progress on these initiatives annually, with an update to county commissioners, who must evaluate funding requests for the coming year, said David Holdzkom, assistant superintendent for research, development, and accountability.

Working Groups

To support the decision-making process and to allow various issues to be examined more extensively, special working groups are created periodically and charged with studying a particular issue facing the board. In addition to the Budget Advisory Committee, other groups, comprising school and community representatives, have addressed meeting the needs of school drop-outs and students suspended from school and serving children in the Exceptional Children's program.

The working groups are all different; there is no fixed formula for choosing the members. The structure depends on the purpose of the group, said Holdzkom. To meet the needs of students who were candidates for expulsion, for example, a working group that included school administrators, law enforcement and juvenile justice officials, and other community members was formed to examine the problem. That group was selected because it was clear from the beginning that children with severe behavioral problems had personal issues that extended beyond the classroom. Their problems had to be addressed on a community-wide basis, says Holdzkom, because expelling them and turning them loose on the community was not the answer. The working group concluded that some children might need mental health assistance for their problems — a service not provided by the schools — and the group formulated possible solutions.

Another working group addressed ending social promotion. The superintendent's senior staff led a campaign to engage the community in the discussion of higher standards for grade-to-grade promotion, using a set of frequently asked questions combined with hard data about how students were performing. A cadre of about 60 teachers and principals was trained to lead conversa-

tions in communities to determine what the standards for promotion should be. During these discussions, parents and other community members who volunteered to participate were able to share ideas about what students should know and be able to do before being promoted from one grade to another. The discussions also included attention to the needs of students who were not yet appropriate candidates for promotion. It became clear, says Holdzkom, that there was community consensus on some issues: "There should be no one single test for promotion," for example, he says, and there should be a way to help special education children who were on the social promotion track. These discussions, at which notes were taken, ultimately led to a unified policy on promotion, built on consensus and based on a set of standards and processes.

Roadblocks to Unification

The road to unification has not been entirely smooth, however. One roadblock to true community engagement was a tendency in the community to accept politically negotiated solutions to problems, says Michael Yarbrough, the district's media relations coordinator. To counter that tendency, the board and superintendent have insisted on the need to make decisions that are educationally sound — rather than accept solutions that are politically expedient. While this process is an ongoing one, he says, there is clear evidence that more people than before are willing to participate in appropriate ways in the decision-making process that drives the district's work.

The decision to revamp school board policies is an example of the district's success in overcoming political hurdles. Superintendent Denlinger, who took her post in March 1997, was determined to unify the board's "jury-rigged" policies, which had been cobbled together from the policies each district had in force before the merger. For the past year, the board has been engaged in a complete overhaul and revision of all policies governing the Durham Public Schools. During this process, the board frequently declined to move on a policy until comment was received from the SBDMs, principals, and teachers. A set of uniform policies — outlining the student code of conduct and methods for reporting student absences to parents, for example — is almost complete.

The district tries to gauge its success through annual "customer satisfaction surveys" administered to parents of students in grades 4, 7, and 10. This survey is in addition to surveys distributed to students in these grades and to all staff members. Since the first full-scale survey was done in January 1995, four others have been conducted. In the 1998-99 survey, which assessed satisfaction with school climate, instructional focus, safety, responsiveness, and seven other themes, 84 percent of students, 38 percent of parents, and 59 percent of staff answered the survey questions. The results were generally positive. "The collective degree of customer satisfaction among all groups can be characterized as favorable," said a summary of the most recent survey. "The two-year trend for customer satisfaction in Durham Public Schools is clearly up, particularly for high school students and parents, and school staff at all levels," said the report.

In response to customer demand, other initiatives have been taken to improve the functioning of the school administration and to make it more cohesive. For example, the nonprofit Partnership for Excellence, which consists of community leaders, educators from Duke University and other institutions, and business leaders from companies such as Glaxo-Wellcome, provides training and guidance to the superintendent and the school board to improve student achievement.

The superintendent has also made a concerted effort to have the administrative team function more effectively and efficiently. Although the district's 45 principals have always had group meetings, they now meet once, rather than twice, a month, and the meetings have been restructured to change the focus from administrative detail to thinking and learning, says Holdzkom. Now, for example, a morning presentation on an education topic, such as "systems analysis and systems thinking," allows principals to learn something new. After the general presentation, the principals meet by grade level to discuss the topic and ask questions.

> Through its various community engagement efforts, the school has made steady progress toward its objective of raising student achievement.

Through its various community engagement efforts, the school has made steady progress toward its objective of raising student achievement. Examples include the following:

- The Durham Public Schools posted the highest gains in its history as a consolidated school district in student performance indicators for the 1997-98 school year. The state ranks all schools through its ABC (Accountability, Basics, and Control) ratings system, placing schools in one of four categories — low performing, adequate performance, expected growth, or exemplary growth. For the 1997-98 school year, 10

more schools achieved exemplary growth than did in 1996-97, for a total of 21 out of 43, or nearly half of all Durham schools. While no schools in 1996-97 had been named "schools of distinction" (80 percent or more of students performing at or above grade level), two schools earned that designation in 1997-98. In 1996-97, half of Durham's elementary or middle school students attended schools that met or exceeded state standards, while nearly nine in 10 students attended such schools in 1997-98.

- The district's end-of-course/end-of-grade (EOC-EOG) tests — state tests that are used to determine the ABC rankings — showed significant increases in 1998 in the percentage of students at all grade levels who performed at grade level in reading and mathematics. There were also significant increases in average scores in reading and math — increases that were sustained when the achievement data were disaggregated by ethnicity. On 15 out of 18 end-of-grade and end-of-course tests, 83 percent of students of all ethnic groups and both genders scored at their highest levels.

- As another indicator of academic success, Durham high school students taking the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scored an average of 996 points in 1997-98. That score was 12 points higher than the previous year's performance, and 44 points higher than in 1992, when the merged district was formed. More than three-quarters (77.3 percent) of eligible high school students take the test, a figure well above both state (62 percent) and national (43 percent) levels. African-American and white students alike have outscored their counterparts in the state and the nation on SAT scores for the past five years.

While the district has made real strides, it knows it has to stay the course to meet its goals — and therefore has to sustain its public engagement efforts. Board President Meyers says the district keeps citizens engaged in two ways: by proving to the public that their investment of time and energy really matters to policymakers, and by keeping the process of engagement "lively, fair, and focused." Noting that creativity and a sense of humor are very important, she gives three pieces of advice to other districts: "Make sure you're willing to heed what you hear. Give up control of the outcome and be open to boldness. And build follow-up 'report cards' into the process so you'll know where it all led."

For more information, contact Michael Yarbrough, Media Relations Coordinator, at (919) 560-3652. The district's Web site is at http://www.dpsnc.com.

EL CENTRO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT

California

Nearly 72 percent of the 6,300 students in the El Centro Elementary School District qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. High unemployment rates and high rates of poverty also characterize the district. Against this background, the district made a commitment, in collaboration with key stakeholders, to make substantial and continuous improvements in its schools.

Located in the southeast corner of California, 12 miles from the Mexican border, the El Centro Elementary School District seems to have the cards stacked against it. The community has the highest unemployment rate — 30 percent — in the state, and, with a mean income of only $14,000 a year, the highest poverty rate as well. Seventy-two percent of the district's 6,300 students, 81 percent of whom are Hispanic, qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. But while this rural school district could not change these bleak economic facts, it was determined to overcome the odds and offer its students a chance for a better life. The school district made a commitment, in collaboration with key stakeholders in the community, to make substantial and continuous improvements in its schools.

In the summer of 1994, the El Centro Elementary School District began a strategic planning process, in conjunction with Goals 2000, that had the following objectives:

- To build consensus around the district's mission, goals, and values
- To develop strategies to improve student performance
- To create a process that involves all stakeholders
- To establish a framework for ongoing long-range planning that incorporates existing planning initiatives and new concepts as they are developed.

As the first step, the El Centro board of trustees discussed strategic issues that pertained to the school district and its students. After these discussions, the board drafted a mission statement, a vision statement, three goals, and eight principles that were identified as critical to support the three goals.

That fall, the district published an open letter to the community, pledging a commitment to improve the educational process for all students. The open letter shared the core beliefs that had influenced the board's formulation of its mission and vision statements and its goals and principles. The letter also invited staff, parents, and the community to participate in a series of community forums. At these forums, stakeholders could react to these fundamental beliefs and goals and discuss the obstacles and barriers they perceived as standing in the way of the district's ability to achieve its goals.

School principals, who also received the letter, were asked to hold faculty meetings at which all certificated and classified staff could discuss the same issues. Finally, leaders of local service clubs, professional organizations, the Chamber of Commerce, and members of an alliance of religious leaders were invited either to participate in a community forum or to schedule a similar activity for their constituents.

A Public Process

That fall and in the spring of 1995, some 27 community forums, faculty meetings, and activities with service clubs, religious leaders, and professional organizations were held. All community forums were conducted in English and Spanish; one meeting was held during the day at a laundromat in order to include many parents who typically did not participate. More than 1,200 people participated in the process of reacting to the draft mission, vision, goals, and principles and then identifying and putting into priority order the obstacles that had to be removed in order for the district to meet its goals of literacy, a strong academic program, and good citizenship.

District leaders say the forums maximized participation for all stakeholders. Led by the district's senior administrative staff and monitored by the board of trustees, each forum followed an identical format. After a welcome and introductions, staff members presented the goals to achieve and the principles to follow. Participants were arranged in small groups of six to eight members; each group, equipped with paper, pens, and tape, selected a reporter and a recorder. The groups first reacted to the district's presentation, charting, posting, and reporting their views. Then the groups tackled the other major issue: "What obstacles or barriers stand in the way of the district's achieving these three goals?" After brainstorming and charting its perceptions, each group listed, in priority order, the top five obstacles it perceived.

Participants identified more than 600 barriers to be overcome. The district's senior staff reviewed the list and

grouped the obstacles into six categories: accountability, communication, instruction, parents and community, policy/fiscal, and safety. After consolidating responses by frequency, the district identified the forum participants' top 10 priorities:

- Improvement in communication between home, school, teacher, and district
- Student uniforms
- Better discipline to deal with classroom disruptions
- Standards for what students are expected to learn
- More parental involvement
- Greater community and business support
- More parent education
- Accountability from students, parents, teachers, and administrators
- More resources
- Teacher attitudes, perceptions, and expectations.

Armed with this list, the district then began a process to determine the most effective ways to remove barriers and work toward the community's priorities. Each school was asked to submit the names of classified and certificated employees and parents to begin to develop an action plan. Members of the community at large and business people were also invited to participate on school leadership teams and on the districtwide panel.

In the area of instructional programs, an important goal is to develop and implement grade-level standards and expectations for all subject areas and to develop and implement a system to monitor student progress.

The 76-member districtwide panel, divided into six working groups — one for each major category — met six times during the 1994-95 school year. The panel created a recommended plan of action by using a "backward mapping" process that began with the major question, "Where do we want to be?" and worked backward to figure out how to get there. Each working group determined the tasks, time, talent, and resources needed to arrive at the destination. Each group shared its draft plan with the entire panel and sought information, clarification, and recommendations.

Putting the Plan in Place

The El Centro board of trustees reviewed and adopted the plan in June 1995. That action plan evolved into the district's strategic plan, "Goals to Achieve — Principles to Follow." The major components of the plan are evaluated every year and revised accordingly, says Superintendent Michael Klentschy. Parents, teachers, administrators, and community and business representatives hold meetings to review the strategic plan and report to the board every year, and a community meeting is held every five years.

The districtwide panel met twice during the next three school years to review and recommend an updated course of action for the district and to review district and individual school progress in achieving the objectives. Two additional categories — facilities and technology — were added at the end of the 1996-97 school year, and the panel then divided into eight teams to study the issues and make recommendations. The draft plan of action for each group became the framework for program planning and program delivery both at the district level and at the school site level. Each plan provides the means to link various levels of planning.

In the key area of communication, for example, one goal is to develop a strong "customer service" orientation at all levels that is responsive to the district's multicultural and multilingual community. Another is to clearly communicate and explain district goals, standards, and expectations to parents, students, and the community; and a third objective is to present budget information that is understandable to the community.

In the area of instructional programs, an important goal is to develop and implement grade-level standards and expectations for all subject areas and to develop and implement a system to monitor student progress. Another objective is to develop a plan that commits resources to having students read at grade level and to emphasize writing across the curriculum. "Safety" plans call for the creation and implementation of a student uniform policy in all schools and the training of students, staff, and parents in conflict resolution techniques.

The district is making steady progress in meeting its goals. During the 1995-96 school year, for example, each school's leadership team, staff, and site council participated in developing the criteria to determine the level of student accomplishment necessary to meet grade-level performance objectives. The recommendation to establish grade-level performance criteria came directly from the strategic plan. Schools reviewed and analyzed various combinations of multiple measures. The board of trustees adopted criteria for reading and language arts and mathematics that gave 50 percent weight to stan-

dardized test scores (using the Stanford Achievement Test Level 8 or its Spanish version, Aprenda) and 50 percent weight to student grades and writing and mathematics proficiency scores for performance. In fall 1997, each school was directed to establish a school-level plan to address how the performance targets would be met.

In 1997-98, 53 percent of students met district performance criteria in reading, and 61 percent met the criteria in mathematics, for a total of 57 percent meeting criteria in both areas. For 1998-99, the district — which is seeking steady, incremental increases — targeted a 4 percent total increase in the percentage of students meeting performance criteria.

During the 1998-99 school year, performance criteria were reviewed and revised to include the Stanford 9 as the instrument for measuring achievement; test results from that instrument are under review. The district also administered a mathematics assessment for the first time in 1999, but those results are not yet available. The district demonstrated, however, that its students had made steady and often dramatic increases on standardized tests they took between 1991 and 1996, before multiple measures were used to chart progress. The district also began assessing writing in 1996. The percent of students passing the writing proficiency examination jumped from 48 percent in 1996 to 73 percent in 1998.

One School's Success

Each school in the El Centro Elementary School District prepares an annual Accountability Report Card. This annual report card, which is available on the district's Web site, provides parents and community members with detailed data in 16 areas, ranging from student attendance and class size to school facilities and safety. A brief examination of one school, the 466-student Martin Luther King School, reveals the district's steady, consistent approach to school improvement.

Because unexcused absences had been high, the school worked closely with students and parents to monitor attendance. As an incentive to improve attendance, the school presented attendance awards at all school assemblies and posted photos of children with perfect attendance in the halls. In addition, the school presented a trophy to the class at the kindergarten, primary (grades 1-3), and upper (grades 4-6) grade levels with the best attendance for the month. These trophies are passed monthly from winning class to winning class.

To reduce class size — a state mandate — the district spent $6 million of its $33 million budget to hire 50 additional teachers and make available additional classrooms. At the King school, class sizes averaged 31 students in kindergarten, 20 in first grade, 31 in grades two and three, and 35 students in grades 4-6. In an effort to build a strong, balanced literacy program, King staff made a commitment to place instructional assistants primarily in the lower grades (K-3).

The school also implemented a schoolwide discipline plan in a consistent and positive manner, with rules posted in every classroom, and used a variety of programs to promote high expectations for student behavior and achievement. For example, there are honors for students of the week and month, as well as end-of-the-year awards for academic and school service efforts. King school also instituted programs, such as a tree planting project, to promote school pride and encourage beautification efforts. The staff worked closely with parents to alleviate serious behavioral problems and to encourage success at school. Over the past three years, suspensions have dropped from nine in 1995-96 to one in 1996-97 and two in 1997-98.

> Parents are more involved in the schools, and parent workshops and institutes have empowered parents to help their children. Teachers are more engaged in using different strategies to put students over the bar.

In staff development, a high priority in the district, activities at the King school reflected staff and instructional program needs as well as a focus on areas identified in the school plan. Activities centered around assessment methods, writing process, math and science activities, the improvement of thinking processes and reading comprehension, language acquisition, and the implementation of the district's intervention strategies for at-risk students.

Looking Ahead

The El Centro district knows it still has a long way to go. "With the collaboration of teachers, support staff, principals, parents, the business community, and others, we are making changes in the El Centro School District so we can place a sharper focus on our customer, the student," school leaders say on the district's Web site. Consistent with its strategic and school-level plans, the district is working to raise academic expectations for all students by refining what and how it teaches; update curriculum and instructional materials; develop new, more accurate

ways to assess and report student progress; provide extra support through after-school tutoring, enrichment, and Saturday school; place a major emphasis on technology as an important instructional and resource tool; increase efforts to have parents and the business community involved; and establish systems of accountability that will help the district more effectively monitor progress, celebrate success, provide support, and take corrective action.

Overall, says Superintendent Klentschy, the district's most noticeable achievement is its engagement with the community as a "true partner." Parents are more involved in the schools, and parent workshops and institutes have empowered parents to help their children. Teachers are more engaged in using different strategies to put students over the bar. The number of interventions, such as tutoring and after-school programs for math, reading, and writing improvement, has increased. And the district is receiving more support from business. Thirty-three businesses have adopted schools; one company, Costco, received an award for having 30 employees adopt students and spend two hours a week tutoring and mentoring them.

School Board President Dianna Newton says that "open and honest communication with the public," continuity, and feedback from participants are important components in sustaining public engagement. Based on his experiences, Klentschy suggests that school districts embarking on a public engagement process should listen to but should not react to the public's perception of the status of their schools. "Truly engage the public in carefully planned activities designed to find incremental solutions and results, which are frequently reported," he says. He also recommends regarding the school district budget as the "policy document" that reflects the district's strategic plan. The budget should reflect the community's priorities for its schools.

For more information, contact Michael Klentschy, Superintendent, at (760) 352-5712, ext. 515. The district's Web site is at http://www.ecsd.k12.ca.us.

GWINNETT COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Georgia

To improve the community's confidence in its public schools, this large suburban district just outside Atlanta began to involve the community extensively in determining the academic knowledge and skills students would need to flourish in the world of postsecondary education and in the workforce.

Each year, about 5,000 new students enroll in the Gwinnett County Public Schools — already the largest school system in Georgia — as more and more families are drawn to the area by economic opportunities in thriving metropolitan Atlanta. Most parents know that this suburban school system has earned a solid reputation for academic success. But in the early to mid-1990s, the community had lost much of its confidence in its public schools, even though students continued to receive good test scores. The public expressed dissatisfaction with the district's emphasis on outcomes-based education (OBE) — an educational theory that guides curriculum by setting goals for students to accomplish and focuses more on goals or "outcomes" than on "inputs" or subject content. As OBE came under intense scrutiny and criticism nationally, it fell out of favor locally as well. In Gwinnett, two superintendents came and went in a fairly short time, and two school board members were defeated in school board elections.

Community members demanded that the school district explain exactly what students were learning in school each day and outline curriculum objectives more clearly. Stakeholders believed the schools' focus should be on academics, according to district surveys done at the time. Parents sought assurance that the essentials were being taught and that students were learning the basics. In addition, all publics called for better communication between schools and parents and more opportunities for parents to become involved in their children's education.

The Gwinnett board of education paid heed to the community's views and took prompt action. To regain public confidence, the district began to involve the community extensively in determining the Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS) students would need to flourish in the world of postsecondary education and in the workforce. "We knew we were going for a high-level curriculum with high expectations," says Associate Superintendent Cindy Loe. "The school board says, 'We have a vision of a world-class school system, and we expect you to carry that out.' There was a real excitement in the district."

Setting Standards

In November 1995, the school board and Superintendent Alvin Wilbanks commissioned a new group, the Gwinnett Educational Management System (GEMS) Oversight Committee, made up of 24 parent and community representatives and 24 participants from the school system, to make certain that standards were high and curriculum objectives were clear and acceptable to the public. The committee was also charged with determining the grades that would be used for Gateway Assessments — a high-stakes testing program that would measure how well students met the standards prescribed by the curriculum.

Beginning in 1995, teams of teachers and curriculum department personnel proposed the essential knowledge and skills for each grade level and course. In proposing objectives, the teams reviewed state and national standards, such as those recommended by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Then focus groups made up of business and community leaders reviewed the proposed standards. In addition, more than 3,300 parents, community members, and Gwinnett County Public School employees gave feedback through surveys.

"The community piece was a real unique part of this effort," Loe recalls. The district hired an outside evaluator to tabulate the more than 5,000 surveys the district received, and survey results were reported to the GEMS Oversight Committee. If 80 percent of teachers and 80 percent of parents agreed on a certain curricular objective, it became part of the AKS. An item was excluded if it had support from 50 percent or fewer survey respondents, and some objectives were placed in a "to talk about" category. The AKS was also reviewed and analyzed for correlations with the state's Quality Core Curriculum, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the High School Graduation Test, and the Scholastic Assessment Test, so that students would be prepared to do well on any standard state or national measure of achievement.

Using the data, the GEMS Oversight Committee proposed the essential AKS and the grade levels for gateway tests that assess students' mastery of the curriculum. In April 1996, the superintendent recommended that the school board adopt the standards that the community had approved. That fall, the district began to publish detailed booklets for parents explaining what they could

expect their children to learn. As one example, fourth-grade language arts has a variety of knowledge categories: listening and speaking; reading; vocabulary; phonics and word identification; writing; grammar, usage, and mechanics; spelling; and accessing information and reference and study skills. The "reading" section alone has 19 objectives, ranging from "read for a purpose" to "identify figurative use of language" to "follow multistep written directions." On the school system's Intranet, its internal Web communications system, teachers can find sample test items and lesson plans that help them assess whether a child has achieved a particular objective.

Assessing Achievement

The review process was repeated in 1997 and 1998 as the school system developed the AKS in additional subjects. To date, the board of education has adopted AKS in all subject areas and grade levels, with feedback from more than 6,200 teachers, parents, and community members. This process is continued each year as new courses are developed and/or changes are recommended for existing courses. Each year, the GEMS Oversight Committee studies the comments gathered from community members, parents, and faculty as they review the AKS and the Gateway Assessment Project. The assessments, now in development for grades four, five, seven, eight, and 10, will measure all students' achievement of the curriculum. Their development has included extensive reviews by parents and community members. Test items that have not undergone public review are not included on any of the assessments.

District leaders say that the involvement of community members and parents in validating curriculum standards is imperative to provide accountability to the community at large for the educational programs that the school system offers.

The tests are an "objective check on our standards" at certain grade levels, says Loe. "If we're doing things right, the tests will validate what teachers have seen in the classroom." Children not performing well on the tests will be able to attend a free summer school and take another form of the test.

District leaders say that the involvement of community members and parents in validating curriculum standards is imperative to provide accountability to the community at large for the educational programs that the school system offers.

The district also saw the involvement of business and industry as vital, and to foster this participation, the school system began its Together for Tomorrow partnerships in 1997. Led by the district's Educational Leadership division, this initiative provides a way for the schools to join with business and industry, postsecondary institutions, and government and community members to enhance academic knowledge and skills and workforce development. Together for Tomorrow partners, who serve on advisory committees, help identify the knowledge and skills that directly relate to business and industry competencies. They identify appropriate courses for each of six high school academic majors (such as fine arts or health and human services), let students and teachers know about the availability of educational and employment opportunities, and give teachers professional development opportunities in business and industry. Together for Tomorrow partners also work with teachers to develop instructional strategies that target career-related skills in the classroom.

Over the summer, for example, 400 teachers had the chance to work in business or government in order to design lessons explaining why the AKS is valuable to students' lives beyond high school. A teacher who worked in county government was able to show students that the study of government, law, or civics has meaning by describing how local government officials, who understand the Bill of Rights, protect the rights of the community's citizens. This close association with business, industry, and government helps students, especially those in middle and high schools, understand how the curriculum relates to the real world, says Loe. To further strengthen the connection between school and the outside world, teachers can invite speakers, culled from a preapproved list of 400 contacts available in a school system database, to address their classes. Many of these speakers are also willing to invite students to their places of work.

Other Communication Vehicles

To further ensure community involvement in system initiatives, community advisory councils exist at both the district and local school levels. In 1995 the superintendent called for each school to establish a Council of School Improvement (CIS), made up of parents, community members, and educators. Each group works with

administrators to establish school improvement goals and the programs necessary to reach those goals. Each Gwinnett County school also has a Parent-Teacher Association or a Parent-Teacher-Student Association. Gwinnett's PTA boasts one of the largest memberships in the nation and has won numerous state awards.

In addition, the superintendent formed a Council of Community Advisors, which includes more than 100 parents and community leaders, in the fall of 1998. These council members, who meet with the superintendent quarterly, advise him on key issues such as safety and security and serve as key communicators within their communities. The council informed the superintendent that, while the Gwinnett community favored the gateway assessments, the public also wanted to be certain that the tests were valid, reliable, and fair and did not discriminate against any group.

Community, industry, and faculty participants in all initiatives are recruited through open calls as well as through local school recommendations. The local schools make recommendations based on their school populations, ensuring that representation is indicative of community and system make-up.

Besides receiving feedback from parents and the community, the school system uses a variety of methods to communicate to the public. Each school's regular newsletter contains local news, and the district's Annual Report and Communique, a parent-community newsletter, disseminates systemwide news. In addition, the local news media provide extensive coverage of school system news, achievements, and activities.

When it first started its extensive public engagement process, the school district had to overcome a hostile environment and regain the public's confidence in its schools. The board of education and the superintendent recognized the need to engage external and internal publics in response to a public outcry for accountability. The district knew it was essential to establish and maintain internal and external support for the system's direction. The involvement of business and community members, as well as faculty, in developing and conducting ongoing reviews of the academic standards for students was critically important in overcoming public distrust. The commissioning of the GEMS oversight committee, the revision of academic standards, and the establishment of Together for Tomorrow partnerships, local school Councils for School Improvement, and the Superintendent's Council of Community Advisors addressed these concerns. By setting these initiatives in motion, the school district began to dispel the public's distrust and win back its support.

Feedback from the public indicates that confidence in the value of students' education in Gwinnett County has increased, district leaders say. Community members, industry leaders, and educators are now striving together to help the Gwinnett County Public Schools become a system of world-class schools where students acquire the knowledge and skills to be successful as they continue their education at the postsecondary level or enter the workforce. Accountability to the community ensures that schools will do all they can to help students meet these high expectations. The engagement of community and business members assures school leaders that all the school system's stakeholders support these expectations.

Positive Results

Since these initiatives were implemented, Gwinnett County Public Schools' test scores, which are consistently above state and national averages, indicate an increase in student achievement across disciplines. The 1998 Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) results for Gwinnett County have, in almost all cases, shown incremental gains over previous scores. The 1996-97 third grade ITBS reading and mathematics scores were the highest ever reported for Gwinnett County since the test was mandated.

Community members, industry leaders, and educators are now striving together to help the Gwinnett County Public Schools become a system of world-class schools where students acquire the knowledge and skills to be successful as they continue their education at the postsecondary level or enter the workforce.

Over the past three years, ITBS scores for sixth-grade students have risen 3 percentile points in reading and 10 percentile points in mathematics. Fifth-grade Georgia Writing Test Scores for the past three years show marked improvements in the upper stages of proficiency; the 1996-97 scores showed the greatest increase over state and metro-Atlanta averages ever reported for Gwinnett County students on that test. Gwinnett's Georgia High School Graduation Test scores surpass both the state and metro-Atlanta averages. Since the implementation of the AKS, scores on the SAT have shown dramatic increases above the national average.

In addition, perception surveys of Gwinnett's faculty, taken in the spring of 1997, indicate an overwhelmingly positive response toward the curriculum changes and a belief that the system initiatives are increasing student achievement. Informal feedback from parents and community members, given through community meetings and local school forums, indicate that the community believes that Gwinnett is "on the right track" in improving student achievement and providing students with the knowledge and skills to be successful after high school.

The school system is taking a leadership role in education in Georgia, the Southeast, and the nation. Superintendent Wilbanks and the Gwinnett board of education received the Georgia Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's 1998 Leadership KELLY Award in recognition of their contribution to student achievement. More than 100 school systems throughout the region and the country have contacted Gwinnett for more information and assistance in initiating programs similar to the AKS and Gateway Assessments programs. On many occasions, state legislators and state education department staff have consulted with Gwinnett's school officials on curriculum and assessment development and implementation, and school staff members have described their programs before metro-Atlanta and state education leaders and at state conferences.

District leaders say that Gwinnett is demonstrating that all students can learn, if held to high expectations set by educators, parents, business leaders, and community members. The community is a critical partner in helping define the school district's mission and in supporting the district in reaching its goals.

School Board Chair Mary Kay Murphy recommends that school systems embarking on a public engagement process establish a research-based strategic planning process and seek representation from all segments of the public. To sustain public engagement, the district needs the confidence of the community — a confidence that can be enhanced by constant communication and by a belief that school leaders are acting with integrity, she adds.

"Welcome public input," Loe suggests. "It makes your system stronger and helps keep you focused on what's important — the best education you can possibly provide for each student. If you satisfy the needs of your customers, they will make the choice to stay with public education."

For more information, contact Cindy Loe, Associate Superintendent, at (770) 513-6619. The district's Web site is at http://www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us.

HOOD RIVER COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Oregon

Engagement and planning practices have resulted in student test scores that regularly exceed the state average in this rural school district where many students come to school with limited English or no formal education.

A rural district that serves 3,700 students, the Hood River County School District is situated at the base of Oregon's Mt. Hood and extends to the Columbia River. Located in an area famous for its pears, apples, and cherries, the community also has an economy based on timber, light industry, and — increasingly — tourism. Still mainly agricultural, the county attracts a migrant Hispanic population that comes north from Mexico during harvest season and returns when the season is over. The mobility of the migrant population causes school district enrollment to fluctuate by 8 percent a year.

The school system has a long history of community support and engagement, ever since it became a consolidated countywide district more than 30 years ago. The tradition of local control and local effort is so strong, in fact, that each of nine neighborhood schools has an elected local school committee, and the school board meets once a year in each school. In the early 1990s, however, the district had to persuade this conservative, rural community to revamp its school system by building additional classrooms and reconstructing existing facilities. Although convincing voters they should approve additional taxing authority is never easy, this community seemed more resistant than many to major expenditures.

As it turned out, however, the building program was the catalyst that renewed the community's support for its schools. Under the superintendent's leadership, community teams were formed to evaluate facilities and report to the school board on the status of the district. Additional key communicator teams were formed to educate the community and sell voters on the need for school improvement. Citizen committees were the driving force, and participants came from all walks of life. As a result of a major education and lobbying effort, voters approved a multimillion dollar bond levy in 1993 — for the first time in more than 25 years. That victory set the tone, school leaders say, for unprecedented civic pride, community engagement, and academic growth.

Strategic Planning

In September 1995, after school sites were reconstructed and the community renewed its involvement in the life of the school district, the school board revised and affirmed a strategic plan outlining future goals. One key component of that plan was the involvement of parents and staff in the pursuit of student excellence and the expectation that staff and parents would assist in setting the direction of their local schools and be responsible for their success. The establishment of school-based site councils, in addition to the existing elected local school committees, helped achieve this goal. Each school presents a school improvement plan, developed by the site council, to the school board. The assistant superintendent monitors the plans and sends copies to the state education department.

As the district's two high schools identified the need for students to move into the community for work-related experiences, business advisory groups were established to help place students in work sites and provide technical assistance with career preparation. As a result of this leadership, the school district was awarded a multiyear regional School-to-Work grant to place students, including those with disabilities, in work-related settings. The grant has since received both state and national recognition. As an outgrowth of this project, the local Chamber of Commerce established Chamber Leaders for Tomorrow, a business-based training program for high school leaders.

The school board has encouraged additional planning and public engagement by holding meetings at local schools and dedicating part of each meeting to a presentation of local efforts to improve the school, neighborhood, and student success. In addition, portions of every board meeting are specifically dedicated to parent and staff presentations that focus on instruction and curriculum improvement.

As part of the school district's commitment to long-range strategic planning, facility management and repairs are written on a rolling, three-year plan. Local citizens are consulted in the development of plans to ensure that sites are safe and conscientiously maintained. The district also asked Portland State University to create student population projections to anticipate growth. The document is updated regularly.

As new building additions are proposed, local patrons are recruited to serve in an advisory capacity. Recently, for example, a new media center addition was proposed for one of the district's middle schools. Both the elected local school committee and the school site's council served as advisory groups. Following the tradition established in the elementary schools — where parents and

civic groups have taken responsibility for planning and funding — the landscaping portion of the new site has been planned and funded entirely by local patrons.

During the past year, the district partnered with the local Parks and Recreation District to support the passage of a bond levy to enhance ball fields in the county. Its successful passage allowed existing school sites to be modified for both community and school use. Each site improvement plan involved community athletic organizations, neighborhood citizens, school staff, and the Parks and Recreation District. School leaders say the partnership and long-range vision of these organizations exemplify the leadership of the school district in the community and its willingness to improve the entire county.

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To help involve the Hispanic community in the decision-making process, parent meetings use simultaneous translation in English and Spanish. In addition, letters to parents and building newsletters are written in both English and Spanish. The district's Migrant Education program is the fifth largest in the state and regularly serves as the host for a statewide parent conference. The Migrant/English as Second Language (ESL) program has received both state and national recognition. To help students make an easier transition to school, the district's preschool programs work with Head Start and child care providers. Teachers of migrant students are trained to integrate students into their classrooms quickly. Summer programs for migrant workers have been implemented, and a newcomers' center helps assimilate students. To reach the broader community, a citizen diversity committee meets regularly with the superintendent to promote multicultural awareness in the schools.

Signs of Success

As each school community embraced the state standards set in the Oregon Education Act for 21st Century Schools, school leaders could point to a growing list of accomplishments. They include the following:

- The district formulated its strategic plan, leading to school improvement plans at each site. The goal-based plans were based on information gathered from staff, parents, and students, as well as on academic performance data.
- In the last six years, all nine sites have been awarded competitive Goals 2000 grants from the state of Oregon. These grants allowed individual schools to pilot innovations in curriculum and staff development. At the district's middle and high schools, block schedules were developed and implemented to reduce class size and increase instructional time. The block schedule allowed all secondary schools to implement an extended after-school program of academic tutoring and extracurricular classes. Community agencies and volunteers assist with many of these programs.
- At one elementary school, each classroom had an industry partner relating to physical science or mathematics. With industry assistance, each classroom created age-appropriate models, which were later demonstrated in the community and, in one case, at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.
- One elementary school received a federal Challenge Grant, which linked the school via the Internet to 17 schools along the Oregon Trail. Each school researched primary sources in the local community. The results were shared electronically, and a summary was presented to the community.
- The district received a three-county School-to-Work grant to bring students into the world of work. The resulting business partnerships were leveraged to form an ongoing mentorship program for all high school sophomores and establish student-run entrepreneurships at both high schools.
- To meet the increased academic challenge established by the Oregon Benchmark Standards, a summer academy was established for 20 percent of students in grades 3-8. Federal and state grants were combined with local resources in a blended program that combined services to migrant, ESL, special education, and low-achieving students. The U.S. Department of Education praised these cooperative efforts, and the plan was presented in the fall of 1998 at the National Migrant Directors' Conference in Washington, D.C.
- Each school in the district has developed a Crisis Response Team to complement the district's team. The teams have responded to student and staff deaths, accidents, and suicides. The crisis teams have joined forces with the County Emergency Planning Team to increase effectiveness and coordination in

case of a countywide crisis. County and school employees, along with local patrons, have participated in joint training and planning.

- To create a vehicle for greater community support of schools, an education foundation was established in 1991 to support excellence in education and provide financial assistance through student scholarships and mini-grants for classroom projects. The foundation is an independent, nonprofit organization whose elected citizen board has attracted resources that have grown from $3,000 to more than $250,000 in less than three years. Hood River's superintendent, Charles Bugge, is an ad hoc member of the foundation, which reports back to the school board.

- Each school conducts a major service project in the community. Examples include a Christmas basket project, fundraisers for a children's hospital, construction of a children's park, and funding for a dialysis center at the Hood River Memorial Hospital. Each spring high school students volunteer to work one day in the community. All funds raised by the students are then donated to a worthy community project.

- To better meet the athletic needs of the community, the school board recently partnered with the county Parks and Recreation District to develop community ball fields on public school grounds. With the support of school staff and community leaders, a levy provided funds to transform parts of playgrounds into community ball fields for soccer, softball, baseball, lacrosse, and T-ball, thus making each school an even better neighborhood center.

- Elementary and middle schools have partnered with the Federal AmeriCorps training program to bring AmeriCorps youth to instruct and act as role models. AmeriCorps youth gain leadership skills, and district students gain knowledge and an energetic mentor.

- Through State of Oregon development grants, each school has contracted with local businesses or individuals to provide training in the area of technology. Parents and business partners work side by side with teachers and students learning new technology. Over the past five years, $1.5 million dollars have been spent to bring technology to this rural school district, and local patrons have been strong supporters in this effort.

- To better inform the community about school district accomplishments and changing standards, the district publishes monthly school newsletters and an annual report to citizens. Teachers write regularly to parents. In addition, administrators present the school's plan to local businesses. The local newspaper and radio station regularly feature school news and speakers.

- Each new curriculum is developed in collaboration with staff and community involvement. Local professionals are often used as consultants in textbook selection.

- For the past three years, the number of volunteers has steadily increased. The total number of volunteer hours has also increased and, in 1998, exceeded 12,000 hours. Each school actively campaigns to increase the number of volunteers in the schools. The district's Community Education program reinforces the mission of the district to produce life-long learners, and last year the program registered more than 11,284 participants.

Gains in Achievement

Academically, student achievement has increased, and more students are meeting the achievement benchmarks each year. Scores regularly exceed the state average, despite the fact that more than 30 percent of the district's students are Hispanic and often come to school with limited English or no formal education.

The dropout rate for high school students is one of the lowest in Oregon and, at 1.83 percent, one of the lowest in the nation. There is an aggressive attendance policy in place to monitor attendance, as well as a structured discipline policy. Principals and vice principals develop behavioral contracts with students who have discipline problems, and expectations for behavior are made clear. Options are provided for students who need alternative learning environments, and parents are expected to be part of the solution.

> Building administrators have had to learn to be flexible regarding work schedules and time commitments, and school district personnel have had to understand that efforts to involve the public were necessary to achieve the greater goal — increased student achievement.

Along the way, the school district encountered a few roadblocks in its quest to keep the community engaged in public education. Since time was a problem for many parents, the district scheduled meetings at times convenient for them. Community presentations were held during lunch breaks, before or after work, and in the evening, to better accommodate personal schedules.

District leaders say that getting parents involved as vol-

unteers, instructors, committee members, and board members means giving them real authority and decision-making capability. Building administrators have had to learn to be flexible regarding work schedules and time commitments, and school district personnel have had to understand that efforts to involve the public were necessary to achieve the greater goal — increased student achievement.

Because resources to make the schools safe and to create space for learning were critical to starting the district's growth, the involvement of key business partners has been critical. Their participation helped make it possible for the district to have a successful building campaign. School leaders say this collaboration developed more support for, and a greater understanding of, a shared purpose than if schools had made changes first and informed parents and the public later. The result is a collective responsibility for the district's children.

Board President Susan K. McCarthy has learned that a school district must make communication with all publics a priority all the time. "Never think that engagement is 'done,'" she says. Parent participation is the real key to improving student achievement. Student-led conferences and exit interviews have the highest participation rate of any parent-staff meetings, she notes.

"Don't overlook any public that is presenting itself to the board or administration on any issue," she warns. "Publics who care enough to come to your attention will care enough to remain loyal supporters of your initiatives." And, she adds, the school district should start early to carefully plan and define parameters and appropriate roles, and open several avenues of participation. "Even if your district goal of improving each student's achievement remains the goal for a few years — use a variety of avenues of participation and a variety of means of communication," McCarthy suggests.

For more information, contact: Charles W. Bugge, Superintendent, at (541) 386-2511. The district's Web site is at http://www.gorgenet/schools/hrcsd.

HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Texas

Through a systematic effort to restructure and decentralize schools and to involve the public in the process, this sprawling Texas school district has become an urban success story.

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) — the largest school system in Texas and the seventh largest in the nation — faced a sea of troubles a decade or so ago. Statewide performance assessments in the mid-1980s revealed that 159 of the district's 232 schools were on the state's list of low-performing schools. In 1993, when the superintendent and school board took the bold step of "reconstituting" or completing restaffing an elementary school that was especially troubled academically, 56 Houston schools had fewer than 20 percent of students passing statewide examinations. And in 1996, although a quarter of Houston's 210,000 students attended school in temporary classrooms, the community voted down a $390 million bond issue that would have funded the construction of 15 new schools and renovations at 84 older ones.

Today, through a systematic effort to restructure and decentralize schools and to involve the public in the process, this sprawling school district has become an urban success story. Although nearly three-fourths of its 211,000 students meet federal criteria for free or reduced-price lunch and nearly one-quarter have limited English-language proficiency, the district has seen significant improvements in student achievement at all levels, in all subjects, and with all types of students. The school district — the first large district in the state to end social promotion — now has the highest percentage of urban schools in the state earning exemplary ratings from the Texas Education Agency. Unlike so many other large urban districts, Houston has had a stable governance structure. Superintendent Rod Paige, a former Houston school board member, has been at the helm for five years; he and the board of education work as a team to implement the district's strategic plan.

In the fall of 1998, voters in the community responded enthusiastically to the changes they saw in the district by approving the largest bond issue in HISD history — a $678 million school construction and repair program — by a landslide majority of 73 percent. And in February 1999, President Bill Clinton cited HISD as an example of a school system doing the right thing by working hard and aggressively intervening to raise student achievement.

A Lesson in Engagement

Houston learned that the public's involvement in, and support of, its schools are essential to success. This lesson is so much a part of the district's philosophy that HISD's Web site declares: "The strategic intent is to earn so much respect from the citizens of Houston that HISD becomes their K-12 educational system of choice."

The district initiated a community engagement effort in 1992, after the business community rebuffed an attempt to raise taxes significantly. It became clear, school leaders say, that the district needed to engage both parents and the broader community in more significant ways as it developed its strategic plans.

The first effort included a dialogue with the Greater Houston Partnership, the city's combined chamber of commerce, economic development agency, and business roundtable group. A committee of business people was formed to review district operations and suggest improvements. In addition, a representative group of community leaders agreed to serve as a steering committee for the planning efforts. The Houston Business Advisory Council spent a year talking with district leaders at all levels of the organization and spoke with parent organizations and community members about the district. At the end of that time, the council recommended to the steering committee a plan to decentralize the school district's central administration and create school feeder patterns that would bring decisions and resources closer to the communities they served.

At the same time, the district fostered shared decision-making committees at each school. These councils gave teachers, parents, business leaders, and community members a voice in the planning and operation of local schools. The areas for discussion included curriculum, staffing, budget, and professional development.

In 1994, the district created 12 administrative districts that serve as arms of the central office. Administrative district offices are housed in community facilities across the city to give students and parents more personalized service and more immediate assistance. In 11 of the these districts, the majority of students in a given community move "vertically" from elementary school to middle school to the high school located in their neighborhood. The 12th administrative district is made up of alternative schools and programs throughout HISD.

With this decentralization, planning became a combination of districtwide and administrative district efforts, with parent advisory committees at both levels, as well as shared decision-making committees at the school, administrative district, and central office levels. The district also has initiated four ad hoc advisory committees that provide regular feedback to the superintendent on actions as seen from the perspectives of teachers, principals, high school students, and parents. These committees meet monthly for a free-wheeling dialogue on any issues that participants choose to address. This broad-based input has resulted in far better decision-making outcomes than in the past, HISD leaders say.

PEER Problem Solving

A key public engagement effort is the district's Peer Examination, Evaluation, and Review (PEER) process, which brings in experts from the community, businesses, and organizations to work with district staff members to address specific issues or problems. Each PEER committee receives a charter from the administration asking the committee to address a specific problem. (Twenty-two PEER committees have been chartered to date.) The charter also provides a timeline and suggestions for activities that will be supported by district staff. Topics have included the district's guidance and counseling services, human resources organization and procedures, criminal background checks, staff development goals and processes, the district's reading program, and compensation for teachers, among others. At the conclusion of its work, each committee reports its findings to the board of education, and the administration develops a plan to carry out those actions upon which the board and administration agree.

Planning became a combination of districtwide and administrative district efforts, with parent advisory committees at both levels, as well as shared decision-making committees at the school, administrative district, and central office levels.

In addressing the district's reading program, one PEER committee played a key role in creating substantive changes in the district's approach to literacy in the early grades. Although school-based decision making had given Houston's principals and teachers wide latitude in determining the instructional strategies that best fit students in their own schools, many teachers and administrators believed a systemwide approach would be more effective. Student mobility was high, and many students suffered from the fact that different reading approaches — phonics versus whole language — were used at different schools.

To settle the issue, Superintendent Paige appointed a PEER committee that spent months reviewing research, discussing the issue, and conducting focus groups. In the end, it recommended a "balanced approach" that combined the skills that helped students decode language with literature-rich activities. The district now mandates that, in grades K-3, reading be taught in an uninterrupted block of time — at least 90 minutes a day — using a balanced, six-part approach. Backed up by substantial financial resources and professional development, Houston's reading program is now considered a national model. Student reading scores have increased steadily on state tests at all grade levels, with dramatic gains at some schools.

In 1998, looking for ways to enhance its decentralization efforts and give even more authority to individual HISD schools, Paige established a PEER Committee on District Decentralization. The committee was given a three-part task: to develop a fair, equitable, and effective decentralized approach to resource allocation; to decide which areas of management and operations could be handled most effectively at the campus level; and to develop a new way to fund schools. Its guiding principles were academic success, the allocation of all resources to schools (unless efficiency or other management issues dictated otherwise), equity in funding, matched or linked accountability and resource allocation decisions, and implementation guided by good sense. Chaired by the chief administrative officer for the city of Houston, the 15-member committee included the city's comptroller, officers of major banks and other business members, university faculty, and parents and HISD principals and administrators.

Over six months, the committee explored alternate ways to send centralized resources directly to the schools and considered which central-office responsibilities should be reassigned to schools and which jobs should remain under the direction of the central administration. The committee also studied whether to hire additional private companies to perform more business functions (Houston already uses outside companies to handle food service, maintenance, and other areas) and whether to establish some existing central administration services on a "user fee" basis for schools.

The report recommended major changes in school management. Under the proposal, 80 percent — rather than 64 percent — of district funds (excluding funds for construction, debt service, and other capital expenditures) would be under the direct control of individual schools. The committee also recommended giving schools more control over a wide variety of functions. While certain "core functions" would remain under the control of central administration, those central departments could ultimately become "service centers" for the schools. The school board will review the report, which will be supplemented by additional analyses. If the board accepts the recommendations, school leaders say the report could potentially have a far-reaching impact on the school district, decentralizing schools to a greater degree than ever before.

Inclusive Decision Making

In all of the work the district does, it calls upon representatives of all communities. Each school submits names of parent and community leaders to be included in a district database of community members. This list is supplemented by administrative, district, and central office lists of members of the broader communities. The database currently contains the names of 38,000 community members, who receive quarterly communications on district activities. Whenever the district creates a committee or task force, staff members use the database to help ensure a balance of participants according to geography, ethnicity, gender, and profession.

Many major accomplishments have resulted from this engagement of internal and external publics, district leaders say. The district has created a new purpose statement that recognizes its connections to the public: "The Houston Independent School District exists to strengthen the social and economic foundation of Houston by assuring its youth the highest quality elementary and secondary education available anywhere." On the academic side, the district has received support for raising graduation standards to require that every student graduating from high school complete four years of English and social studies, three years of mathematics and science, and one year of technology and foreign language. The board of education approved this plan at the same time that it eliminated remedial courses in high school from the graduation credit structure.

This year, the district went further by establishing promotion standards for grades 1-8. These standards require students to pass their courses, pass a state-mandated academic skills test, and score within a year of grade level on the Stanford 9, a norm-referenced test given nationally. For students in grades 1-3, the requirements apply to reading skills, while for students in grades 4-8, they apply to both reading and mathematics.

Not surprisingly, the district had experienced some roadblocks along the way. A small but vocal group of community members who did not believe the district was operating efficiently and effectively defeated a 1996 bond issue that the district badly needed to relieve overcrowding and improve education. The district participated in an intensive state audit, which lead to suggestions for saving approximately 2 percent of the annual budget — a testament to the district's efficiency, school leaders say. The enthusiasm with which the district embraced the suggestions has resulted in an increased level of trust among the citizens of Houston. In fact, the district found that its willingness to accept criticism and use it to make improvements has been a major factor in developing community support. One measure of that support was the public's overwhelming approval of the recent $678 million bond issue; the district received the backing of every group in the city, geographically, ethnically, and by level of income.

> The numerous academic improvement and community involvement efforts the district has made have led to dramatic improvements in test scores in recent years.

Next Steps

The district seems eager to go even farther to involve the public. In December 1996, Superintendent Paige outlined Project Reconnect, a plan to develop programs that will reengage the public in the life of the schools and the schools in the life of the community. The plan called for each school to establish parent-community participation teams to promote parental involvement and collaboration in community development activities. It also called for each administrative district to develop a strategy for involvement in inter-community activities, and for HISD to establish mechanisms for "ready two-way communication" between all organization levels and targeted populations — school patrons, HISD employees, retired people, the business community, the media, and people without children in school.

Although there is no timetable for Project Reconnect and the goal is to keep the budget as low as possible, the "project meets centrally each week and is very well organized," says Susan Sclafani, HISD's chief of staff for educational services. Parent centers have been established at 60 schools, and leaders have been hired, each of

whom supervises centers at two schools. Each parent center serves as an "information warehouse" in answering parents' questions and in making available such resources as English and family literacy classes, computer training, preparation for the high school equivalency (GED) test, and "make and take" classes in creating instructional materials for home use. Each school has a parent group, which works in sync with the decision-making councils, Sclafani says.

The numerous academic improvement and community involvement efforts the district has made have led to dramatic improvements in test scores in recent years. As one example, the percentage of fourth-grade students passing the reading portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) jumped from 70 percent in 1994 to 89 percent in 1998. African-American fourth-graders made even bigger gains, as the percentage of those passing reading tests rose from 63 percent in 1994 to 86 percent in 1998. The percentage of Hispanic fourth-graders jumped from 68 percent passing reading in 1994 to 89 percent in 1998. In fact, the scores on the spring 1998 TAAS set new records, with 10th-grade scores reaching an all-time high.

The district expected some decreases in test scores in the 1998-99 school year, however, as a result of exempting fewer students from taking the test. In the most recent round of testing, only about 11 percent of HISD students received exemptions. In contrast to many other urban districts, which exempt large percentages of students with limited English proficiency from test taking, the Houston school board decided that only students who had resided in the country for less than a year, or those who had not yet become literate, would be exempted from state tests. That meant that thousands of students took the tests for the first time, and, not surprisingly, some scores fell. The percentage of students who passed all third-grade TAAS tests fell from 73 percent in 1997-98 to 63 percent in 1998-99. Similarly, fifth-grade passing rates fell from 83 percent to 72 percent. But sixth-grade passing rates fell only one point, from 66 percent to 65 percent; seventh-grade passing rates stayed the same at 64 percent; and eighth-grade passing rates increased by 6 percentage points, from 59 percent to 65 percent. Passing rates for 10th-graders jumped from 62 percent to 69 percent.

As he closed the 1998-99 school year with a state-of-the-schools speech that drew some 1,800 community leaders, businessmen, and educators to the city's convention center, Paige said strong board leadership and partnerships between the public and private sectors were the keys to improving the city's schools. While acknowledging both the district's successes and its challenges, he said, "No other great city in our nation has the potential I think Houston has. While most great cities in our nation struggle with school reform and school employment, Houston has a stable environment and strong support from its community."

School Board President Laurie Bricker says she is "extremely proud of our community engagement commitment. That relationship has been the catalyst for turning public opinion around in favor of public education in Houston, Texas." But districts must work hard at sustaining those initiatives and must be sure to make communication a continuing priority. Bricker says three factors have been critical to the Houston Independent School District's continuing success in public engagement efforts:

- A sincere and aggressive effort to involve all aspects of the community
- A definable framework by which to engage the community so as not to waste people's time or resources and to give them a clear sense of purpose
- Training that educates community participants about the process and the subject.

For more information, contact: Susan Sclafani, Chief of Staff for Educational Services, Houston Independent School District, at (713) 829-6329. The district's Web site is at http://www.houstonisd.org.

LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

California

Arguing that education is an economic development issue, leaders of the Long Beach Unified School District and other educators took the initiative and urged business and city government to take action.

In 1992, the city of Long Beach, Calif., was at a critical crossroads. Its naval station and shipyard had closed. The McDonnell Douglas Company, a major employer, had downsized to nearly half its workforce, leaving 17,500 residents without jobs. As civil unrest began to destroy many of the area's small businesses, Long Beach saw that its economic base was being devastated. Something had to be done — and done quickly. So, arguing that education is an economic development issue, leaders in the Long Beach Unified School District and other educators took the lead in urging business and city government to take action. The mayor called together more than 80 community leaders to participate in a special Economic Task Force to analyze the economic climate and make recommendations to improve the quality of the city's life. After gathering feedback from more than 2,500 community leaders, the task force issued its report, "A Call for Action." Education, the report said, must be at the center of economic renewal.

To attract and keep business and to improve community life, local government, school, business, and community leaders formed a partnership to strengthen education, public safety, and the community's image. Because education reform was the starting point for change, the newly established Education Partnership brought together three key players: the superintendent of the Long Beach Unified School District, the president of California State University-Long Beach, and the president of Long Beach City College. Their collaborative efforts have led to major, systemic reforms in an urban district struggling to improve the lives of its 90,000 students — 68 percent of whom are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches and 33 percent of whom have limited English skills.

Since the Education Partnership began in 1994, the Long Beach school district has worked hard with its education partners to transform the schools in support of the district's vision: to create a "seamless" world-class education that provides unlimited educational opportunities for all students. Although the Long Beach school board has carried the torch, the presidents of the university and community college have also been active in the partnership, say school district leaders, and the mayor and city council have been supportive.

A Three-Way Partnership

The three partners work together to create academic standards, develop course outlines, align curriculum, improve academic achievement for students, better prepare teachers, and overcome barriers interfering with these goals. District leaders say this collaboration is recognized as one of the most effective examples of concurrent systemic education reform in the nation — a reform effort that extends beyond individual programs, departments, and colleges. The three education institutions have aligned their visions, missions, goals, objectives, and action plans through strategic planning and data collection, coupled with evaluations of progress.

The three primary education institutions in the partnership are supported by a host of other organizations. Other participants include the National Education Association (NEA) in Washington, D.C., NEA affiliate unions in Long Beach, and teacher and faculty associations at the partnership institutions. Several foundations and corporations support partnership activities, and the partnership works closely with legislators to promote education activities and support the partnership's mission. In the six years since its inception, the partnership has gradually increased the participation of local government, businesses, foundations, and educators — to the point of attracting national attention and support from major funders such as the McConnell Clark and Annenberg foundations.

The partnership is co-chaired by three executive staff members, one from each of the education institutions, who are charged with making any necessary changes. The Long Beach school board reviews any recommendations and plans and holds periodic retreats to review major initiatives. School board members work closely with the superintendent and are very visible in the community. These educators and other partnership members adopted a strategic planning model to identify key initiatives, which were based on student need and developed by two or more of the institutions and other partners. The three institutions pay the full-time salary of an administrator, who devotes 100 percent of her time to partnership activities; a mentor teacher assigned to the administrator also devotes all her time to the partnership.

The partnership's Seamless Education Steering Committee oversees seven "launch initiatives" that are based on the school system's overall goals and plans.

These initiatives range from an integrated teacher education program to middle school reform to a counseling initiative that helps make school counselors more effective advocates for student achievement. Described as "an extremely busy committee," the steering committee includes executive-level educators of the three education institutions, the chairs of the seven launch initiatives, teachers, business representatives, and invited guests. The steering committee has subcommittees and assists all other committees with strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation. Committee members may serve on one or more related committees. Committees, required to meet at least once a month, publish a monthly and yearly progress report.

Business partners play an integral part in helping educators set their targets for preparing students for the world of work.

Long Beach Superintendent Carl Cohn and the leaders of the university and community college meet monthly to monitor committee progress and provide assistance. Other participants include classroom teachers from grades K-12, faculty from higher education institutions, administrators from the three institutions, union representatives, support staff, and executive-level representatives, parents, and school board members. The Long Beach City Council and the mayor, who receive copies of all meeting minutes, frequently attend partnership meetings.

Corporate Support

Business partners play an integral part in helping educators set their targets for preparing students for the world of work. The superintendent holds breakfast meetings for small business owners, so they can describe the skills and knowledge the district's graduates will need. The partnership also receives support from numerous major corporations, as well as from the local newspaper, the Port of Long Beach, and the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau.

One example of this corporate support dates back to 1994, when — with the help of Southern California Edison — the district became the first public school district in the nation to mandate uniforms for elementary and secondary school students. The dress code helped bring about a sharp reduction in crime and disruption at the district's 60 elementary and 15 middle schools. In the first year, according to news reports, fights dropped by half and suspensions fell by one-third. The issue of uniforms fits into a larger reform agenda, Superintendent Cohn told a local newspaper. "The whole deal is about standards—dress better, behave better, and achieve more. It's a package," he said.

Since then, the power company has sponsored a Seamless Education Conference, a California reception in Washington D.C., and an after-school program. It has also chaired the partnership's education committee and provided company support for K-16 collaborations across the state.

Toyota Auto Body Inc., another partner, focuses on teachers. It provides teachers with $1,000 incentive grants and guest seats at cultural and sports events, and supports the school district's President's Scholars program. Boeing (formerly McDonnell Douglas) also provides seats for teachers at important community events and offers substantial resources for two specific initiatives: All Teachers are Teachers of Writing, and Redefining the Role of the School Counselor.

Communication and Collaboration

To ensure that all community voices were heard, representatives from all possible groups were invited to define education and community needs when the partnership began. The group developed several belief statements that expressed the value of public engagement: No reform is approved or implemented without all stakeholders' knowledge and support, and any issue or concern can be brought to the appropriate committee for reevaluation.

Because ongoing communication is crucial to the effectiveness of any partnership, the school district created a communications team, which includes representatives from the Education Partnership. The team has developed a variety of plans and approaches to keep all partners informed. Minutes of the meetings are disseminated to members, and negotiations are open to the general public. Any person, including members of the press, may access all documentation.

The district's extensive collaboration with its education and other partners has resulted in a number of important and substantial changes. In March 1999, for example, 71 percent of voters supported the passage of a $295 million school construction and facilities bond measure.

"It was unprecedented that a large, urban school district passed a bond measure of this size on the first attempt," Superintendent Cohn reported in an end-of-year message. "This never would have been possible without the hard work of our parents, staff, and community members

who worked tirelessly to support the measure," he said. The money, when leveraged with available state matching funds, will mean that the schools will have approximately $500 million for new schools and repairs, he said.

Reform Initiatives

One of the partnership's seven major "launch" initiatives has successfully supported the district's extensive efforts to reform middle schools. A centerpiece of these efforts is the district's determination to do away with social promotion. Long Beach has adopted a policy stating that no eighth-grade student with more than one failing grade will be promoted to grade nine; students who receive more than one F must repeat eighth grade in an alternative academic setting.

To help middle school students who are at risk of academic failure, the Education Partnership, with foundation funding, started a Youth Development and Resource Center at Stanford Middle School. Through a rigorous approach to content standards and classroom lesson support, students receive focused academic coaching from adults. Coaches are given intensive training before working with students and receive at least one day of professional training per month to strengthen their own academic and classroom management skills. The center's program also includes behavior coaching, attendance monitoring, and literacy coaching. Community speakers, lunchtime activities, and field trips round out the program. That model has been expanded to two more middle schools, with funding from Safe and Drug Free Schools.

The Youth Centers monitor student progress continuously. Academic coaches maintain files on student grades, classroom test scores, standardized test scores, student discipline, school attendance, and homework. All academic interventions are recorded in the files, and their effectiveness is monitored to be sure students receive meaningful support. Parents are called twice each month to discuss student progress. The Youth Center model has data supporting its effectiveness in increasing student achievement and strengthening the relationships between students, their studies, and their schools. Some students have, in fact, raised their failing grades to C's or B's.

The subcommittee on Youth Violence Prevention also supports middle school reform. The community's hospitals, fire and police departments, and local newspaper collaborated on a youth violence curriculum and related newspaper series titled "The Path of a Bullet." Live presentations by a retired police chief and the head of a medical trauma team take students through a graphic description of the effects of a gunshot on a human body. The presentations are supported by graphic video footage of local gunshot victims.

For its latest middle school reform effort, the school district was planning to open a middle school dedicated entirely to single-gender instruction in September 1999. The board of education approved this initiative after a survey showed that 58 percent of parents were interested in having their children attend single-gender classes. The Jefferson Leadership Academies will open their doors with approximately 500 boys and 500 girls in grades six through eight; boys and girls will attend classes separately. Parents from the entire district were given the chance to enroll their students in this innovative middle-school program, which is a districtwide magnet. By July 1, the school was filled to capacity.

A reading initiative, supported by the partnership, has also been a key component of school district reform. The goal is to have all students read at grade level by the time they leave third grade. Since this effort began in June 1994, all prekindergarten through third-grade teachers have participated in extensive literacy training and professional development. The school district and the university developed and co-taught a course for K-3 teachers. The university now requires that all students who want to earn a degree in liberal studies must complete 120 hours in the K-3 classroom working on literacy. The result, the district says, is that better prepared graduates are being accepted into the College of Education's teacher preparation program, and the school district is more satisfied with its new elementary school teachers.

> Agreeing on communication strategies in advance helped break down barriers, as did positive interactions among leaders and staff.

The school also adopted a requirement, endorsed by the Education Partnership, that any third-grade student who cannot read at third-grade level by the end of the school year will attend a mandatory summer tutorial focused on the student's individual learning needs. Not a traditional summer school, this program uses any and all effective interventions.

Barriers and Achievements

Although the Long Beach Unified School District now enjoys a strong relationship with other educational insti-

tutions, it initially faced a number of barriers to collaboration. The culture, traditions, and policies of the collaborating educational institutions had to be addressed. Agreeing on communication strategies in advance helped break down barriers, as did positive interactions among leaders and staff. Aligning strategic plans, identifying common priorities, and reallocating resources helped overcome financial challenges. The partnership was able to gain public trust — another challenge — by ensuring that the public had access to all documentation and committee meeting minutes. Foundations, legislators, and the media all helped build a positive public image of the partnership.

While this urban district has made great strides, it knows it must continue to work very hard to raise achievement in order to fulfill its mission of providing a seamless, world-class education for all its students.

The district has made notable academic gains in many areas — gains that occurred because of the collaborative efforts of teachers, administrators, classified staff, and parents; the school system's partners in higher education; the Los Angeles County Office of Education; local business partners; foundations; and local, county, and state government. Those gains include:

- District test scores. The district uses a Grades 1-3 Benchmark Book Assessment to test reading ability. Students read aloud from grade-level books selected by the school system but previously unseen by the students. To pass, students must read with 90 percent accuracy and answer 75 percent of oral comprehension questions. Scores on this assessment have increased in all three grades. In 1996, for example, 31.3 percent of students read at or above grade level, but by 1998, that figure had more than doubled to 62.6 percent. The percentage of second-graders reading at or above grade level increased from 62.9 percent in 1997 to 72.5 percent in 1998. For third-graders, percentages rose from 65.3 percent in 1997 to 71.4 percent in 1998.
- College admissions tests. The percentage of seniors taking the Scholastic Assessment Test has increased 3.4 percent over the past three years.
- Completion of algebra in grade eight. Algebra is often considered the "gatekeeper" course, because students who complete it in eighth grade are eligible to enroll in high-level mathematics courses in high school. The percentage of students completing algebra in eighth grade increased from 16.8 percent in 1996 to 34.1 percent in 1998.
- Percentage of students going to college. The percentage of graduates attending all types of public higher education has increased by 4 percent over three years. Long Beach Polytechnic High School has more students admitted to the University of California than any other high school in the state, and enrollment at the California State University is steadily increasing.
- Dropout rate. The dropout rate has declined dramatically over the past three years, from 10.2 percent in 1996 to 3.8 percent in 1998.
- Retention rates. Long Beach Unified was one of the first districts in the nation and the first in California to develop an intervention-retention plan at critical grade levels. As noted earlier, students are retained if they read more than a year below grade level in grade three and if they receive two or more F's in any combination of subjects in grade eight. Despite these higher standards, retention rates have decreased in both grades.
- Participation in the Golden State Examinations. These rigorous end-of-year tests are designed to assess academic attainment in college preparatory classes. Students receiving awards (school recognition, honors, or high honors) on six or more tests are awarded a Golden State Seal on their diplomas. In the past two years, the percentage of Long Beach students receiving awards has increased on five of the nine examinations administered.

While this urban district has made great strides, it knows it must continue to work very hard to raise achievement in order to fulfill its mission of providing a seamless, world-class education for all its students. With support from the Education Partnership, the school board has undertaken more initiatives and become enlightened risk-takers, says Judy Seal, administrator for K-16 collaborations and external funding.

In a newspaper interview, Board President Karin Polachek said that the school board responds to what parents and the community view as important in their schools. "We believe [school reform] is a doable job, and we are not looking for excuses," she said. To sustain the public's belief in and commitment to its schools, Polachek says, a school district must listen to all stakeholders, continually evaluate progress, and communicate that progress to the community.

For more information, contact Carl A. Cohn, Superintendent, at (562) 997-8242. The district's Web site is at http://www.lbusd.ca.us.

PINELLAS COUNTY SCHOOLS

Florida

Dissatisfied with what it termed "random acts of achievement," this large urban school district chose systematically and continually to improve the performance of students, staff, and the entire school organization. With the expressed intent of empowering the community, district leaders involved the public in crucial decisions.

This large, urban district on Florida's west coast — the seventh biggest school system in the state and still growing — spans 50 miles, from the Pasco county line to the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. Still under a 1971 federal court desegregation order, which may soon be lifted, Pinellas County Schools operate a court-ordered busing system. Some students ride 45 minutes on a bus to reach schools located 20 to 25 miles from home. Pockets of poverty dot the landscape.

Undeterred by its size or economic problems — 40 percent of its 107,000 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch — the district is completely focused on attaining the highest student achievement possible. Not satisfied with what it terms "random acts of achievement," Pinellas has chosen to continually and systemically improve the performance of students, staff, and the entire school organization. With the expressed intent of empowering the community, district leaders involve the public in critical decisions all along the way.

Integrated Management and Total Quality

The Pinellas County Schools have always involved community members, although not necessarily in the strategic planning process. In 1991, however, the state legislature passed the Education and Accountability Act, which called for the active involvement of parents, guardians, business people, and other community members in school improvement and accountability efforts. Over the next nine years, business and community leaders, as well as parents, joined forces, and eventually students also participated in the strategic planning process that the district calls its Integrated Management System (IMS). The IMS is a structured approach that ensures that the principles of "quality" management are systemically and consistently applied and that all educational components are linked.

Following passage of the 1991 law, all schools in the district initiated School Advisory Councils. By law, these councils must include teachers, support staff, parents, students, businesses, and other citizens of the community. They must be representative of the ethnic, racial, and economic diversity of the citizenry served by the school. Although the size and composition of the council can vary from school to school, state law requires that the majority of members not be school employees.

The district also adopted Total Quality Management (TQM), a philosophy and set of practices based on the internationally acclaimed work of W. Edwards Deming. To maximize success, Deming said, organizations must create a clearly defined sense of purpose to improve products and services and must work continually to strengthen their organization. TQM chiefly relies on a rational decision-making process that is based on hard data, not emotion or opinion.

The system's goal is to meet "customer requirements" for student achievement and to continually improve the processes that make high achievement possible. State standards and research determine those requirements. The community, parents, and teachers evaluate how well the requirements are being met by completing surveys and participating in focus groups. "The success of our system has created requests for information and training from states across the nation and from several foreign countries who are seeking to define customer requirements through community engagement," says Kenneth L. Rigsby, executive director of Quality, Employee Learning, and Planning Systems. A photograph in the 1998-99 District Comprehensive Plan gives a humorous glimpse at how seriously the school district takes the TQM philosophy. In the photograph, a teacher from the Pinellas County Schools wears a T-shirt that says: "All I need to know about students I learned from my data."

To help staff understand TQM, Pinellas brought in an outside company, AT&T Paradyne, to train top district and teachers association leadership in TQM principles, and it partnered with AT&T and Florida Power and Light — a Deming prizewinner — to apply best practices and strategies for promoting the use of TQM for school improvement. A District Quality Council was formed to ensure that all stakeholders shared a common vision and constancy of purpose. The council integrated quality management strategies with existing components of the comprehensive planning and budgeting system.

Next, the district piloted a collaborative collective bargaining process. Members of the Collaborative Quality Council — the superintendent, a deputy superintendent,

quality coordinator, teachers association president, executive director of the teachers and support services union, and the president of the County Council of PTAs — worked as a unit to develop collaborative decision-making processes. District leaders have said that including the teachers union in the TQM movement from the beginning is a key to its success.

Reaching for High Performance

As a next step, business and community leaders joined the school system to establish the Quality Academy. The research and development arm of the district, the academy focuses on transforming the district into a high-performance organization that seeks increasingly higher levels of achievement. Considered the linchpin of the school system's communitywide initiative, the academy works to move the district to the next level in the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria, a national framework for high performance that is based on seven criteria: customer focus and satisfaction, strategic planning, performance results, leadership, management of process, human resource development and management, and information and analysis.

There is no question about what the students should be learning: District expectations for what students should know and be able to do at all grade levels are aligned with state standards and widely published.

The Quality Academy works with all groups, from the local school board and community to professionals across the country, and has been very successful in supporting the district's transformation, Rigsby contends. In 1993 the district won the Governor's Sterling Award, which is designed to promote, encourage, and recognize excellence based on the principles of leadership, employee involvement, customer satisfaction, and continuous improvement.

Through the business community at large, the district was able to develop more than 5,000 school-based partnerships. The Tampa Bay Total Quality Management Network, Inc., which includes more than 300 major community organizations, served as a resource. The Pinellas County Education Foundation, involving more than 700 companies, supports the school system and the Quality Academy in numerous ways. For example, it recruits business volunteers to serve as mentors, trainers, examiners, and consultants to the academy staff and the schools.

With the help of its community partners, the school district established the Quality Academy Advisory Board, which helped adapt the Malcolm Baldrige Award for Quality criteria to best fit the district. The Superintendent's Quality Challenge (SQC), based on the criteria of the Baldrige and Sterling awards, recognizes and commends schools and departments whose teachers and administrators demonstrate that they have internalized quality management principles and values. The second goal of the challenge is to help schools and departments establish baselines and standards for continual improvement, using the SQC's assessment criteria as compass points. Under the system, schools work with technical support groups, whose trained consultants help them complete an award application that contains a self-assessment. Specially trained internal and external quality professionals review those materials and offer advice based upon assessment results.

Aligning Efforts

Believing in a systemic approach to improvement, the school district works hard to align and coordinate all its efforts. The Pinellas County School Board writes and implements improvement plans. The cabinet, or top management, conducts a self-assessment and uses the feedback for improvement. All schools and departments complete improvement plans with long- and short-term goals. School improvement plans are aligned with the Baldrige Criteria; the evaluations of the superintendent, district administrators, and principals are also aligned with those criteria and to student achievement results. The teaching staff uses a similar model, the Classroom Learning System Self-Assessment, which asks teachers to evaluate their own success not by what they teach but by how much students learn.

There is no question about what the students should be learning: District expectations for what students should know and be able to do at all grade levels are aligned with state standards and widely published. To help parents and community members understand what is expected, the district makes available a series of grade-by-grade booklets titled "A Family Guide to Student Success," which are distributed to parents. The booklets identify student expectations for grades K-8, with a high school book of expectations still to come. In third-grade reading, for instance, students should be able to perform 11 tasks, ranging from retelling a story complete with characters, setting, problem, sequence of events, and resolution, to recognizing cause-and-effect relationships and understanding the differences between fact and opinion. The booklet also contains suggestions — "use the library on a regular basis" — that help parents support their children's academic achievement.

Community participation in the planning process is ongoing. Pinellas County uses "cross-functional" strategic planning teams of district and school personnel, community and business representatives, parents, and sometimes even students for standing and ad hoc committees. A Budget Review Committee, for example, makes specific short- and long-range recommendations concerning the district's budget. In addition to the School Advisory Councils and School Improvement Teams, which exist at all district schools, the district uses committees to deal with a range of other important issues. A student rights and responsibilities committee, a community involvement advisory council, a safe and drug-free schools advisory council, and a professional education advisory council are some examples. Moreover, most departments in the district use cross-functional task forces or focus groups whenever necessary to gather comments on major strategic decisions. These groups are disbanded when they complete their tasks.

The public has direct knowledge of school district actions, plans, and decisions, not only through school board meetings, but also through town meetings that are conducted for the public four times a year. Anyone can address the board briefly during its open agenda period, although lengthier presentations must be put on the agenda two weeks ahead. Topics, a weekly newsletter, and a school system television channel make reaching the public easier. For example, a television program called "PCS Journal: '99 in Retro" provided an hour-long look at highlights of the 1998-99 school year.

At the district level, Superintendent J. Howard Hinesley ensures the participation of all stakeholders by communicating regularly with all district and community groups. He visits schools regularly, meets with teacher representatives by area twice a year, hosts a quarterly breakfast meeting with employees, and addresses principals and administrators monthly at student achievement and accountability meetings. The superintendent also meets monthly with minority advisory committees in two parts of the large county, and talks annually with the editor of the St. Petersburg Times. He encourages district staff to work with a variety of community-based committees, such as the Biracial Committee and the United Way.

Communication with stakeholders is also a feature of individual schools. Principals meet monthly with their School Advisory Councils and Parent-Teacher-Student Associations, encourage business partnerships and community-based projects, publish monthly newsletters, and respond quickly to issues raised by community members or others. Teachers work regularly with volunteers from all sectors of the community. More than 22,000 people have spent more than 1.3 million hours volunteering throughout the district, with 339,000 of those hours spent in direct tutoring or mentoring of students.

'How Are We Doing?'

A districtwide survey recently asked respondents to rate the importance of the district's five strategic directions — highest student achievement, safe learning environment, partnerships, a high-performing workforce, and an integrated management system. Respondents included parents, students, teachers, support staff, administrators, and 14,000 community members called at random to elicit 800 valid responses from constituents. Overall, the 5,600 parents who responded were most satisfied with progress toward the student achievement and high performing workplace goals, while community members were least satisfied with progress toward a safe learning environment, the goal they rated as most important.

Ensuring continuing public engagement has been a challenge in Pinellas, in part because of the district's large size and socioeconomic variability. District leaders have relied on the Integrated Management System to provide a universal strategic planning and operating framework. Through the IMS, all schools and community members share the same goals and constancy of purpose; all focus on results; all understand the importance of their roles in decision making and the importance of aligning all processes; and all use data to drive decisions.

In Pinellas, increased student performance is the ultimate measure of success, and the district has shown overall improvement in nationally normed and state criterion-based tests over several years.

In addition, the district offers a wide range of education options throughout the county. For example, International Baccalaureate Programs exist at both north and south county locations, as do magnet programs, elementary schools that emphasize the fundamentals, and vocational programs. In 1997, the district created a Choice Task Force to petition for unitary status, or relief from court-ordered desegregation. Negotiations, which Rigsby said were very cooperative, were expected to result in full unitary status for the district by the end of 1999.

In Pinellas, increased student performance is the ultimate measure of success, and the district has shown overall improvement in nationally normed and state criterion-based tests over several years. Nationally normed

standardized test scores have been above the national average in all subject areas since 1989. Pinellas has also posted some of the highest writing scores in the state every year since 1993, ranking first in the Florida Writing Assessment for grade 4, ranking second for grade 8, and tying with another district for first place for grade 10. Average performance on the Scholastic Assessment Test for both verbal and mathematics, and the average composite score on the American College Testing examination, exceed the average for both Florida and the nation. The percentage of juniors passing the mathematics portion of the High School Competency Test exceeds the state average. Moreover, two elementary schools have reported "breakthrough" data. Despite the low socioeconomic levels of their students, these schools have shown up to 30 percent increases in standardized test scores.

Overall, says Rigsby, the most significant changes in the school district since the start of its extensive public engagement process have been the emergence of a "common language" revolving around high performance, the use of the Malcolm Baldrige system to align activities and resources, a high level of interest in improvement, and a focus on results. Both Superintendent Hinesley and School Board Chairman Lee Benjamin emphasize the necessity of a strategic planning process that engages the public in all phases, aligns all district resources with that plan, and regularly reports its results to the community.

For more information, contact Kenneth L. Rigsby, Executive Director, Quality, Employee Learning, and Planning Systems, at (727) 588-6295. The district's Web site is at http://www.pinellas.k12.fl.us.

ROMULUS COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Michigan

Recognizing the need for systemic change, the Romulus Community school board directed school administrators to design and implement a district strategic plan to increase student achievement that would involve the entire community.

State parks, golf courses, historical sites such as the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, a man-made marsh for fishing, hiking, and horseback riding — these attractions surround the Romulus Community schools, 20 miles from Detroit. A large number of colleges and universities, as well as community colleges, also are nearby. Romulus itself, however, is a not particularly affluent blue-collar community whose residents work primarily for the nation's three leading automobile makers. Twenty percent of the district's 4,000 students are at poverty level, 53 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch, and all elementary schools receive Title I funds. Although many of the parents did not graduate from high school, they knew they wanted something more for their children — an education that would help ensure a greater choice of career opportunities and an economically secure future. They looked to the school district, with the close collaboration of the community, to provide that top-quality education.

In November 1995, the Romulus school board began a districtwide restructuring process intended to increase student achievement. School leaders say they were inspired by Horace Mann, the first great American advocate of public education, whose words are quoted in a school district publication: "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men — the balance wheel of the social machinery."

Although the school board had attempted isolated interventions, it realized that these attempts had had no significant impact on achievement. Knowing that a plan to create systemic change was needed, the board directed administrators to design and implement a strategic plan to increase student achievement and to graduate students who are successfully prepared to enter the fast-changing workforce. This process entailed extensive community involvement, including a two-day retreat with teachers and community leaders; a public hearing at the high school; individual meetings with all members of the faculty; and meetings with parents at each school.

After much discussion with the community, the board endorsed a strategic plan with five components: parent involvement; alignment and assessment of curriculum; a preschool program; school climate; and technology These initiatives provided the district with a collaborative opportunity to make the school district's vision a reality. To develop strategies and timelines for these initiatives, the district formed action committees and empowered them to provide the content, process, and assessment tools that would solidify a common district direction to improve student achievement. A symposium attracted 60 candidates for committee spots, and a steering committee sought other volunteers.

These five committees have been operating for five years. Each committee has representation by administrators, board members, teachers, parents, police, city officials, and business members. Committees meet monthly and report to the school board at least three times a year. All committee chairpersons meet with the board twice a year.

Expectations for Parents and Students

To make sure everyone stayed focused on achievement, the school board endorsed a districtwide Parent Compact, which specifies the roles and responsibilities of parents, teachers, students, and schools. The compact, which reflects feedback from many different community and school groups, outlines key areas — study time, nutrition, homework, and parental responsibility, for example — that affect student achievement. District leaders say the compact keeps everyone working together to ensure a quality education for all students. Parents and students must sign the compact, demonstrating their commitment to quality teaching and learning.

Each school has a paid parent coordinator who is responsible for involving parents in the districtwide initiative. The seven parent coordinators are members of the Parent Compact Committee, which meets monthly. The parent coordinator is a parent from the school, not a professional staff member. All parents are actively encouraged to become members of the five "initiative" committees and are asked to volunteer three hours a year at school. In a letter to Romulus parents in the March 1999 edition of *The Link*, a newspaper published jointly by the school district and the city of Romulus, School Board Vice President Michael Woods urged parents to spend more time in the schools. "Taking advantage of the recommendation [to volunteer] will allow parents to see firsthand the education their children are receiving from our schools," he wrote. "In addition, it

sends a strong message to students, teachers, and administrators that, as parents, you are concerned with the quality of education given to your children." Since these efforts began, parent volunteerism has increased by 50 percent districtwide.

The school district has also worked hard to improve curriculum and raise standards. A Teaching and Learning Manual clearly identifies goals, philosophies, and strategies all teachers are expected to implement. Common assessments for all core K-12 classes determine whether a student is learning the curriculum and can demonstrate proficiency in the material. The school system already had extensive hardware and software in place, and technology has now been aligned with grade-level objectives and assessments. An assessment tool was developed to track student progress to ensure that students received the instruction they needed.

A board policy requires students to attend classes until they have mastered the material. To help students, the district has made tutoring mandatory in language arts and mathematics for K-12 students who are not achieving 70 percent mastery of educational objectives; students who do not achieve 70 percent mastery in language arts must also attend summer school. The summer school program, "Mastering the Essentials," operates on the theory that all children can achieve mastery when exposed, in grades K-2, to a four-block language arts framework: guided reading, self-selected reading, writing, and "making words." The program for students in grades three to five centers on raising their reading ability to grade level as quickly as possible and then helps them apply reading strategies across the curriculum. A diagnostic center for new students will place students at the appropriate instructional and skill level.

Teachers received extensive released time at the beginning of the achievement effort to learn to work as a team, and grade-level meetings across the district keep a continuing emphasis on collaboration.

Another step toward improved student achievement was a curriculum audit, directed by a middle school principal who had received audit training and who brought in others to assist him. Elementary and secondary principals, as well as staff members in each content area, used the audits to improve curriculum for the following year.

A districtwide School Climate Program, developed by a large committee, identifies the behavioral expectations for all students in the district. Its goal: to produce a "positive and predictable" school environment that supports student achievement. The school board approved a conflict resolution program for all school buildings, with special programming for at-risk students. Community services, school services, and social services are coordinated to avoid duplication, and channeled through the school. A new police mentoring program for 54 at-risk students in grades four through six enables six police officers to mentor six to nine students over a three-year period. The climate program is producing results, says Curriculum Director Thomas Dolan. No student was expelled during the 1998-99 school year, and the district has heard few complaints from parents, because everyone understands his or her responsibility.

Support for Schools and Teachers

The district empowered individual schools to design and implement programs that support the district's goals. Each School Improvement Team, which operates by consensus, is expected to present an annual report that evaluates progress. While a faculty member facilitates the meetings, team membership reflects the various components of the community. Teacher members are expected to keep other colleagues informed, and minutes of meetings are transmitted to staff after every meeting. All team decisions are expected to be consistent with effective school research and common sense.

Teachers receive a good deal of support to improve their abilities. New teachers take an extensive two-week professional development program, and all district teachers have been trained in the use of technology and in mastery and cooperative learning. Teachers received extensive released time at the beginning of the achievement effort to learn to work as a team, and grade-level meetings across the district keep a continuing emphasis on collaboration.

At each school board meeting, teachers give presentations that focus on subject matter content, and outstanding teachers are recognized at the beginning of each school year at a districtwide program. In addition, two evening programs with guest speakers are held for new teachers.

District leaders know that students need a variety of educational experiences that extend beyond the traditional school day. The Romulus school district recently received a $900,000 grant to provide after-school programs, child care, and boys and girls clubs, all without charge for the next three years. In collaboration with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, the district opened a Romulus Boys and Girls Club at an elementary school in December 1998. The club is open after school until 8:30

p.m.Tuesday through Friday and all day Saturday, offering a variety of activities to keep school-aged children occupied. Full-time professional staff, part-time instructors, volunteers, and student aides provide leadership and informal guidance through games, crafts, sports, and small-group participation.

"A child's education is determined by his experiences during the formative years. Parents, school, church, and community are extremely important," said Superintendent William Bedell at the club's opening ceremonies.

To keep the school system's alumni as active participants in the district, the Alumni Association holds an annual Alumni Hall of Fame dinner. Inductees, who can come from any walk of life, are chosen not only because they have achieved success in a particular field, but also because they have contributed time, leadership, effort, or resources to benefit the city of Romulus (or the area in which the alumnus resides). The Alumni Association has presented more than $15,000 in awards to graduating seniors.

Problems and Payoffs

The school district is realistic about the demands on staff members' and citizens' time. Given those demands, district leaders say, it was not easy to find time to engage all the community in the restructuring process. Meetings were scheduled on Saturdays, during the summer, and after school, and principals brought staff members back to school a week early to revisit the mission and work collaboratively on goals, content, and assessment. Graduate credit was arranged with Eastern Michigan University for 42 teachers, so that teachers could learn better ways to apply content in the classroom. District leaders say time continues to be a concern, however.

A lack of union support was another roadblock. The teachers union has not actively supported any of the five initiatives. Dolan explains that union leaders did not take an active role because teachers have not had a collective bargaining contract for a number of years — a situation complicated by the fact that the union contract involves seven school districts, not just Romulus. The teachers union issue continues to be a challenge to the board.

The district's consistent efforts to raise achievement, supported by the community, have clearly paid off, however. In December 1998, the Romulus Community Schools reached an accreditation milestone: All seven schools earned North Central Accreditation. The North Central Association (NCA), the largest of six regional accrediting associations, asks schools to demonstrate that they meet or exceed the standards established for all NCA-accredited schools. In the past, only the high school in Romulus had been involved in the process, but the school district wanted accreditation endorsement for its other schools as well. "The evaluation of our district by the visiting [NCA] team was unanimously positive," said a report in *The Link*. "Visiting teachers ... were very impressed by the climate of the schools, the technology we have, and the focus of all the teaching staff in working toward a common achievement initiative through quality teaching and learning."

State assessments show continued and often dramatic improvement. In fourth grade, 48.8 percent passed the state's reading assessment in 1998, compared with only 17.4 percent in 1994. Similarly, the percentage of fourth-graders passing the math assessment shot up from 43.8 percent in 1994 to 72.5 percent in 1998. In seventh grade, increases were also significant. The percentage of seventh-graders passing reading increased from 21.8 percent in 1994 to 34.6 percent in 1998, and the percentage passing math went from 23.2 percent in 1994 to 42.1 percent in 1998.

The district's consistent efforts to raise achievement, supported by the community, have clearly paid off.

Dolan emphasizes that Romulus believes in a "common sense way of doing business" and tries not to make things too complicated. The focus, he says, is on students, but also on making all three parties — parents, teachers, and students — responsible. The school board — a "legitimate partner" that has kept the five initiatives in focus for the past five years — has provided the leadership. "We all have a common language," adds Dolan.

Board President Betty Lenossi noted that five factors are particularly important to sustaining public engagement:

- Developing a timeline for implementing initiatives
- Specifying the responsibilities of key staff members
- Developing a Parent Compact that spells out specific responsibilities
- Scheduling meetings and assessments
- Celebrating success.

For more information, contact Thomas Dolan, Curriculum Director, at (734) 941-1600. The district's Web site is at http://www.romulus.net.

SHAWNEE MISSION SCHOOL DISTRICT

Kansas

This district's strategic planning process and its efforts to include its publics in that process have increased public confidence, especially at the polls. In April 1994, voters approved a major $139 million facilities bond issue by a 2-1 margin, even though only 30 percent of district voters have children in school.

Shawnee Mission, a 32,000-student school district located in a suburban community along the Kansas-Missouri state line, encompasses more than 14 communities and cities, large and small. This socioeconomically diverse district has traditionally prided itself on delivering a top-of-the-line education, and its students have always scored well above national averages. In the 1980s and early 1990s, however, scores had slipped, and school leaders realized that they could no longer take achievement for granted. It was time to take a harder look at the schools and determine how to make them better by involving the community in strategic planning.

Two factors influenced the current level of community engagement, school leaders say. The first was a new system of accountability, called Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA), which was instituted by the state of Kansas in the early 1990s. One of the requirements of QPA is that every school building (and there are 56 in Shawnee Mission) have its own site council, composed of building personnel and community members. Shawnee Mission initiated its QPA site councils in 1992.

The second factor was the arrival of a new superintendent, Marjorie Kaplan, in 1993. Realizing that the district had not engaged in a process of long-range planning, she began collecting data and identifying community members who would become part of a long-range planning team. The district has just completed its first five-year plan and, in the fall of 1999, began a second five-year plan.

The strategic planning process involves both internal and external publics. Internal publics include students, teachers, administrators, and classified personnel. All groups have responded to needs assessment surveys to evaluate their performance and needs and those of others. Representative teachers from each building meet in curriculum groups to address specific curricular needs and guide curriculum development. District-level administrators meet with liaison committees of building-level administrators to ensure that district activities are meeting the needs of students and teachers at individual schools. In addition to meeting weekly with her cabinet, the superintendent meets regularly with focus groups of students, teachers, and classified personnel to identify ongoing concerns and needs that should be addressed.

Community Participation in Planning

The external public includes parents, patrons who have no children in district schools; employers; business leaders from the chambers of commerce of the various cities within district lines and the Northeast Development Council; ministerial groups; and public service groups, such as the PTA, Kiwanis, Rotary, and other organizations.

Community members are elected to serve on advisory boards, one for each of the district's five attendance areas. Each group has four members who are elected to two-year terms; a board member from that geographic area chairs the committee. The advisory groups act as liaisons, linking schools, community, and school board. District patrons are encouraged to attend these monthly meetings to learn about district activities and give feedback on current issues facing the district. Attendance is generally good at the meetings, district leaders say — especially considering that 20 percent of the attendees have no children in the school system.

To solicit information from the community as a whole and from parents in particular, the district uses surveys on such issues as families, curriculum, the five-year plan, and other concerns. District administrators attend community group meetings both to contribute and to solicit information. Such meetings provide an opportunity to share information about district programs as well as to gain input from community members about the needs they perceive.

Because Shawnee Mission is divided into five attendance areas, all districtwide committees are structured to include representation from all the areas. Checklists are used to make sure that parents, patrons without children in school, business representatives, and community leaders are included. District representation is distributed across certified and classified staff members as appropriate to the committee or situation. Gender balance on committees is always addressed. While the ethnic makeup of the community is very homogeneous, minority representatives are included in large committees.

At the building level, the composition of site councils is mandated by state regulations. Each council has seven or

more members and must include the principal, representatives of teacher and other school personnel groups, parents of pupils attending the school, the business community, and other community groups. The councils provide advice in evaluating performance goals and objectives and help determine what methods should be used to meet those goals.

The district's structured strategic planning process and its efforts to include its publics in that process have increased public confidence — which has been demonstrated in part by support at the polls. In April 1994, voters approved a major $139 million facilities bond issue by a 2 to 1 margin, even though only 30 percent of district voters have children in school. Similarly, a local option budget (allowing the district to increase its expenditures by 25 percent over the state per-pupil allotment) passed with a 68 percent vote.

Strengthening the Curriculum

A major finding of the needs assessment for the first five-year plan was that a rigorous curriculum was needed in all areas. The curriculum and instruction department has been reorganized under an associate superintendent with demonstrated expertise in curriculum. After setting a schedule for revising curriculum and purchasing new materials, the district put in place an articulated K-12 curriculum in all content areas. New instructional materials have been adopted, and appropriate staff development has been provided, district leaders say.

As part of its plan to create a more rigorous curriculum, the district expanded Advanced Placement offerings and established an International Baccalaureate Program for academically talented and highly motivated students. The district also opened a Center for International Studies for high school students interested in developing skills in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. During the 1997-98 school year, Shawnee Mission began introducing foreign language studies to fourth- through sixth-graders at 11 elementary schools; the following year, 36 schools were involved, with 33 offering Spanish and three offering French. The next five-year plan will continue to look at curriculum and technology, as well as community involvement, fine arts, and special education, says William Frick, assistant to the superintendent.

The focus of staff development has changed to address two issues: (1) providing teachers with the training necessary to teach the curriculum as it is revised in a given year; and (2) assisting individual buildings with the staff development required for their respective school improvement plans.

Through the combined efforts of the district five-year plan and the school improvement plans at all buildings, achievement has shown steady incremental growth. Shawnee Mission students consistently score in the top 10 percent of public and private students in the nation on standardized tests. In 1998, Shawnee Mission students taking the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and the American College Testing examination (ACT) earned the highest scores in district history, with a total average score of 1212 on the SAT and a composite score of 23.8 on the ACT. On the SAT, taken by 24 to 29 percent of the students in the senior class, scores have risen steadily over a three-year period, from 1170 in 1995-96 to 1178 in 1996-97 and 1212 in 1997-98. Some 70 to 73 percent of seniors take the ACT test. ACT scores (based on a scale of 1 to 36) have also risen, from 22.8 in 1995-96 to 23.6 in 1996-97 and 23.8 in 1997-98.

The district's students continued to earn results well above the national average on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), taken by students in grades three and six, and the Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED), administered to students in grades eight and 12. On the ITBS, the district had a composite score at the 94th percentile for sixth-graders and the 89th percentile for third-graders. Sixth-graders demonstrated strong performance in all areas, especially language and mathematics. District leaders say that test results indicate considerable growth in the sixth-grade students since their third-grade year in all areas covered by the test.

As part of its plan to create a more rigorous curriculum, the district expanded Advanced Placement offerings and established an International Baccalaureate Program for academically talented and highly motivated students.

The ITED is closely aligned with the Shawnee Mission curriculum. The eighth-graders' composite score of 96 ranks them in the top 5 percent in the nation. The overall performance for the eighth-grade class, as measured by core total and composite scores, was identical to last year's scores — which reflected an all-time high in districtwide performance based on school norms. The district composite score of 88 ranks Shawnee Mission seniors above 88 percent of all seniors nationwide taking the test.

In addition, 30 Shawnee Mission students were named National Merit Finalists in the 1998-99 school year, and

one of the state's two 1998 Presidential Scholars was from the school district. In May 1999, Shawnee Mission South High School was named a winner of the prestigious Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education.

Strengthening Ties with the Community

The district's Education Foundation, which is supported by private individuals, businesses, and organizations, attempts to enhance the school system's learning environment, increase the effectiveness of instruction, and strengthen ties between the schools and the community. Since its grants programs began in 1993, the foundation has awarded 128 grants totaling more than $140,000. For example, its Innovate to Educate grants allow district principals to apply for up to $5,000 to fund quality education programs that have an impact upon the entire school. These grants provide funding for special projects that the district could not otherwise afford. The grants will allow one elementary school, for example, to distribute Family Home Packets at a parenting fair. The fair will include a guest speaker and offer "mini-teach" sessions that will focus on family organization skills, family math, science projects, homework, and other issues. Activities in the packets will change monthly and will correlate with the current curriculum. The foundation also helped launch the Center for International Studies and provided support for the reconstruction of the historic Prairie School, which was destroyed by a fire in 1990.

Only 30 percent of district patrons have students in school. School leaders say that gaining support of the other 70 percent has required a strong public relations thrust.

Shawnee Mission involves the community in its schools in other ways as well. A program called Seniors Serving Schools matches more than 100 senior citizen volunteers with students at some 35 school buildings. The seniors help with homework, listen to students as they read, lend a hand with arts and crafts projects, lead students in exercise programs, assist teachers with special events, and serve as guest speakers. The district also has a YouthFriends program. Through mentoring, role modeling, and establishing friendships with students, adult YouthFriends volunteers offer support to students who need it. They assist with reading and academic coaching, coordinate recess games, and participate in other activities that allow them to be role models for students.

The district's demographics have posed some challenges along the way, however. Only 30 percent of district patrons have students in school. School leaders say that gaining support of the other 70 percent has required a strong public relations thrust. District publications include a quarterly newsletter and an annual report that all district patrons receive. In addition, the superintendent meets with both community and employee groups on a regular basis. Because the school district covers 13 different municipalities, administrators are assigned to work with various chambers of commerce, city governments, and community groups on an ongoing basis.

Another challenge is declining enrollment — a loss of about 200 students a year. Because the community is landlocked and has little new development, some residents have moved away to take advantage of new development elsewhere. School leaders say that declining enrollment presents a planning challenge in all areas of school operation. To meet this challenge, district representatives work with area realtors to promote the benefits of living in the Shawnee Mission school district.

As district patrons engage in ongoing dialogue with school administrators, requests are continually made that exceed the financial resources of the district. The superintendent has formed an ad hoc committee of superintendents across the state that now has members from 157 school districts — more than half the districts in the state. The major purpose of this committee is to form a unified front in working with state legislators on education funding issues.

In her message to the school community, which appears on the district's Web site, Superintendent Kaplan noted the importance of public engagement. "The state and national recognition our schools receive continues to highlight the levels of achievement students can reach when supported by quality staff, involved parents, and a strong community," she said. Communication, broad-based representation, and respect for diverse opinions are what the superintendent and school board say are the key ingredients needed to sustain community involvement and support.

For more information, contact William Frick, Assistant to the Superintendent, at (913) 993-6439. The district's Web site is at http://www.smsd.k12.ks.us

ST. LOUIS PARK SCHOOL DISTRICT

Minnesota

For more than a decade, the St. Louis Park School District has been involved in public engagement. The district, city, businesses, health and social service agencies, religious community, and individuals are called upon to "reclaim their responsibility for young people and provide the guidance, support, and attention young people need to be successful."

The St. Louis Park Public Schools, a small suburban district just west of Minneapolis, has often been a school system ahead of its time. At least a decade before the adage "It takes a village to raise a child" became a commonly accepted educational philosophy, this district was deeply involved in community engagement. In the late 1970s, the district began a "visioning" process called Project 85 that was intended to position St. Louis Park to respond to the future — a future that would see enrollment decline from 11,000 students to a smaller but more culturally diverse student body of 4,600 students, about a fifth of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Project 85 — which involved hundreds of residents in focus groups, task forces, and large-group planning — laid the groundwork for future plans, and Superintendent Carl Holmstrom intensified the public's involvement in the schools during his tenure from 1985 to 1996. The district developed a five-year strategic plan and pioneered the Village Goes to School day, in which the entire community was invited to school to share its ideas on education. In 1992, St. Louis Park became the first community in the nation to fund a Children First initiative, based on research, that asked all individuals and organizations to put children first as they made decisions and took actions. And the school district has always taken its responsibility to educate the entire community very seriously, offering classes and instruction for all ages. "We are a lifelong learning district, from the sand box to the pine box," says Bridget Gothberg, the district's community education director.

Building on Tradition

With a strong history and tradition of community involvement and support behind it, the district moved steadily toward its next phase: developing a new five-year strategic plan aimed at making a good school district even better. In December 1998, under the direction of Superintendent Barbara Pulliam, the district embarked on an extensive planning process using a planning model the superintendent had found effective and believed would give the district the specific direction it needed as it entered the new millennium. The process engaged 30 community and staff members in a three-day session to draft a belief statement, mission, objectives, parameters, and strategies.

In designing the strategic planning process, school leaders believed it was important to make sure the planning team was representative of the entire school district community. Each school submitted names of potential participants, paying careful attention to the balance of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The community education division also submitted names, ensuring that parents of preschoolers, nonparents, and senior citizens were included. School site councils, administrators, and staff members reviewed the lists to be sure they were both inclusive and representative. Superintendent Pulliam then personally called the people on the list, inviting them to be a part of the strategic planning process.

After the initial planning process was put in place, it was expanded to include hundreds of community volunteers. Subsequently, more than 150 parents, community members, students, and staff volunteered for action teams, which met weekly to research and develop action plans to achieve the strategic goals.

Improving the Learning Environment

One action team was charged with making recommendations about facilities use and possible grade reconfigurations. District leaders had already met with parent focus groups and school staff to discuss whether its present facilities helped or hindered the quality of instruction St. Louis Park wanted for its students. Outside consultants had also conducted a facilities study. "All facilities were reviewed. We've grappled with major educational and facility issues from the standpoint of what's best for learners," said Assistant Superintendent Bev Stofferahn in a news release. "Now we need to discuss alternatives with our teaching staff, parents, and community members." The review process identified four areas for more discussion: choosing the best learning environments for middle school students; implementing the district's five-year technology plan within funding parameters; reviewing space alternatives for the district's growing Spanish immersion program; and examining ways to address the current inadequacies of programs and facilities.

The school board gave the 24-member facilities task force, chaired by three parents and one principal, very specific parameters: Come back with several recommendations about how best to reconfigure grades for the most effective learning. The task force conducted community and staff dialogues and a telephone survey to assess opinions. The task force members, all volunteers, also drew on expert testimony, enrollment projections, and on the facilities studies that outside consultants had conducted earlier in the year. After a good deal of research, brainstorming, and discussion, the team developed four recommendations for school board consideration.

The district could keep its current structure — which included two primary schools with grades kindergarten through 3; two intermediate schools with grades 3 through 6; a Spanish immersion elementary school that was adding one grade a year; a junior high school with grades 7 and 8, and a high school with grades 9 through 12. Or it might consider several other options, such as K-5 elementary schools and a middle school with grades 6-8. In developing its recommendations, task force members had to ask tough questions: What shape would the junior high school be in if grade 6 were added? Does a middle school with grades 6 through 8 provide a stronger educational experience than one with only grades 7 and 8? How would space be affected if the legislature wanted all-day kindergartens?

Although the district developed basic strategies to meet its goals, it expects to involve hundreds of citizens in action teams to further refine and implement the strategies.

The grade configuration issue interested many citizens, so the district had no trouble getting volunteers to serve on the task force. "Because people knew they would have a voice, they came forward," says Gothberg. "We didn't have to beat the bushes." But the school district worked hard to ensure that that the team wasn't skewed toward any one philosophical position, and that it represented the cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity of the district. Over the summer, the task force presented its report to the school board, which was expected to select one recommendation, or perhaps a combination of recommendations, in August 1999.

A New Strategic Plan

In June 1999, the strategic planning team reconvened to review the action plans, incorporate them into the draft strategic plan, and forward the overall plan to the board of education for adoption. In July, says Gothberg, the board adopted its new strategic plan, which has the following objectives:

- Every child will enter kindergarten ready to learn.
- Each student will annually set, pursue, and review challenging educational goals that stretch him/her to the limit of his/her capabilities.
- 100 percent of students will meet or exceed district standards in the core curriculum in grades 3, 5, 8, 10, and 11.
- 100 percent of students will graduate.

For many other school districts, those goals might seem lofty or even unattainable. But St. Louis Park already had a strong record of achievement: It was the only school district in Minnesota to have all of its schools recognized as Blue Ribbon Schools, or National Schools of Excellence, by the U.S. Department of Education. Criteria include academic performance, strong teaching and curriculum, discipline, and parent involvement. Educators from all over the state have come to observe the district's whole-language program, which encourages reading and integrates reading, writing, speaking, and listening from kindergarten on. And the district, a recognized leader in technology, was one of the first districts in the nation to have every classroom linked to one another and to worldwide resources.

To meet its objectives, the district decided it would have to take a critical look at itself in eight key areas, ranging from aligning curriculum and ensuring that staff are using the best teaching methods, to improving public perceptions of the schools. Although the district developed basic strategies to meet its goals, it expects to involve hundreds of citizens in action teams to further refine and implement the strategies. For example, although the district has instituted many wonderful programs over the years, it has no system in place to evaluate and drop programs that are no longer useful, Gothberg says. Instead of adding on to what already exists, a group will develop a system for reviewing existing programs and determining whether they are outdated or duplicative. The district will keep asking itself a difficult question: "Why are we still doing this?"

According to the strategic plan's guidelines, no new service or program will be accepted unless it is consistent with the strategic plan, unless benefits justify costs, and unless provisions are made for staff development and program evaluation. No existing program or service will be retained unless benefits justify costs and unless the program contributes to the district's mission: "As a caring, diverse community with a tradition of putting its

children first, we will ensure that all students attain the highest level of achievement and become contributing members of society, and we will offer everyone high quality opportunities for lifelong learning, by providing multiple pathways to excellence and challenging each learner to meet high standards, within a safe environment."

In technology, for example, St. Louis Park has found that being on the cutting edge is no longer enough. Thus, the district's technology strategy will be to focus on making the best use of technology as a teaching tool and as a data-management system. District teams will write a comprehensive information literacy skills curriculum for grades K-12, find ways to let community members access the district's information and resources electronically, and ensure that all staff members have the necessary technology skills to access, process, and communicate information in their work.

To ensure that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn, the district will need to reach out in ways it never had to before, breaking down barriers of isolation that still exist in a school district that is more culturally diverse than most in the region. One of the district's goals is to increase by 15 percent the participation of families in early childhood parenting classes and programs. Another is to develop curriculum for all district early childhood programming that provides a more seamless transition to kindergarten.

"We've developed some strategies and an action plan, but now we have to carry it out," says Gothberg. "Now we'll get our hands dirty."

The school district will continue to build on its history of shared decision making. Each elementary school has a site council, which focuses on making data-driven decisions to improve student achievement. Each site council is autonomous and decides how to choose its own members, but must have a balance of teachers and parents. The junior and senior high schools have parent advisory councils, and the community education division has a representative citizen advisory council. The councils have a say in areas such as interviewing and hiring new staff and in making budget decisions. The councils also recruit parents to complete the numerous forms necessary to apply for Blue Ribbon school status. In addition, ad hoc committees are convened frequently on current issues. For example, a Citizens' Financial Advisory Committee met this year to assess the district's financial status and to recommend fund balance guidelines to the board. A Transportation Advisory Committee is also assisting the business office in reviewing the current status of school buses.

Putting the Children First

St. Louis Park will also continue to build on its innovative Children First initiative, the communitywide partnership that works to strengthen families and to create a more caring community environment for children and youth. A philosophy rather than a program, it first started in 1992, when Carl Holmstrom, then superintendent, challenged the Rotary Club to do something for children. The business community responded with interest and initial funding. The initiative, supported by research, is based on building "assets" for healthy youth. The more assets (family support, parental discipline and standards, structured use of time, positive values, educational commitments, and social competence) young people have, the more likely they are to do well in school and in the community, and the less likely they are to engage in drug and alcohol use and other negative behaviors.

The school district, the city, businesses, health and social service agencies, the religious community, and individuals are all called upon to "reclaim their responsibility for young people and provide the guidance, support, and attention young people need to be successful." For example, a local church offers a free after-school program for 40 elementary school students, and a local florist gave children in a low-income housing complex flowers to give to their mothers on Mother's Day. To support the Children First initiative, the district's Web site also suggests ways in which parents, businesses, and organizations can become involved. "Look at your business policies and consider them in light of what will support families and their children," it suggests. "If you employ teens, consider ways you can support their positive development."

To ensure that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn, the district will need to reach out in ways it never had to before, breaking down barriers of isolation that still exist in a school district that is more culturally diverse than most in the region.

The district has always emphasized a high-quality education, and its academic success has been steady. The dropout rate is just 1 percent. In 1998, 87 percent of the graduating class went on to postsecondary education of some sort. Eighth-grades scores have risen steadily on state graduation tests, which were instituted in 1996. That year, 66 percent of students passed reading and 76 percent passed math; 60 percent passed both tests on

their first try. In 1998, 78 percent passed reading and 77 percent passed math; 70 percent passed both tests on their first try. And since the passing score was raised from 70 to 75 in 1977, the increase in the passing rate was even more difficult to achieve, say district leaders. District scores have also steadily risen on the California Achievement Tests between 1995-1996 and 1997-1998. In addition, the district's high school mathematics team has been the state champion five times in recent years, and its community education program was named a national model by the Mott Foundation.

Still, even in a community with a history of public engagement, involving the public in open discussion and shared decision making has its challenges. The roadblocks seem to come when expectations and communications are not clear. "We are very careful to lay out expectations, parameters, timelines, and types of decisions needed so that the public knows exactly what it is engaged to do," says Gothberg. "We also develop processes for communication between the community involved, the staff, and the school board. This minimizes roadblocks and lays the groundwork for success."

In addition to making expectations and timelines clear, School Board Chair Julie DiGravina notes that it is important to take the work of public engagement seriously, to be available to clarify any issues, and to offer support. "Listen, be flexible, and show gratitude," she advises.

For more information, contact Bridget Gothberg, Community Education Director, St. Louis Park School District, at (612) 928-6063 or (612) 928-6064. The district's Web site is at http://www.stlpark.k12.mn.us.

ST. MARY'S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Maryland

Sentiment in this Eastern Shore community ran high to change the school district's time-honored governance structure from a politically appointed school board to an elected one. Members of the newly elected board, as well as the board's nonvoting student member, identified public engagement as one of their top priorities.

The St. Mary's County Public School System is a rural district located in an area rich in history — St. Mary's City was the state capital in colonial times. Situated in southern Maryland near the Chesapeake Bay, the community also has an abundance of parks, waterways, and other recreational facilities. In the last few years, however, this seemingly idyllic district has faced the same kinds of problems and pressures encountered by larger, more suburban school systems. As enrollments increased 13 percent, the district not only had to educate more students, but it had to educate students with greater financial and educational needs. Nearly a quarter of the district's 14,691 students meet the poverty guidelines for free and reduced-price lunch; 18 percent qualify for Title I funds; and 24 percent are transient. Many local families must move frequently in search of work, and many students come to school with less preparation than other students receive from home.

At the same time, community sentiment ran high to change the school district's time-honored governance structure from a politically appointed school board to an elected one. After an overwhelming majority (82 percent) of voters supported the idea of an elected board, the county asked the state legislature to change the law to make an election possible. In December 1996, voters chose their first elected school board in more than 100 years — a board that is, by its very nature, directly accountable to the public.

The time was right for St. Mary's County schools to take a major step forward in involving citizens more extensively in the public schools. Although the district had a history of engaging the public and its internal constituents in school issues, the newly elected board, and its new superintendent, Patricia Richardson, started a more formal public engagement process. The five-member school board, as well as its nonvoting student member, identified public engagement as one of its top priorities.

First Steps in Collaboration

The school district's first efforts centered on developing partnerships with the many institutions in the community that could enrich the resources available to the public schools. It entered into a formal partnership agreement with St. Mary's College, a four-year liberal arts college that consistently receives a high national ranking and offers an elementary and secondary education program leading towards certification in these areas. Thanks to this partnership, student teachers take some of their methods courses in district schools; the courses are team taught by college instructors and district teachers and principals. This arrangement may encourage many new teachers to start their careers in the St. Mary's County Public Schools — an important consideration for a school system that expects enrollments to continue to rise.

To involve the U.S. Navy, a major presence in the community, the superintendent met with the new captain of the Patuxent River Naval Air Station soon after his appointment to discuss collaborative initiatives. Built in 1943, the naval station is located on some 6,500 acres in what is now Lexington Park, the county's largest community. After this first meeting, the Navy formally adopted the St. Mary's public schools. As part of their Adopt-a-School efforts, members of the squadron provide regularly scheduled mentoring and tutoring support for students, together with technological support services. In addition, the base has donated more than 350 computers to the district. At a convocation that opened the 1997-98 school year, Capt. Paul Roberts, commanding officer of the Naval Air Station, told educators: "You are important to us, and you are important to the Navy. Our scientists, engineers, and test pilots are products of your efforts." He promised to encourage all Naval Air Station employees to help teachers with their jobs of educating "our future citizens and future leaders." The district's biennial opening convocation celebrates community engagement by inviting local leaders and leaders of the district's many partnership organizations, as well as the school board and the entire school staff.

A third major initiative strengthened individual School Improvement Teams (SIT) by developing systemwide guidelines to provide greater team structure and consistency. This effort involved the County Council of PTAs and a representative group of principals, supervisors, and central office staff. The guidelines call for the teams to meet a minimum of seven times a year, but to vary the meeting times to allow working parents to attend. The meeting schedule is disseminated in the district's August newsletter, which also highlights the topics, such as budget or assessment data, that each meeting will cover.

Team members represent both internal and external publics, including parents, teachers, students, administrative support personnel, and community leaders who serve as public school activists. Each SIT participates fully in the development of each school's annual strategic improvement plan, which is based on the long-range system goals established by the school board in consultation with the superintendent and her executive team. Principals chair the committees, although SIT members may elect to have a cochair as well.

The Community's Advisory Role

Finally, the newly elected board created an important new advisory committee to study growth patterns in the community and to make specific recommendations regarding school construction, redistricting, and the adequacy of public facilities. In making its recommendations, this Growth Management Advisory Committee looks at the school board's class size goals, enrollment projections, and school capacity both with and without portable buildings. Committee members also work with the district as its capital improvement plan is developed and support the board as it requests school construction funds from the state.

After surveying a sample of the school community to identify factors that contribute to, or interfere with, minority achievement, the task force developed its plan, paying special attention to reading, writing, and mathematics.

The school board's goal for committee membership is 70 percent community representatives and 30 percent school staff, with local agency representatives providing additional expertise. Board Chairman Michael Hewitt says that advertisements, notices, suggestions from principals, and the identification of community leaders are the chief ways potential members are identified. A selection committee makes the final choice, based on a candidate's expertise and resume. Every attempt is made to make the committee representative of the community and its schools, Hewitt says.

The board also strengthened two existing board advisory committees, Budget Advisory Committe, and Citizens Advisory Committee for Special Education, by adopting bylaws these groups had suggested. These committees now come before the board on a regular basis to receive tasks, report progress, and make recommendations. Numerous other board advisory committees, task forces, and forums engage the public on issues such as dropout prevention and student attendance, student conduct, transportation, staff development, and school-to-work trade and industry connections. In addition, the school board encourages public comment at all board meetings, which are televised via the local cable network.

In tandem with these initiatives, Superintendent Richardson spearheaded a student achievement task force that focused on raising the academic performance of the district's African American students, who make up 20 percent of the district's enrollment. "National, state, and local assessments have repeatedly shown a discrepancy between the performance of minority and nonminority students on measures of reading, writing, and mathematics achievement," she wrote in the district's monthly newsletter. "If we truly believe that all students can be successful, we must find ways to tailor our instructional approaches, methods, and strategies to meet the needs of our diverse population. This action must be done before this serious issue becomes a critical issue."

The task force, which included a wide variety of stakeholders, was asked to develop a systematic, comprehensive plan that would include an evaluation component. After conducting a literature review on minority achievement, the task force wrote a resource paper identifying promising practices to improve achievement. Committee members then identified practices already in place in the system's schools to enhance minority achievement. After surveying a sample of the school community to identify factors that contribute to, or interfere with, minority achievement, the task force developed its plan, paying special attention to reading, writing, and mathematics. Finally, members wrote a plan to evaluate progress. The task force, which presented its preliminary report to the superintendent last February, was expected to deliver its final report to the school board in August.

Increasing Participation, Producing Results

District leaders say the school board makes every effort to ensure full and active participation on advisory committees by seeking out interested citizens from all schools and geographic regions for each board-appointed group. Principals are canvassed, and requests for citizen participation are published and broadcast by the local media. If the district perceives that any constituent groups (parents, business partners, labor organizations, students, or school staff) are not fully represented, the board makes a concerted effort to increase that participation.

In an effort to reach citizens who may not read newspapers regularly or listen to public service announcements, the district uses a variety of "nontraditional" approaches to get the word out that it is seeking citizen participation. For example, notices are posted in laundromats, grocery stores, beauty parlors, community activity centers, and places of worship. In addition, by working closely with the County Council of PTAs and using that group's formal and informal communications networks, the district has increased awareness of and participation on committees and work groups by interested parents. The school system's information officer works closely with local and regional press to keep the public informed of meeting dates, and minutes of work sessions are posted on the district's Web site for public review.

The superintendent also meets with many focus groups on a regular basis to seek feedback and recommendations for positive system growth. Students, parents, teachers, and support staff participate in these focus groups. Students also have the chance to be represented through their elected board member, who participates in all board meetings. Although the student member does not vote, he or she provides the student perspective on issues such as redistricting and keeps the board apprised of the wide variety of school-sponsored events that take place in the community.

Through its engagement of internal and external publics, the school district has seen significant improvements in public confidence, curriculum standards, and staff development.

- Increased public confidence. A survey of citizens' attitudes toward school climate, commissioned by the county government and conducted by an outside consulting firm, showed that 46 percent of those surveyed believed the district's schools were good or excellent. Fewer than 10 percent of respondents gave the school system a negative rating.
- Higher curriculum standards. District leaders say they have raised expectations for student achievement by making the curriculum more rigorous and by making the community aware of their higher expectations. Elementary and middle school programs of studies, as well as those for high school, are distributed to parents and placed in public libraries. The school system has doubled the number of Advanced Placement courses offered at each high school and added honors courses for freshmen and sophomores, and in the last few years the percentage of juniors and seniors who take AP courses has risen from 20 percent to 31 percent.
- Enhanced staff development. District leaders say that their major investment in staff development has really paid off. The superintendent chaired a statewide reading task force that convinced the state school board to increase requirements for all teachers in the area of reading instruction. All elementary and special education teachers at the K-8 level must have 12 hours of reading instruction, and a minimum of six hours of coursework in content-area reading is now required for secondary certification. "In St. Mary's County, we identified the need to improve teachers' skills and knowledge in the area of reading before the state decisions went into effect," says Hewitt. More than 100 teachers immediately enrolled in reading courses that the district offered for the first time last year. The school system also conducted intensive staff development sessions to prepare teams of elementary and middle school teachers to hold summer reading academies for students — academies so effective they were expanded this past summer. Additional professional development opportunities include extensive technology training and a fall miniconference for teachers, which offers a variety of sessions featuring different education topics.

These combined efforts have led to increased student achievement on a wide variety of indicators. For example, the state's education department recognized 16 of 20 elementary and middle schools for continuous progress on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), administered to third-, fifth-, and eighth-grade students in late spring. The MSPAP measures school improvement, not individual student performance. The 1998 composite MSPAP scores showed that St. Mary's County Public Schools showed improvement for the fifth straight year. Eight of 20 eligible schools were recognized for improvements in achievement twice in three years, and 13 of 20 received cash awards totaling $390,000.

Through its engagement of internal and external publics, the school district has seen significant improvements in public confidence, curriculum standards, and staff development.

Student scores on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) in 1998 were the highest in five years, with the district's students outperforming both the state and the nation. The percentage of seniors going to a two or four-year college increased from 56.6 percent in 1997 to 65.7 percent in 1999.

Moreover, St. Mary's has worked hard to enhance technology, improve programs, reduce class size, and make other improvements that are critical components of student achievement. Its average class size was reported to be the best in Maryland, and its 6 to 1 ratio of computers to students was the second best in the state. The school system also received a $825,495 21st Century Community Learning Centers Grant, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and the C. S. Mott Foundation, to create or expand after-school programs at two middle schools. These programs provide safe havens for students while allowing them to explore technology, art, sports, and other topics of interest.

Sustaining public engagement is difficult, however, and St. Mary's is no exception. Although many parents and community members would like to become more actively involved, they have difficulty finding the time. In response, the school board has varied its meeting times, holding some meetings in the morning, some in the afternoon, and some in the evenings. The local cable station broadcasts school board meetings, and a monthly newsletter communicates key board decisions and events. The district also plans to broadcast a mathematics program to help students and parents develop a better understanding of the district's math curriculum. The program will eventually include a call-in option for homework assistance and general information about mathematics.

In addition, the district has also supported a more active role for the County Council of PTAs, a group once hardly noticeable in the community. Using presentations and written materials, staff members have informed council members on key issues, and the staff works closely with council leaders to lobby state legislators on specific education issues. The school system also subsidized the insurance individual school PTAs must carry.

Hewitt says he has discovered that people "want to help and want to know how to be of assistance." By taking the initiative and giving people opportunities to participate, the district has found that the public has much to offer, he says. Especially if they can contribute to "sunset" projects — which have specific goals and objectives and definite timelines — citizens are very willing to participate in the work of the schools.

For more information, contact Michael L. Hewitt, School Board Chairman, at (301) 863-6624 or (301) 475-4253. The district's Web site is at http://www.smcps.k12.md.us.

SUNNYSIDE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 12

Arizona

When this school district's planning panel started its work, members agreed that no goal would be part of the plan unless everyone said, "I support this goal, I believe it's important, and I would work for it." Media coverage of the district has changed dramatically from a long-standing negative coverage to a much more positive, achievement-focused perception.

In the early 1990s, Sunnyside Unified School District No. 12, a fast-growing urban district in metropolitan Tucson, had high aspirations for its poor, largely Hispanic student population — but no real way to realize those hopes. Like parents everywhere, Sunnyside parents — many of whom spoke little English, held down two jobs, and juggled child care with other responsibilities — wanted their children to share in the American dream. Although they were committed to their children's education, they had little time to become involved with the schools. Besides, the district had a negative image in the community; local reporters often wrote disparagingly about the school system on the "south side" of town, with its low expectations for student achievement. Although the district had general goals, it had no overall strategic plan supported by specific strategies, timelines, and budgets. Local school improvement plans existed but were not aligned with systemwide goals.

In short, Sunnyside badly needed direction and community support.

In the last five years, the district has undergone a major transformation, thanks to dynamic leadership, a strategic plan that focuses on student achievement, and unprecedented levels of community involvement and support. The 15,000-student district is now nationally recognized for its successes in early childhood education, family literacy, bilingual education, counseling, staff development, and School to Work programs. Students are making steady academic progress, school safety has improved, and grants and other external funding have increased. Sunnyside is the only public school system in the country to win recognition for its K-12 technology plan and curriculum from the Smithsonian Institute for Leadership in Technology. In 1998, Sunnyside Superintendent Mary Garcia won the All Arizona Superintendent Award, named the outstanding superintendent for large school districts. This year, she was elected president of the Arizona board of education.

The Seeds of Change

The school district began to make real change in January 1995, when it engaged in its first strategic planning process. That process brought together a 54-member panel to create a long-range plan that represented the vision, mission, beliefs, goals, and strategies necessary to address district needs over time. The members of the planning panel were carefully selected to represent the district's various constituencies. They included representatives of community agencies and neighborhood associations, education associations, support staff leadership, the district's diverse ethnic/racial communities, various employee groups, and city and county government officials. Teachers, support personnel, administrators, board members, and students represented the district's internal publics, while parents, community members at large, and members of business, industry, and higher education represented its external publics.

The planning panel's work was based on information collected from patron and employee surveys, as well as from analyses of national, state, and local data and trends. Panel members met twice a month for six months to complete their task. Although not all 54 members attended every meeting, they did stick with the work, Garcia says, and if they had to miss a meeting, they asked for review materials. In determining its six goals, the planning panel easily reached consensus. "The members had so much background information on which to make decisions that it became clear what we needed to do," says Garcia. Moreover, the group operated not on majority rule but on the basis of unanimous consent. "When we went to set the goals, we said no goal would be part of the plan unless everyone said, 'I support this goal, I believe it's important, and I would work for it,'" adds Garcia. "There was a strong buy-in to the six goals we chose." Those goals focused on student achievement, school safety, adult literacy and lifelong learning, community and parent involvement, staff development, and school readiness.

Moreover, when the initial vision and mission statement and goals were being developed, the district's leadership sought feedback from the site councils and staff members at each school. "When we were developing the plan, we broke it up into chunks of work that we took out to our internal publics, so the site councils knew what we were doing all along the way," recalls Garcia.

Because the site councils could respond to various components of the draft document — and because changes were made in response to their comments — the final document contained no surprises. The board of education approved the strategic plan in June 1995.

After the plan was developed, individual schools worked to align their own school improvement plans with the district's. The synergy created from this process, Garcia says, has led to increased and sustained student achievement each year since the plan's implementation. At the school level, the site councils received — and continue to receive — extensive training; many school leaders have emerged from site council ranks. The site councils continue to be active in monitoring and implementing each school's improvement plan. School board policies guide council membership at each school. By policy, teachers, noncertified employees, parents who are district residents, the principal, community representatives, and students (if the school is a high school) are required to make up the council membership.

A Living Document

District leaders knew, however, that a strategic plan that simply sits on the shelf is worth next to nothing; it has to be a living document to create the impetus for change.

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After implementing the strategic plan for a year, the district conducted focus groups to determine people's perceptions of the plan's goals and strategies, as well as to determine their level of awareness of the plan itself. Separate focus groups were held for teachers, administrators, parents, students, and members of business and industry. Each group was asked a similar set of questions: "How did you learn about the plan? Is it being taken seriously? Do you know the goals and strategies? Are we making progress? When you make decisions, do those decisions support the plan's vision, mission, and goals?" Generally, says Garcia, people knew that student achievement was the first and most important goal, and they also realized that school improvement plans had to be linked back to the overall plan.

The district also created a structure that keeps the long-range strategic plan, each annual action plan, each school improvement plan, and the annual report to the school board linked together. The district's annual action plan, based on the strategic plan, allows the district to focus on certain objectives that can be accomplished in a particular year. Like the strategic plan, the annual plan notes the strategies, person responsible, budget impact, funding source, and timeline for each goal. An annual "Status of the District Report" describes how well the district has done in meeting its objectives and notes successes, progress, and specific targets for the next year. This structure helps to ensure that the vision, mission, and goals are collectively addressed across the district throughout each year and for the entire five years of the strategic plan. Periodic evaluations, incentives to reach achievement goals, and reports to the school board add a further dimension, Garcia says, and the whole process brings unity and cohesion to the district, while still allowing for flexibility.

Now, as the first strategic plan draws to a close during the 1999-2000 school year, Garcia is already gearing up for the next five-year plan. She first expects to engage focus groups in evaluating what worked and what did not in the first plan, and in determining what modifications might be needed the second time around. She might bring back some of the original members of the planning panel — many have since assumed leadership roles at the school level or participated in focus groups — as well as new participants.

In Touch with the Public

The Sunnyside district also involves the community in many other ways. For example, it uses surveys to keep abreast of the public's perceptions. In response to an identified strategy related to adult literacy and lifelong learning, parents were surveyed about their interests in personal growth. The results of these surveys were used to develop programs for parents. Teachers and classified staff were surveyed to determine their ongoing staff development needs. Parent satisfaction surveys and climate surveys are administered on an annual basis. Results are aggregated across the district and used as one measure of the strategic plan's success. Sites use the disaggregated results in their school improvement planning, which is aligned with the strategic plan.

Parents, teachers, and administrators are also involved in setting benchmarks in core areas at every grade level. This task force will recommend organizational and structural changes, such as transitional grades and extended time for learning, that will help ensure student success. "They will look at a wide variety of alternatives to retention," says Garcia. "It's a huge piece of work." The task force will present its recommendations to Sunnyside's board of education in May 2000.

Students at Sunnyside also play active roles in the ongoing work of the school district. The Superintendent's Advisory Council, which includes 18 to 20 high school students selected by school principals and counselors, meets with Garcia once a month to discuss issues of concern and brainstorm solutions to problems. The council members, who receive business cards and special shirts, also have served as a focus group for such issues as block scheduling and a student survey on the impact of the media on students' self-image. While the students on the council are not necessarily first in their class academically, they display leadership qualities, Garcia says. Their feedback is helpful, as they are candid in discussing their perceptions and often bring a different perspective to education issues than adults would offer. Moreover, from a personal point of view, Garcia says she finds the student meetings "absolutely the most delightful thing I do every month." Because she gets to know these students well, their graduation becomes especially meaningful. "It's a really special personal moment when they receive diplomas, as it's the last time I'll see them in a formal sense," she says.

To keep the community involved and informed, the district distributes an annual calendar that is rich in information and that allows busy parents to plan their time for school activities. Written in English and Spanish, the 1998-99 calendar contained the district's mission statement, homework policy, athletic schedules, and forms for participation in school lunch programs (82 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch). Most important, it listed all school board, site council, and other meetings, as well as testing dates, early release days, parenting classes, honors assemblies, community clean-up days, and other events.

Substantial Results

District leaders say the school system's extensive public engagement process has produced substantial and varied results. The development of the strategic plan itself was the first accomplishment. Parent satisfaction is also high: On a survey, parents indicated that Sunnyside schools are doing a good job of teaching students the basic skills (85 percent), communicating high expectations (77 percent), and providing a safe learning environment (84 percent).

Other accomplishments are equally noteworthy:

- The public showed its support for the schools by voting yes in a bond election in 1998. The bond includes $16.0 million for technology and will result in six student workstations and one teacher workstation in every classroom in the district; a telephone in each classroom to enhance teacher/parent communication; cabling for voice, video, and data; television monitors in each classroom; connectivity throughout the district, and Internet access.
- To meet two long-range goals — literacy and lifelong learning, and parent and community involvement — the district has opened its doors to parent training for technology. In 1997-98, more than 1,000 parents signed up for approximately 400 openings for this training; the following year, an additional 400 parents took part.
- The district has established a local education foundation. In its first three years, the Sunnyside School District Foundation has raised about $300,000 toward a $1.0 million endowment and has given out nearly $50,000 in scholarships and mini-grants. The group's fund-raising dinners are a major social event throughout the metropolitan Tucson area; nearly 850 people paid $125 per ticket to attend an event in March 1999.
- The success of the school readiness goal is measured in part by the new and growing Parents as Teachers Program, which serves families with children from birth to three years of age. Preschools have been expanded to serve more at-risk four-year-olds, and a district prekindergarten-kindergarten registration resulted in more children starting school with completed immunizations and more being identified as in need of early intervention.
- The district's collaborative efforts with area organizations and law enforcement agencies have become a national model for school safety programs. Sunnyside staff are frequently sought out for advice and presentations. These efforts have changed parent perceptions about the safety of the schools. Ninety percent now report that conditions and activities at the schools support a safe learning environment.
- A mandatory homework policy has been developed by a cross section of constituents and approved by the board of education. This policy is being evaluated through a survey that asks parents, teachers, and students for their reactions.
- Finally, the District Parent Council — which includes an officer from each school's parent organization, together with a Parent Involvement Assistant — has taken on new importance. The council's agendas are more substantive, Garcia says, and the group is often used as a focus group to get feedback on pending actions such as revised report cards and the homework policy.

The district's strategic focus and the community's involvement and support have also led to steady gains in student achievement, the district's primary goal. For example, the dropout rate declined from 17.3 percent in 1995-96 to 15.1 percent in 1997-98. Attendance went up slightly, from 92.8 percent in 1995-96 to 93.2 percent in 1997-98, and the high school graduation rate climbed from 52 percent in 1995-96 to 54 percent in 1997-98.

Sunnyside students demonstrated significant gains in scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) from the fall of 1994 to the fall of 1995, but the state of Arizona began using the Stanford Achievement 9 (SAT9) test instead and changed the test time from fall to spring. Those changes forced the district to begin with new baseline data. The results of the first administration of the SAT9 revealed that students had a lower percentile rank than on the ITBS, but the second year of testing was better. That year (1997-98) saw increased percentile ranks in 22 of the 30 subtest areas of reading, language arts, and mathematics at all grade levels. Although the district still scores below the national average in all areas, Sunnyside students are demonstrating larger percentile rank gains than students across the state.

The district's collaborative efforts with area organizations and law enforcement agencies have become a national model for school safety programs.

Securing Commitment

Although the district's strategic plan and public engagement policies have led to substantive results, involving constituents in planning has been difficult. Some parents hold two jobs; some have no telephone at home; some don't have access to good child care; and some cannot speak English. These impediments become evident when it comes time to identify people to serve on a task force that meets throughout the year or to participate on a site council for a multiyear term. By securing an "up front" agreement to a long-term task, however, school leaders have found they can select people more likely to stay the course, rather than having to educate new committee members midstream.

Accommodating work schedules through alternative meeting times and providing child care have helped improve parent participation. Offering the services of a translator allows more families to participate in parent-teacher organizations, site councils, and district committees. In addition to providing materials in Spanish, the district, which has a small (4.5 percent) percentage of Native American students, will frequently translate materials into Tohono O'odham, the language of students who live on the San Xavier Reservation served by the district, and into other languages as well.

"Probably the most difficult challenge is to maintain and expand participation when we move from the plan to the implementation," says Garcia. "Continuing to engage some of the initial planning group through at least the initial stages of implementation, and then to bring them back into the evaluation phase, can be of tremendous help."

In summarizing Sunnyside's experiences, Board President Ned Norris Jr. says that the school board's commitment to the public engagement process has been essential. Ensuring that all parties are represented, having a substantive strategic plan, and continuing to review the plan and report on its progress, he says, are the other key ingredients of success.

For more information, contact Mary Garcia, Superintendent, Sunnyside Unified School District No. 12, at (520) 545-2024. The district's Web site is at http://www.sunnysideud.k12.az.us.

VANCOUVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Washington

The Vancouver school district was determined to prepare its students to flourish in a modern, global economy. To do so, the school board and school administrators knew they had to win community support for a massive building program, for major technological enhancements, and for key improvements in the education program. The challenge was clear: The district had to take steps to create a positive, shared vision of the future and to persuade community members to invest in children.

This urban school district in southwest Washington state, bordering the Columbia River, saw its economic hopes diminish as, one by one, several well-known American companies closed their doors or downsized their corporate headquarters. During the past 15 years, the loss of Alcoa, Union Carbide, Del Monte, Boise Cascade, and other major plants strained the region's economic viability. The average household wage, when adjusted for inflation, actually declined — from $28,543 in 1975 to $24,336 in 1990.

The school district was determined not to let the community's economic circumstances dampen the educational aspirations of its students — students with greater needs than ever before. The district's student population had become more mobile (only 70 percent of students attend the same school for an entire year), more diverse, and, increasingly, poorer. The poverty rate has nearly doubled in the last 10 years. Today, 39 percent of Vancouver's 21,000 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

But Vancouver was resolute in its desire to prepare its students to flourish in the modern, global economy. The school board and administration knew they had to win community support for a massive building program, for major technological enhancements, and for key improvements in the education program. The challenge was clear: to create a positive, shared vision of the future and to persuade community members — including those with no children in the school system — to invest in children and their future.

The Vancouver Public Schools met that challenge through a public engagement process that involved hundreds of citizens, businesses, government agencies, and community organizations in envisioning a world class school system that allows every child to reach his or her full potential. The educational transformation of the Vancouver Public Schools began in 1989, when the superintendent and school board undertook an ambitious strategic plan aimed at preparing the schools to enter the next millennium. An 80-member citizens committee helped develop a mission statement, vision, and strategic goals.

The goals concentrated on four areas: a revitalized curriculum, instructional delivery, and assessment system; facilities and technology tools for the 21st century; a high-quality staff; and community partnerships. Those long-range goals have remained consistent over the past decade, although, in 1998 the district revised its mission statement to reflect a systemwide commitment to personalizing education and ensuring success for each student.

Each year, the administration identifies specific objectives and timelines that the school board endorses and refines at a fall retreat. Teams were formed to implement the goals and report periodically on their progress; the school board receives annual progress reports each June. This process keeps the goal work on target and allows for any necessary fine-tuning as the district progresses with its long-term strategic plan, says Tom Hagley, assistant to the superintendent for community relations.

Decentralized Decision Making

When it first put its strategic plan into action in 1990, the district made a key decision: to reorganize its central administration and expand decision making to the local school level. The cost savings gained through downsizing the central administration were reallocated to local schools. Since then, faculty members have worked with parents at each school to develop and implement Student Learning Improvement Plans (SLIPs), which must include community involvement and partnership strategies. The district provides leadership and ensures accountability but gives schools the resources and freedom they need to be innovative.

This decentralized decision-making process involves maximum participation. At each school, the principal administers the school budget, but a Budget Oversight Committee, staffed by faculty members and required under the contract with the local teachers union, reviews the distribution of revenues and expenditures. A Site-Based Leadership Team, led by faculty cochairs (and also required under the contract), implements plans, practices, and programs for school improvement

that are based on established priorities; manages resources; collects and interprets assessment data; and establishes basic operating procedures for the school.

A Learning Improvement Team at each school, mandated by school board policy, focuses specifically on increasing student achievement. Working in conjunction with the Site-Based Leadership Team, the learning team prepares a strategic plan to improve student learning and meets regularly to assess progress and develop strategies that contribute to the plan's success. It also prepares an annual report. The principal selects and recruits learning team members, who include teachers, support staff, parents, community members, and, when appropriate, students. Although not a decision-making body, the learning team makes recommendations that the school board takes seriously, Hagley says. In addition, members of the Learning Improvement Team also serve as "goodwill ambassadors" among parents, schools, and patrons.

The entire school staff and the school's Parent Advisory Council also review the learning plan. Before it is submitted to the school board, the plan is also reviewed by the district's Accountability Team (which consists of a broad range of administrators in curriculum areas, special education and Title I programs, and school operations) to make certain it aligns with the school district's overall vision, mission, and strategic goals. After monitoring student achievement data throughout the year, the district offers "targeted assistance" to schools that have not adequately improved student learning, Hagley says, providing the necessary resources to implement specific tactics to improve achievement. "Some principals in Vancouver have found these services to be so helpful that they requested targeted assistance to continue even after the requisite improvements have been achieved," he adds.

The district developed a collaborative design process for facilities planning that directly involves the community in creating the kinds of schools it wants and needs.

Building for the Future

To achieve its educational goals, Vancouver needed modern, technologically excellent facilities. But first, residents had to pass bond measures to fund new construction and renovations. The district developed a collaborative design process for facilities planning that directly involves the community in creating the kinds of schools it wants and needs. The collaborative process, which has earned the district national recognition, starts with a two-day design planning symposium before any new building projects or renovations are undertaken. Each symposium draws 60 to 70 students, parents, educators, architects, consultants, school partners, city planners, and other community members. Vancouver educators say the symposium was inspired by the Disney Company's "imagineering" concept: The goal is to envision the school and make it a reality.

At each symposium, the superintendent first describes the district's vision for 21st-century schools. The school principal then outlines the site-based goals for the school, and a consultant presents exemplary school designs from around the country. Working in small groups, participants brainstorm ideas about teaching and learning, special programs, and partnerships, keeping in mind the demographics of the students served by the school. After a tour of the school site, participants brainstorm again to generate ideas and concepts for facility design. During both sessions, an architectural illustrator captures the groups' collective vision in sketches. The large group then adjourns, and, during evening and morning hours, three design teams work in friendly competition to create conceptual drawings for the school. At noon on the following day, the large group reconvenes to review and critique these drawings.

District administrators say Vancouver's design symposium lays the groundwork for architects and staff work groups to further refine the design elements that precede blueprints and other construction documents. Final project evaluations reveal that the early conceptual drawings and the final documents show "remarkable fidelity to the collective vision of the symposium participants," school leaders say. And Vancouver educators contend that this collective planning model is far more time-efficient, cost-effective, and forward-looking than the traditional "educational specifications" process used by many other school facility planners.

The collaborative facilities planning process has won great support in the Vancouver community. Since 1990, voters have approved two capital bond measures authorizing nearly a quarter of a billion dollars in local and matching state expenditures for 27 school construction and renovation projects. The bond proceeds have also paid for the acquisition of educational technologies and provided a common design "template" and a vision of schools for the next century. The template has a number of design elements (a sense of "smallness within largeness," for example) that support the district's instructional model: One-third of a student's experience consists of independent reading, computer work, or other individualized learning; one-third involves small-group work and hands-on projects; and one-third uses large-group instruction.

Communicating with the Community

Vancouver's site-based committees and collaborative facilities-planning process are not the only ways the district engages the community. Continuing efforts to communicate with the district's diverse constituency include technology fairs, the public dedication of new buildings, a monthly "patron tour," citizens' advisory groups, cable television productions, and a variety of staff and community newsletters.

School leaders say the superintendent's patron tour has been one of the most successful ways to convey the district's vision and goals to community members. The patron tour — a half-day of presentations, on-site school tours, and student performances and demonstrations — concludes with a luncheon prepared and served by students enrolled in the district's culinary arts program. Over the years, the district has targeted a wide variety of audiences for the tours: business and community leaders, parents, senior citizens, school district retirees, religious leaders, current staff members, alumni, and public officials. For the past two years, a special tour has been held for families with limited proficiency in English; interpreters convey information in several different languages.

In addition, the district has the Superintendent's Management Task Force, a blue-ribbon group of community and business leaders that provides counsel on key issues, and the Citizens' Committee for Good Schools, an advocacy group that meets year-round to advise the school board and administration and to campaign on behalf of the district in school finance elections.

To assess its achievements, the district regularly gathers information using a variety of methods, ranging from traditional paper-and-pencil and telephone surveys, to focus groups, to an automated telephone feedback system called Voice Poll. Results have been used to set priorities for strategic planning and annual goal setting. For example, a 1995 random sample telephone survey of 500 citizens identified "student discipline and school safety" and "achievement of basic skills" as the two top priorities for public education. The superintendent and school board acted on the survey data by adding an operational goal that focused on improving safety and security. They also implemented the 21st-Century Basic Skills Initiative, a comprehensive effort to raise student achievement that focused not only on reading, writing, and mathematics, but also on the technological, problem-solving, and communication skills necessary for the workplace. In 1997, the district conducted a Voice Poll survey that targeted all 2,700 staff members, 450 local opinion leaders, and a random sample of 1,100 patrons from the greater community. The district used that survey to help set priorities for its strategic plan and long-range goals.

Measures of Success

Educationally, the Vancouver Public Schools have seen their efforts result in steady academic gains. Despite dramatic changes in the district's diverse student population, districtwide achievement scores have remained at or above state and national averages. The student dropout rate dropped from 8.1 percent in 1988 to 3.9 percent today, and more than 80 percent of Vancouver students plan to continue their education beyond high school.

Because the district emphasizes site-based management, however, its gains may best be described by taking a closer look at individual schools such as Eleanor Roosevelt Elementary, which educators say exemplifies the school-level community engagement that has occurred throughout the Vancouver system. The school serves a diverse population, including students from 19 countries and 11 language groups. Of its 665 students, 77 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch, and 27 percent have been identified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). To provide both educational and emotional support to their students, Eleanor Roosevelt's staff and external publics have collaborated in ongoing efforts to build a cohesive community and to address student needs.

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The school, a schoolwide Title I site and the recipient of a Title VII grant that supports the school's Bilingual Education Literacy Project, has taken a variety of steps to increase student achievement and to support students who were failing, or at risk of failing, to meet state and district standards. The school day and school year have been extended, and recess has been restructured to increase students' time with teachers. The school also provides trained staff assistants, mentor programs, business partnerships, and parent involvement programs. Extensive staff development programs that address students' special needs have given teachers a wide variety of teaching strategies. Weekly parent nights, before- and after-school computer training, daily lunch and reading with a parent, a Science Fair, and a Young Authors con-

ference are some of the many ongoing activities that provide academic, social, and cultural enrichment.

Because of such efforts, students at Eleanor Roosevelt have made positive achievement gains. On the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, between 1994 and 1997, reading achievement increased from the 30th percentile to the 39th percentile; math scores climbed from the 28th percentile to the 41st percentile; and language arts achievement improved from the 25th percentile to the 41st percentile. Moreover, Eleanor Roosevelt was one of only three schools in the state to receive the prestigious 1998 Title I Distinguished School Award, given by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Association of State Coordinators of Compensatory Education. To qualify, schools must have 50 percent of their students in free or reduced-price lunch programs; must demonstrate quality partnerships with parents and the community; and, most important, most show three years of continuous improvement in academic performance. Eleanor Roosevelt was also one of six schools in the nation to receive a federal citation for excellence in serving LEP children.

The district's success has hinged on its ability to sustain the public's commitment to, and involvement in, the school district's vision and goals.

The school is not unique in Vancouver, administrators say. Rather, its programs, partnerships, and plans for school improvement are typical of the system's other schools. The district's success has hinged on its ability to sustain the public's commitment to, and involvement in, the school district's vision and goals. Board President Randi Holland, a former teacher and community volunteer who has served on the school board since 1987, attributes Vancouver's success in raising student achievement to the following factors:

- Stable, visionary leadership and dedicated team members
- Strong community partnerships and parental involvement
- Empowerment at the school level to develop and implement site-specific plans and effective strategies to improve student learning
- A shared commitment to individual student success
- A set of long-range goals that are aligned with public expectations.

For more information, contact Tom Hagley, Assistant to the Superintendent for Community Relations, Vancouver Public Schools, at (360) 737-7382. The district's Web site is at http://www.vannet.k12.wa.us.

RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A good place to begin a search for resources on community engagement is your state school boards association. Some state associations offer programs to local school districts or can identify the most effective service providers in the field. Additionally, the National School Boards Association Web site at http://www.nsba.org identifies ideas and local practices — including material contained within its Student Achievement and Key Work listings.

Organizational Resources

American Association of School Administrators
1801 N. Moore St.
Arlington, VA 22209
(703) 528-0700
http://www.aasa.org

American Federation of Teachers
555 New Jersey Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20001-2079
(202) 879-4400
http://www.aft.org

American Youth Policy Forum
1836 Jefferson Place NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 775-9731
http://www.aypf.org

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Brown University
Box 1985
Providence, RI 02912
(401) 863-7990
http://www.aisr.brown.edu

America's Promise
909 North Washington St.
Suite 400
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 684-4500
http://www.americaspromise.org

Communities in Schools
277 South Washington St.
Suite 210
Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) CIS-4KIDS
http://www.cisnet.org

Council of Chief State School Officers
One Massachusetts Avenue NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20001-1431
(202) 408-5505
http://www.ccsso.org

Institute for Educational Leadership
1001 Connecticut Ave. NW
Suite 310
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 822-8405

http://www.iel.org/programs/engage

Institute for Responsive Education
50 Nightingale Hall
Northeastern University
Boston, MA 02115
(617) 373-2595
http://www.resp-ed.org

Learning First Alliance
1001 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 335
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5220
http://www.learningfirst.org

National Association of Partners in Education
901 N. Pitt St., Suite 320
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 836-4880
http://www.napehq.org

National Association of State Boards of Education
227 S. Washington St., Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 684-4000
http://www.nasbe.org

National School Boards Association
1680 Duke St.
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 838-6722
http://www.nsba.org

The Public Education Network
601 13th St. NW
Suite 900 North
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 628-7460
http://www.publiceducation.org

Public Agenda
6 East 39th St.
New York, NY 10016
(212) 686-6610
http://www.publicagenda.org

Study Circles Resource Center
Box 203, Rt. 169
Promfret, CT 06258
(860) 928-2616
http://www.studycircles.org

U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202-0498
(800) USA-LEARN
http://www.ed.gov

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
555 New Jersey Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20208
(202) 219-1556
http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI

U.S. Department of Education
Regional Educational Laboratories
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202-0498
(800) USA-LEARN
http://www.ed.gov/prog_info/Labs

Voice Poll Communications
3331 Broadway
Everett, WA 98201
(425) 259-4205
http://www.voicepoll.com

Parent Groups

The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
3929 Old Lee Hwy
Suite 91-A
Fairfax, VA 22030
(703) 359-8973
http://www.ncpie.org

The National PTA
330 North Wabash Ave.
Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 670-6782
http://www.pta.org/programs/append.htm

Business Groups

National Alliance of Business
1201 New York Ave. NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 787-2848
http://www.nab.com

Business Coalition for Education Reform
1201 New York Ave. NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 787-2848
http://www.bcer.com

Publications

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about NSBA...

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. NSBA achieves its mission by amplifying the influence of school boards across the country in all public forums relevant to federal and national education issues, by representing the school board perspective before federal government agencies and with national organizations that affect education, and by providing vital information and services to Federation Members and school boards throughout the nation.

NSBA advocates local school boards as the ultimate expression of the unique American institution of representative governance of public school districts. NSBA supports the capacity of each school board—acting on behalf of and in close concert with the people of its community—to envision the future of education in its community, to establish a structure and environment that allow all students to reach their maximum potential, to provide accountability for the people of its community on performance in the schools, and to serve as the key community advocate for children and youth and their public schools.

Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. NSBA represents the nation's 95,000 school board members. These board members govern 14,772 local school districts that serve more than 46.5 million public school students—approximately 90 percent of all elementary and secondary school students in the nation. Virtually all school board members are elected; the remainder are appointed by elected officials.

NSBA policy is determined by a 150-member Delegate Assembly of local school board members from throughout the nation. The 24-member Board of Directors translates this policy into action. Programs and services are administered by the NSBA executive director, assisted by a professional staff. NSBA is located in metropolitan Washington, D.C.

National School Boards Association
1680 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3493
Phone: (703) 838-6722
Fax: (703) 683-7590

Web Address: http://www.nsba.org *E-Mail: info@nsba.org*

Excellence and Equity in Public Education through School Board Leadership

National School Boards Association
1680 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone 703-838-6722
Fax: 703-683-7590
Web Address: http://www.nsba.org
E-Mail: info@nsba.org

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