

# RESEARCH BRIEF

[www.centerforcsri.org](http://www.centerforcsri.org)

December | 2006

## Characteristics of IMPROVED SCHOOL DISTRICTS

*What are the factors that can improve school districts?*

### The Study

Shannon, G. S., & Bylsma, P. (2004). *Characteristics of improved school districts: Themes from Research*. Olympia, WA: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Retrieved October 2, 2006, from <http://www.k12.wa.us/research/pubdocs/DistrictImprovementReport.pdf>

### Methodology

The authors reviewed more than 80 research articles that investigated the attributes of schools and districts that have improved over time. After reviewing these studies, they concentrated on 23 conducted within the past 15 years that focused on multiple school districts rather than schools. As the authors analyzed the

content, they identified 13 themes or characteristics of improved school districts that emerged from the data and developed a conceptual framework to express the relationships of those themes to each other.

### In Brief

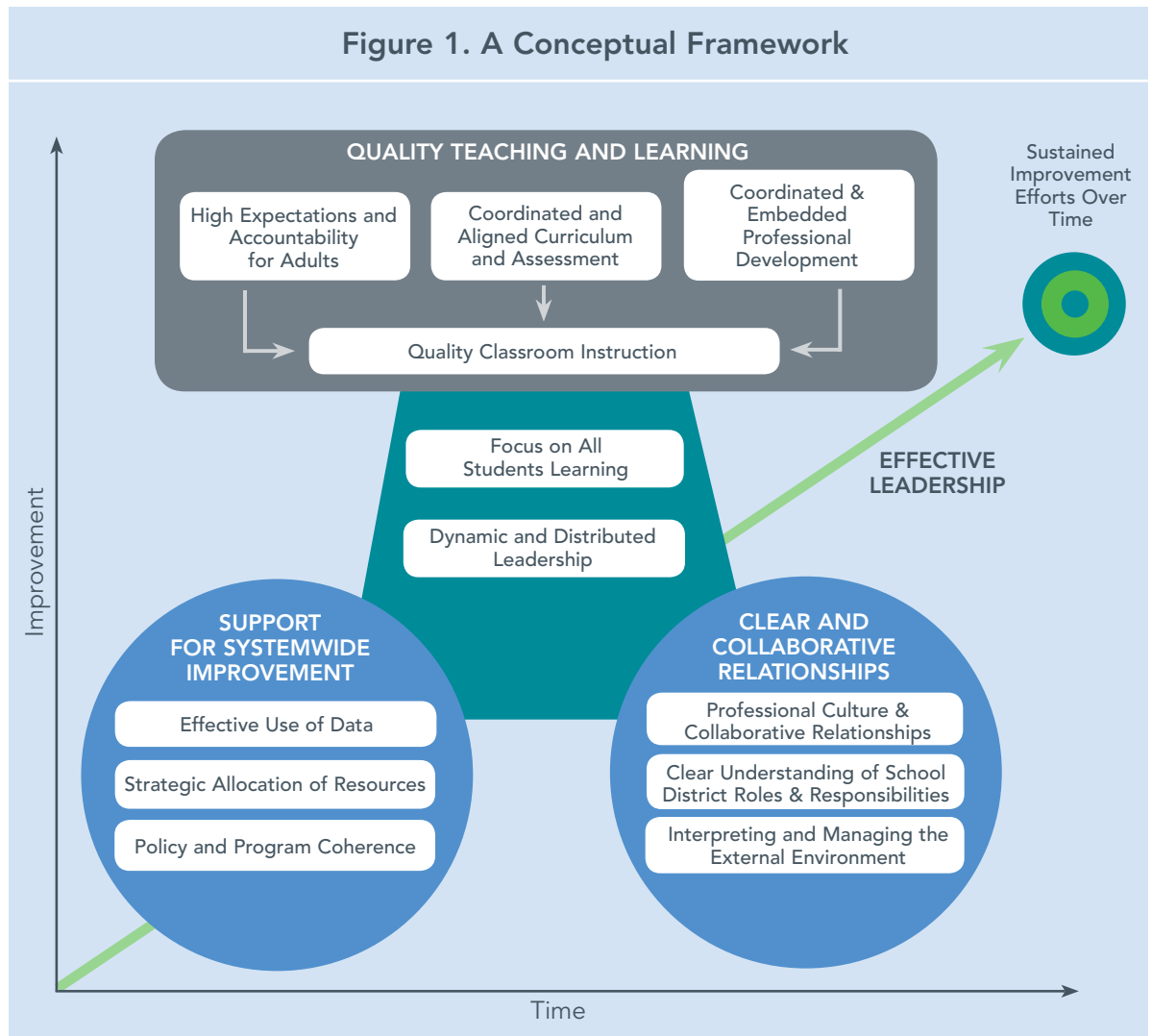
The authors grouped the 13 themes into four categories: (1) quality teaching and learning, (2) effective leadership, (3) support for systemwide improvement, and (4) clear and collaborative relationships. Each of these categories is described in more detail later. In addition, they created a framework that illustrates the interactions between the categories and the themes. (See Figure 1.) The overall focus of improved districts—quality teaching and learning—is depicted in the top rectangle. The rectangle rests

on a trapezoid that symbolizes the central role leadership plays in district improvement efforts. The two circles, like wheels that keep the improvement efforts on track and moving in a positive direction, encompass support for systemwide improvement and clear and collaborative relationships.

**Quality Teaching and Learning**

The themes identified in this category are high expectations and accountability for adults, coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment, coordinated and

embedded professional development, and quality classroom instruction. The study found that instructional improvement begins with expecting that everyone in the educational system will support student learning and by holding each of them accountable for doing so. Quality teaching and learning is supported by ongoing professional development that is job-related and focused on the learning needs of students. It is complemented with close attention to classroom practice and coaching for teachers when necessary.



From page 10 of *Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes from Research* by G. Sue Shannon and Pete Bylsma, available online at <http://www.k12.wa.us/research/pubdocs/DistrictImprovementReport.pdf>. Copyright © 2004 by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia, Washington. Reprinted with permission.

## Effective Leadership

The analysis identified effective leadership as a central element in district improvement, and effective leaders included not only the superintendent, but principals and teachers. Effective leaders are visible in the school and interested in instruction. They have high expectations for *all* students and are focused on learning goals. These leaders believe that part of their job is to eliminate distractions and competing programs that may interfere with reaching the district's learning goals. The authors say effective leadership is stable, which sustains improvement programs long enough for them to be institutionalized.

## Support for Systemwide Improvement

This category focuses on the coherent management of district operations to support student learning. The authors found that the timely use of data from a variety of sources can lead to more appropriate instruction in the classroom and better educational attainment for students. The effective use of data demands a coordinated effort involving a technological infrastructure, teacher training, and adequate time to delve into the data and use it to make plans. Both quality instruction and effective data are supported by the strategic allocation of both financial and human resources.

## Clear and Collaborative Relationships

Clearly defined and collaborative relationships also contribute to the infrastructure that keeps district improvement efforts moving forward. This category encompasses three themes found in improving districts: the presence of a nurturing professional culture and collaborative relationships, a clear understanding of school and district roles and responsibilities, and the ability to interpret and

manage the external environment. "Improved districts build a culture of commitment, collegiality, mutual respect, and stability. Professional norms include peer support, collaboration, trust, shared responsibility, and continuous learning for the adults in the system" (p. 46). Districts that showed improvement balanced autonomy and control by serving as helpful mentors to schools, sometimes mediating state and federal policies with local policies. Improved districts also established community partnerships with businesses and families to assist in the improvement process.

## Suggestions for School District Improvement

Based on their review of research on improved districts and the subsequent conceptual framework that emerged, the authors provide concrete suggestions for improving school districts (p. 56):

- **Hold staff accountable for high expectations.** Time and again, research has pointed to the positive impact of high expectations on student achievement. These expectations are encouraged through fostering shared beliefs and values, having clear goals, and leading with a shared vision of change. School districts can make high expectations part of the job by expecting excellence, monitoring performance, and providing feedback as necessary.
- **Pay close attention to instruction.** Districts can provide guidance and oversight that improves teaching and learning by developing a common vision of good instruction and helping schools to realize that vision through monitoring curriculum, instruction, and teaching practice.



- *Align standards, curriculum, assessments, and policies.* The district should review and revise policies as needed in order to closely link programs and practices to learning goals. The district also serves as the central venue for coordinating curriculum approaches and decisions. Ensuring alignment between standards, curriculum, and assessments is the responsibility of the district.
- *Target professional development.* The district can take steps to ensure that professional development focuses on improved teaching and learning. Improved districts make use of school-based coaching and support.
- *Develop dynamic and distributed leadership.* Improved districts provide moral leadership that emphasizes doing over talking. Their leadership teams encompass not only central office staff but also principals and teacher leaders. These leaders share a common purpose, spend time in schools, and show interest in teaching.
- *Sustain improvement efforts.* Sustaining requires looking at improvement as a process that requires a long-term commitment. Districts that improve research the solutions that are right for their context, make thoughtful decisions about what needs to change, and then stay the course. A long-term commitment to a particular change initiative helps staff internalize change and move improvement forward.
- *Allocate resources strategically.* Allocate and reallocate the resources necessary to support quality instruction, say the authors. Because not all students learn at the same rate, additional resources might be needed to support low-performing students. Districts need to be flexible with schools when it comes to meeting the needs of students.
- *Delineate district roles and responsibilities clearly.* Districts that improve balance their authority with school autonomy. District staff set expectations and act as change agents but also support schools and mentor them.
- *Manage the external environment as much as possible.* Improved districts serve as a buffer between their schools and external distractions. They take responsibility for responding to state and federal policy mandates. The district coordinates efforts to organize local businesses and community members in support of the schools.

## Challenges

The challenges to district improvement efforts are plentiful. One is a lack of stable leadership. Improvement takes time, and when district leadership changes every few years, even the strongest reform can be jeopardized. District improvement initiatives sometimes conflict with the terms of existing collective bargaining agreements, especially when districts seek additional teacher time to work with data or attend professional development sessions. Of course, inadequate funding can be an issue in any reform effort. The costs of improvement can be daunting. However, the social costs of not improving a district can be worse. Meeting these challenges requires a shared vision for improvement, a sustained focus on improvement goals, and a sense of teamwork.

## Bottom Line

This review of research studies illustrates that school districts can improve over time. When they do, they improve because they understand and work with the many interrelated parts of the educational system that impact student achievement.

## Other Resources

### **American Association of School Administrators *District Improvement Website***

This American Association of School Administrators website ([www.aasa.org/edissues/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2148&snItemNumber=2135&tnItemNumber=2140](http://www.aasa.org/edissues/content.cfm?ItemNumber=2148&snItemNumber=2135&tnItemNumber=2140)) features links to articles and reports on district improvement, with a focus on measuring progress and meeting targets.

### ***The Qualities of High-Performing School Districts PowerPoint***

This February 2006 PowerPoint presentation ([edweb.sdsu.edu/ncust/publications/PAVE.ppt](http://edweb.sdsu.edu/ncust/publications/PAVE.ppt)) by Joseph F. Johnson Jr. of the National Center for Urban School Transformation at San Diego State University suggests that high-performing districts get results by focusing on urgency, responsibility, and efficacy.

### ***The Broad Prize for Urban Education Website***

This website ([www.broadprize.org/](http://www.broadprize.org/)) reveals why Boston Public Schools won the 2006 Broad Prize, a \$1 million award given to a large urban school district that demonstrates high performance and improvement in student achievement and reduces the achievement gaps for poor and minority students.

The Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education ([www.cddre.org](http://www.cddre.org)) at Johns Hopkins University is funded by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education. The center helps states and districts organize and use data and provides information on effective programs and practices.

The Using Data project ([usingdata.terc.edu](http://usingdata.terc.edu)) is funded by the National Science Foundation. Its purpose is to increase the capacity of school and district leaders to create a culture of collaborative inquiry that uses data to improve both teaching and learning.



Administered by Learning Point Associates in partnership with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and WestEd, under contract with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education.

