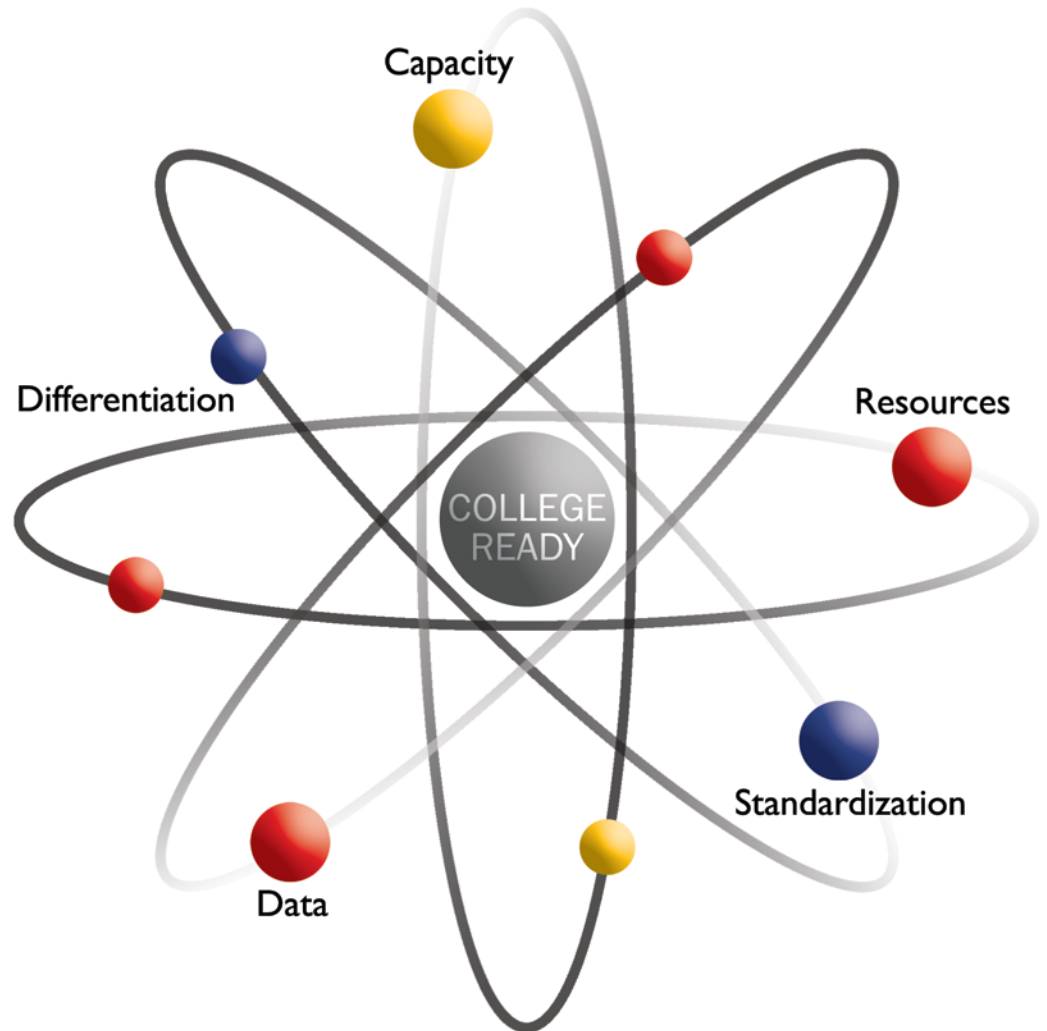


Creating a College-Ready System:



Findings from Four Case Studies

Spring 2009

By

Brinton S. Ramsey



Case Studies
of Systems Change

Creating a College-Ready System:
Findings from
Four Case Studies

Case Studies of Systems Change
Fourth in a Series

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About the Small Schools Project

The Small Schools Project, part of the Coalition of Essential Schools Northwest, was created in 2000 to promote the understanding of and development of small schools committed to providing rigorous, relevant learning experiences for all students, based on powerful relationships that support this learning. We provide support and assistance to high schools and districts committed to high school redesign and to graduating all students ready for college, work, and citizenship.

The Project offers a range of services, including school and district coaching and professional development activities for educators and administrators. We produce a variety of publications about small schools and create hands-on tools to use in the classroom, school, district, and community. For more information see our website (<http://www.smallschoolsproject.org>).

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The Series

The Small Schools Project series **Case Studies of Systems Change** is intended to illuminate challenges of district and high school redesign processes and to be used as a learning tool for district and high school personnel, technical assistance providers, and others involved in school redesign efforts. We seek to build knowledge about how a district changes its own policies and practices to drive and support changes at the building, small school, and classroom levels.

The school districts studied in this series all received district change grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. These districts have also committed to aligning their school district systems in support of their stated goal of graduating every student college-, work-, and citizenship-ready by creating highly personalized learning environments in their high schools and improving teaching and learning in every classroom.

This Publication

In this final publication in our series, **Creating a College-Ready System: Findings from Four Case Studies**, we look across the four district case studies to reflect on what happens when a district commits to the goal of graduating each student ready for college, career, and citizenship.

Data for the case studies considered in this report was collected from September 2006 to June 2007 (Cascades and Olympic districts) and September 2007 to June 2008 (Eastridge and Forest Hills districts). Researchers visited each school district regularly over the course of the school year, observing and job shadowing high school and district administrators and high school teachers, and documenting administrative meetings, task force meetings, and strategic planning meetings, as well as professional development activities. We also conducted focus groups with teachers and students and interviewed school and district administrators (often more than once), board members, union representatives, and community members.

Manuscripts of each case study were reviewed by central office and school personnel in each school district and corrections were made to clarify our understanding and improve accuracy before the cases were published. This process helped to create a richer and more nuanced study in each case.

To protect confidentiality, all proper names of participants and locations in this study have been changed and some identifying characteristics have been modified.

What does it mean to prepare students for life after high school? What kinds of skills and dispositions are required to meet the demands of a global knowledge economy? How can we best teach these skills and dispositions? What kinds of structures do we need to have in place to support teaching and learning that prepares students for a constantly changing world?

If your goal is to graduate [kids] from high school, you think and plan and focus differently than if your goal is to prepare kids for college, career, and citizenship. Our goal is not just to pass the [state standardized test]. Not just to have all the credits. It's really what do [students] need to have all the choices for college and career when [they] leave high school? The finish line was twelfth grade in the old system. The new finish line [is] being able to enter and be successful in college—all the way through. —District administrator

The community itself, and it doesn't matter if it's [this community] or America, is not ready for the notion that all kids need to be graduated college-ready so that they make a real choice rather than a de facto choice. There is still an enormous segment of the population that believes that some kids just aren't college material. They are more than willing to make that choice for a kid by which math class he or she gets placed into in fifth grade. ...Some teachers here and some members of the community who have kids going to college are ready to deny other kids that opportunity. —Principal

I do agree that if I prepare you for a four-year college, then I have ensured that I've also prepared you for any trade school. But if I'm the resource guy do I just eliminate all those courses that connect [kids interested in trades] to those programs? Because I don't need those courses to make [the kids] college-prepared. I don't need shop [or] computer programming, all I need to teach you are reading, writing, arithmetic, and a foreign language. If we prepare them [but exclude] connecting those kids [with] other viable career options, then we've thrown the baby out with the bath water. Where does that kid fit? Do they see [a path for] themselves? A lot don't. —High school teacher

I might start at a community college, but I don't think I can handle a real university. The school doesn't prepare people, not anymore. Honestly I really think that the school spends so much time on preparing us for the stupid [state standardized test] that they don't prepare us for college. I've argued with several teachers that how to pass a test just is not what I'm going to need when I get out of school. —High school student

As the comments above illustrate, preparing students for life after high school is a complex task. It isn't just about "beefing up" curriculum or adding more course requirements. The commitment to preparing all students for college, career, and citizenship in the twenty-first century requires a deep questioning of values and assumptions. Significant changes in administrative and instructional practice require a culture shift at all levels of the school system.

For the past three years, the Small Schools Project has worked with seven school districts that have struggled to come to grips with preparing students for life after high school. The leaders of these districts committed to the goal of preparing each student for college,

career, and citizenship and received grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to redesign their systems and schools to make this happen. This report looks across case studies of four of the seven districts to reflect on what happens when a district commits to such a goal. Each of the four districts was constrained by the same state standards, regulations, and funding models. Each district embraced the challenges of committing to this goal in different ways, reflecting their varied and unique communities, student populations, and leadership. And each district had already been involved in school redesign and district reinvention work for varying lengths of time, even before this three-year grant. In this report we examine questions and challenges that arose across each of the four case study sites and outline four considerations that seem to be fundamental in the progress toward the goal of preparing each student for college, career, and citizenship.

What Research Says About Transforming School Districts

A growing body of literature examines organizational learning in school districts engaged in what Marzano calls “second-order changes”: specifically, the ability of schools and central offices to build capacity and create conditions for substantive and sustained change in values, assumptions, and practice.¹ In their study of the leadership role that mid-level central office staff plays in implementing reforms, Burch and Spillane found that the ability of a central office to support schools depends directly on the value that central office staff and school leaders apply to their interactions. Spillane and Burch argue that four common barriers prevent school leaders and central office staff from interacting in productive ways:

- when school relationships are seen by central office staff as low priorities,
- when communications between central office staff and schools are based on policy expectations rather than on conversations about teaching and learning,
- when central office staff don’t visit schools and seem to lack understanding about school issues,
- and when central office staff lack expertise around teaching and learning.²

They suggest that teaching and learning can be “strongly affected” when central office staff and school staff create communities of practice where all “are partners in determining how instructional policies are designed, translated, and implemented.”³

In a related study using the same data, Allen et al. looked at district policies and classroom practice across three case studies. The authors found that “districts failed to communicate and translate their “big ideas” into improved instruction because their tools and mandates were not informed by school-level expertise and were not accompanied by the kind of support and capacity building necessary to change instruction.”⁴ Teachers interviewed for the study felt disconnected from the decision making that was imposing changes in their classrooms and schools, and principals were being asked to “integrate multiple agendas” that were often perceived as competing. External policy messages seemed at odds with internal drives to attend to unique learning needs of students and instructional support for individual teachers.⁵ The authors conclude that

¹ Marzano et al., 1995, p. 162.

² Burch & Spillane, 2004, p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴ Allen et al., 2005, p. 4.

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

there is a “delicate balance needed between school-level autonomy, central guidance and direction, and shared responsibility for student learning.”⁶

⁷ Gallucci et al., 2007, p. 28.

The idea of balancing school-level autonomy and central office direction is fleshed out further in a study by Gallucci et al. which looked at the convergence of two theories of action (site-based school management and district-driven standards-based reform) and their effects on four middle schools in New York City. Gallucci and her colleagues found that although the two theories of action seemed to be in conflict, in certain contexts the structure imposed by the district-driven standards complemented the individualized practice and ability to differentiate for specific students that was the strength of the site-based management model. The authors do note several caveats. Schools that had embraced the site-based model more thoroughly and had strong school leadership were better able to integrate the district mandates with their own distinctive mission and practice. In addition, to make the balancing act work at the district level, district administrators needed to maintain “sufficient flexibility in meeting the needs of the schools and keep the pressure on for high-quality standard-bearing work.”⁷ The challenge, Gallucci and her colleagues assert, is not to choose one theory over the other, but rather to “engage both, accept the tension, and to struggle productively within it.”⁸

⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

⁹ Honig & Hatch, 2004, p. 16.

Gallucci’s work highlights a fundamental challenge for school districts involved in systemic reform—how to maintain coherence throughout the system and yet differentiate between and among schools with varying needs. Honig and Hatch, in writing about policy coherence, suggest that the idea of coherence should be reconceptualized “not as the alignment of external requirements but as a *dynamic process* which involves schools and school district central offices working together to craft or continually negotiate the fit between external demands and schools’ own goals and strategies.”⁹ In this framework, the district’s role is to support individual schools in developing and maintaining goals and strategies specific to their particular site. Honig and Hatch list three activities required for “crafting coherence”: schools establish their own goals and strategies “developed through sustained and managed school-based participatory activities”; “schools use their goals and strategies as the basis for deciding whether to ‘bridge’ (connect to) or ‘buffer’ (limit connection to/with) external demands”; “district offices support these decision-making processes by using information about the schools’ goals, strategies and experiences to inform their own positions.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

Implementing the system-wide reforms identified by this research—increased collaboration between schools and central offices on policy decisions, support for a strong site-based school culture, flexible pressure for accountability from the central office—requires a renewed commitment to and increased capacity for continuous learning at all levels of the system. In part, this report illustrates the challenges each of the four case study sites faces as leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders struggle to embrace these system-wide reforms.

What Is a College-Prepared System?

Most proponents of school reform initiatives talk about the need to prepare students for a changing world. New kinds of jobs are being created as the United States moves from an industrial economy—based on jobs that often required experience but not necessarily schooling—to a knowledge economy where more than two-thirds of new

jobs require some postsecondary schooling.¹¹ As the national and global economy changes, students must be prepared to keep up. The question is, are school districts and high schools up to the task? And the answer, especially in urban areas, has been no. A national study conducted by the American Diploma Project Network found that for every 100 ninth graders, 68 graduate from high school in four years, 40 enroll immediately in college, 27 are still enrolled in their sophomore year, and 18 graduate from two-year colleges within three years or four-year colleges within six years.¹²

¹¹ American Diploma Project Network, 2006a, p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p. 2.

Several recent studies have highlighted “preparation gaps” and “expectations gaps,” showing that high school graduates are inadequately prepared for the demands of employment or postsecondary education.¹³ In a study done for the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Greene and Winters found that only “thirty-four percent of students who entered ninth grade in public schools left school with both a regular diploma and the abilities and qualifications required to even apply to a four-year college.”¹⁴ The situation for minority students is worse, with only 23 percent of African American students and 20 percent of Hispanic students leaving school college-ready, compared with 40 percent of white students.¹⁵ In the face of these numbers, added to results from a number of employer surveys that find that students need the same skills to be successful at work as they do in college, school districts across the country are trying to align their policies and practices with the demands of college and work.¹⁶

¹³ McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; American Diploma Project Network, 2006b; Greene & Winters, 2005; Bedsworth et al., 2006

¹⁴ Greene & Winters, 2005, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁶ ACT, 2006; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003

¹⁷ Baker, Clay & Gratama, 2005, p. ii.

What does it mean to graduate all students college- and career-ready? What will districts and schools have to change in order to meet this commitment? What does “college” or “career” mean? What constitutes “ready”? These are questions the four case study districts are grappling with as they think through and make decisions about processes, structures, and practices that must change in order to meet their goal. To frame their discussions about college readiness, we use two recently developed measures that break down the process into discrete elements to be considered.

A College Readiness Equation

Developed by Duane Baker at the BERC Group, this college-readiness equation breaks down the notion of college readiness into three separate elements: college awareness, college eligibility, and college preparedness. These elements are interdependent processes that are “essential requirements for college readiness, and must be present in concert throughout a student’s secondary educational program.”¹⁷

College Readiness Equation	
College Aware	The student understands the importance of college and sees it as an option
+ College Eligible	The student takes the necessary courses for college entrance
+ College Prepared	The student graduates from high school with the skills necessary for college—no remediation required
<hr/>	
= College Ready	

Although it is not necessarily easy to put in place structures, schedules, and attitudes that promote college awareness and college eligibility, these two elements of the equation can be addressed largely through technical answers that districts and schools already know and understand. The notion of “college prepared” is perhaps the most challenging element in the equation because it asks districts and schools to think about what skills are needed for life after high school. These skills are not well defined and thus not often taught in a coherent, systematic way. The four districts are still defining what “college prepared” means to them.

Conley's Operational Definition of College Readiness

The level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—**without remediation**—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program. **“Succeed”** is defined as completing entry-level courses at a level of understanding and proficiency that makes it possible for the student to consider taking the next course in the sequence or the next level of course in the subject area. (2007)

Conley's Listing of College-Level Expectations

The college instructor is more likely to emphasize a series of key thinking skills that students, for the most part, do not develop extensively in high school: make inferences, interpret results, analyze conflicting explanations of phenomena, support arguments with evidence, solve complex problems that have no obvious answer, reach conclusions, offer explanations, conduct research, engage in the give-and-take of ideas, and generally think deeply about what they are being taught.

Increasingly, college courses in all subject areas require well-developed writing skills, research capabilities, and what have been commonly described as thinking skills. Students are expected to be independent, self-reliant learners who recognize when they are having problems and know when and how to seek help from professors, students, or other sources. (2007)

David Conley has recently developed an operational definition of what he calls “college readiness,” which frames a clearer definition of this third element in the equation—the skills and attributes needed for students to be “college prepared.”

Redefining College Readiness

Conley's definition of college readiness (see box) speaks to the fundamental disconnect between high school competence and college preparedness, highlighting issues of rigor, and accountability to benchmarks beyond high school graduation.

While awareness and eligibility are still important in this definition, Conley suggests that simply adding more prescribed courses to a student's schedule or taking students on college visits does not prepare students for the dramatic differences in expectations, both academically and socially, between high school and college. In defining more specifically the key cognitive strategies, academic knowledge and skills, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness that students need to succeed in college, Conley hopes to facilitate the development of measures of college readiness that would help shape high school preparation programs “so that they do a better and more intentional job of developing student capabilities in these areas.”¹⁸ He also suggests that his operational definition can be used as a conceptual framework “to design observational tools to assess the degree to which any particular high school program of instruction contains all the necessary elements to prepare students for college.”¹⁹

Creating a College-Ready System

Each of the four case study districts is working to address the elements of college readiness across their systems. This process is ongoing and continually refined as school and central office staff uncover issues of uneven acceptance of the college- and career-ready goal, sometimes hostile and unsupportive teacher attitudes, low expectations of student abilities, and difficulties in defining, implementing, and evaluating rigorous teaching and learning on the part of school, district, and community members. While each district is approaching the college-ready goal on a variety of fronts, we highlight here areas where each district has committed substantial central resources to align their systems with the

college- and career-ready goal.²⁰

Cascades School District spends a large proportion of its professional development budget on a system-wide framework for instructional improvement and professional development that is intended to foster a common understanding of the district's vision of quality instruction. Based on six elements that focus learning on such factors as disciplinary understanding, ongoing relevant assessment, building relationships, and rigorous instructional strategies, this model incorporates the use of instructional facilitators at each school building and collaborative study and practice groups made up of teachers and administrators from every school and the central office. Professional development

¹⁸ Conley, 2007, p. 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁰ All four case studies can be downloaded from www.smallschoolsproject.org under Resources and Publications/Research and Documentation/Case Studies of Systems Change.

for teachers, administrators, and instructional facilitators is aligned with the instructional framework. Although there is some resistance from schools and teachers to this district-mandated framework (described in more detail in the case study), the framework represents a significant district commitment of time and resources to the college- and career-ready goal. (See Appendix A for Cascades School District description.)

The **Olympic** School District has focused on raising student achievement through a system-wide redesign of its high schools and a reorganization of its central office leadership roles to focus on accountability and system-wide support for teaching and learning. Key central office administrators have conducted site visits in schools to keep them connected with what classroom practices look like, and the district supports an embedded coaching model that places one coach in each school. The district has also conducted a “college audit” that examined how well the entire system is aligned not just with graduation requirements but also with the larger goal of college and career readiness. (See Appendix B for Olympic School District description.)

After a year of debate, analysis of school data, and discussions with community and other stakeholders, the **Forest Hills** School Board passed a policy mandating that graduation requirements in the Forest Hills School District align with entrance requirements to four-year colleges. Phased in over the next seven years, the new graduation requirements are a bold commitment by the board and district leadership to the college- and career-ready goal and have resulted in district-wide debates about resources and access to rigorous programs for all students. Strong teacher resistance highlights the uneven levels of understanding and buy-in to the goal. (See Appendix C for Forest Hills School District description.)

The goal of preparing each student for college, career, and citizenship is written explicitly into the new five-year strategic plan for the **Eastridge** School District and applies to both alternative and traditional schools. District administrators have committed substantial resources to bringing alternative schools into greater alignment with the college- and career-ready goal and are in the process of examining how their system-wide resource allocations support their mission. Discussions about resource allocations have highlighted issues of equity and access between the traditional high schools and the alternative schools in the district and have highlighted gaps in alignment between state education funding models and district needs. (See Appendix D for Eastridge School District description.)

Commitment to the goal of graduating each student ready for college, career, and citizenship forces districts to examine the various structures, practices, and cultures that define them. It is the “each student” as much as the “college-ready” that declares old ways of working unacceptable. A focus on “college-ready” asks districts and schools to hold themselves accountable to a higher standard of student achievement and align their systems toward that goal. A commitment to “each student” asks districts and schools to look more carefully at those students who are not succeeding in their system and do something about that, challenging a prevalent presumption that the problem lies with the student rather than the system. These are not easy tasks, and they are not solved by technical solutions alone. Success in each aspect of this two-pronged goal demands adaptive solutions, requiring significant change in the beliefs and behavior of all members of the system.

Heifetz & Linsky define *technical* challenges as those for which people have “the necessary know-how and procedures” to solve them. *Adaptive* challenges are those that “are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures.” Adaptive challenges “require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without...changing attitudes, values, and behaviors people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.” (2002)

To succeed in these tasks, school systems need to become learning organizations characterized by a willingness to listen, to take direction from those with expertise they need, to collaborate, and to focus on a common goal. For students to learn deeply, the adults who teach them must also learn and continue learning even while they are teaching. In the same way, administrators must also continue to learn as they are leading and supporting changes in the system. “It is only in the exami-

nation of beliefs and practices challenged by the need to adapt to changed structures and expectations that adult learning becomes a transformational experience—one which challenges or changes a person’s beliefs and behavior.”²¹

²¹ Lambert et al., 2006, p. 3.

While each of the four districts studied here is approaching the challenges of “each student” and “college-ready” in ways that are specific to their situation, location, population, and political realities, a look across the four case studies illuminates cross-cutting issues that each district must address as it moves forward. The four challenge areas discussed below highlight the need for greater connection, alignment, and capacity throughout the district systems if they are to reach their goal. The deeper questions raised by these challenge areas represent an adaptive challenge that requires school system administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and communities to re-examine their beliefs about education and make difficult choices to prepare each student for college, career, and citizenship.

Differentiation and Standardization

I’m not using the word “standard” and I’m not using the word “same,” but I do think in systems where kids improve, at every level you have some things that you agree on in common, that a graduate from a high school in this district will do this handful of things. What are those common things that...we all want to have for our students? —Olympic district administrator

The “delicate balance” between school autonomy and central office direction highlighted by the research discussed earlier comes clearly to the fore here. The push to reach the “each student” part of the goal has led teachers, principals, and district administrators toward greater differentiation in instruction, professional development, and resource allocation within the district system. The push toward “college-ready” (as well as the

emphasis on high stakes standardized testing and the demands of the federal No Child Left Behind [NCLB] requirements) has led teachers, principals, and district administrators to focus on common standards and benchmarks across the system. Committing to both of these goals has forced the four districts to grapple with the question of how to build a coherent yet flexible system that creates space for differentiation *and* standardization.

Several years ago, the Olympic School District set itself a district-wide goal of improving literacy. The district mandated a specific pedagogy and invested in school-level coaching and professional development around literacy at elementary, middle, and high school levels. At the high school level, teachers were free to choose their content and learned to collaborate, reflect on their work and, at Achieve Academy, became skilled at using a writer's workshop model that required them to work more closely with individual students. Literacy scores have risen every year at Achieve Academy and the language arts teachers now represent a critical mass of skilled teachers who focus on personalizing literacy instruction for each student.

With literacy improving district-wide, district and school administrators decided to focus their attention on math, particularly in light of continuing low math scores for high school students on state standardized tests. The district decided to pursue a design similar to the one they had used with literacy—mandating a pedagogical approach and purchasing a lot of coaching and professional development for teachers and principals in order to facilitate a better understanding of effective math instruction. Another Olympic district administrator describes what happened:

In math [the model] is not going as well or as fast. Our math teachers don't know their content that well. So we are realizing we have to teach them the content, and then how to change their pedagogy. ...Math teachers just come with a different mindset. Collaboration is new to them. Reform and change is very new to them. We're realizing "oh my God, if we wait until our teachers know how to teach this, we're never going to get there." So in math we are looking at more targeted, specific interventions. We can't sit by for three to five years. We will probably all do some sort of centralized math curriculum. And we are going to try to get smart about some programs that schools or principals can buy—a bit more scripted. ...The people who don't know their content are really going to struggle with what [are the key things they need to teach]. That's where some district curriculum might be a support to them, not to have to figure out on their own what the essential units of study are.

Unlike the literacy initiative that standardized pedagogy but left content decisions up to individual teachers, with math, the district moved to standardize both pedagogy and content because of a perceived lack of content knowledge on the part of math teachers. For school administrators, the district-level decision around math could be seen as a move toward centralizing decision making, yet in fact the district's approach suggests an overall strategy that differentiates centralization based on building-level capacity. Clearly, negotiating this "delicate balance" is complicated and could be, as in the case of Olympic, determined by levels of capacity as much as anything else.

The Olympic School District is trying to accept the tension of differentiation and standardization and struggle productively within it as suggested by Gallucci et al., quoted in the earlier research section. Using the push for rigorous teaching and learning as an example, one Olympic district administrator described the balancing act this way:

If we leave it up to people completely, we'll get a very mixed picture of what people think rigor looks like as they try to implement it in the classroom. So we need to do more work there, to do it alongside teachers, have a deeper conversation about what rigor means—how to have some direction around it without it being a totally in-your-face mandate.

Deciding what should be held in common across the district and what should be differentiated across schools has often resulted in a negotiation of decision-making boundaries and authority that can be seen in all four districts. Cascades, Olympic, and Eastridge school districts all include high schools with principals and teaching staffs strongly committed to site-based management. School administrators and teachers have worked hard to create structures within their schools that support personalized attention to individual students, teacher collaboration, and distributed leadership. These efforts, while supported by each district's central office staff, have sometimes been at odds with district-wide initiatives. The high schools have used “bridging” techniques to integrate certain district demands with their own structures and practices and “buffering” techniques to maintain their own autonomy and authority over their individual (or building) schedules and professional development objectives.²²

²² From Honig & Hatch, 2004. See earlier research section in this report for context.

Forest Hills School District is shifting from a more top-down, centralized structure where direction was provided primarily by the central office to a more decentralized model that necessitates more autonomous decision making at the school level. Moving, as one Forest Hills district administrator put it, “from the battleship model to the flotilla model. You know, we're all still going in the same direction but we're not just all on one ship now, we're doing it in different ways.” In this case, high school principals are having to build their own capacity and the capacity of their staff to make site-based decisions while continuing to negotiate with the district the boundaries of who decides what.

Standardization and centralization provide an illusion of predictable outcomes and of equity. Districts hold each school to the same standards and have traditionally provided each school with the same resources to achieve those standards. In the four districts, the “college-ready” goal sets a common outcome but the “each student” goal challenges the traditional methods of achieving that outcome. Each student cannot be reached without differentiating instruction to meet students' specific learning needs in the classroom, differentiating support for their teachers' ability to understand and challenge them, and differentiating resources for their schools so teachers have what they need to meet these goals. And yet district administrators worry that a system cannot leverage finite resources, support and assess progress, and hold itself accountable to its mission when there are 25 schools doing 25 different things. The “each student college-ready” goal challenges districts and schools to find ways to accommodate both differentiation and standardization and to create flexible structures that allow a focus on a common goal—each student prepared for college, work, and citizenship—but multiple paths to get there.

Capacity Building

Our kids are so different, and [we get different kids] every year. We need to empower those closest to kids—teachers and principals—to be able, and capable of making decisions. Our job [is] to build their capacity and hold them accountable. —Olympic district administrator

Changes in structure and practice began to draw attention to gaps in understanding, knowledge, skills, and capacity at all levels of the system as the four districts worked to move toward their “each student college-ready” goal. Preparing each student for college and career meant that students needed to be challenged. To do this, teachers needed to take responsibility for their own continuous learning, and in some situations move out of “the way we’ve always done it” into a new understanding of rigor and differentiation. Some teachers embraced this demand while many others resisted.

As a result of a new policy mandate to align graduation requirements with college entrance requirements, many teachers at Northridge High School in the Forest Hills School District will have to adapt to new configurations of students in their classes and new expectations for their teaching. As the policy is phased in, all students will be required to take a college preparatory schedule, including three years of math (through Algebra II), two years of a world language, four years of English, and at least two years of lab science. Many teachers at Northridge, particularly those who teach upper level courses and world language (traditionally courses that attract higher-achieving students), worry that they will not be able to teach the more rigorous content to classes of students with more mixed achievement levels. These teachers have not had to address the same kinds of classroom management and discipline issues as teachers who teach lower level courses to students with a wider range of abilities. Differentiating for individual, and perhaps struggling, students is not necessarily a skill that these teachers have developed; they may need to learn new pedagogical skills as well as change their attitudes toward lower performing students. Commenting on the situation in general, a principal from another district school said:

World language [teachers] haven’t been challenged in classroom management and discipline and [the change in requirements] will quickly raise ugly [questions]. In some ways, [world language teachers] are the purest of the type of teacher who believes that they are teaching because of their content area—attracted by the idea of teaching French rather than teaching kids. ...They’re going to have to do some things differently and I think that’s a big fear on their part. —Forest Hills principal

Another administrator noted a similar struggle for honors and Advanced Placement (AP) teachers:

When I meet with [honors and AP teachers], many of them think they don’t have struggling students in class. I try to challenge them. “You do have some struggling students and...are you making a connection, following up with this kid?” For years they’ve been able to get away with “well let’s drop the kid, reduce their schedule.” We’ve really moved away from that in the last five or six years. We don’t just drop them from the class. And that was a big shift for a lot of these teachers. —Forest Hills assistant principal

At the same time, many teachers in all four districts have embraced differentiation and new pedagogical approaches designed to engage and challenge students. Those teachers who have embraced new teaching strategies also face challenges that require new capacities. In the Cascades School District, one AP U.S. History teacher runs his class entirely on a project-based learning model. Students for the most part work independently on projects and the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than an “expert,” meeting with students individually to assess progress and learning and to provide resources and direction. The shift from teacher-driven instruction to student-driven projects forced this teacher to change everything about the way he prepared for classes, the way he taught, and the way he graded student work.

You have to know more of your content [with project-based learning] because the kids come up with a lot of questions. You really need to know what is going on and be prepared. Before it was all prescribed and more teacher-driven. Then I started to realize, “well [it’s not about] teaching what you like, [it’s about] teaching what the students need,” and that was a big transformation. I’ve read more books in the last year trying to prepare and really pushing me to be a better facilitator and coach and help them ask deeper questions.
—Cascades teacher

Meeting the divergent skill levels of teachers to implement rigorous teaching and learning strategies—strategies that differentiate for each student—challenged the capacity of school administrators to provide instructional leadership. Innovative teaching methods require new ways of supporting and evaluating teachers, often leading principals into more of a coaching role than they may be used to. Speaking about a teacher in the Olympic School District who won the Teacher of the Year award, her principal said,

With Sophie, it’s not about directing her to where she needs to be but supporting her in where she knows she is and needs to be, which is different from how I might support another teacher. If anything, we’re at that place where it is side-by-side coaching. She just needs more touch up, not like she’s doing wrong, but “have you thought about this?” or, “you posed this question about this student and his learning. Let’s look at this evidence again. What does that tell you?” It’s more of a sounding board...asking those questions for her to think about the decisions that she’s making as a teacher. So that I’m building her capacity to lead the work, not just teach the work.

Administrators at the central office level face a similar challenge in raising the capacity of school leaders to balance the need for system coherence with the need to exercise school-level authority and judgment over teaching and learning. Managing this balancing act takes a strong leader who can maintain what one superintendent called “a healthy interdependence” between school and district demands. In each of the four districts, the abilities of school leaders to act as instructional coaches and “bridge” and “buffer” internal and external demands varied greatly. All of the districts have created structures for providing professional development for school administrators.

As capacities changed and evolved at the school and classroom level, some central office administrators realized that everyone in the system, including central office staff, needed to better understand classroom practice in order to support the college-ready goal. In the Cascades School District, central office staff participated on site councils at each of the

district schools. In the Olympic School District, central office staff conducted site visits in schools. In the Eastridge School District, administrators attended staff development days at individual schools and formed critical friends groups of administrators to talk about their own problems of practice. District administrators in these three districts tried to shift from being “experts” to being facilitators in their relations with schools.

The challenges of the two-pronged (“each student” and “college-ready”) goal have caused each of the case study districts to discover that traditional ways of thinking and practice will not get the job done. New capacities must be built in individuals and in system structures that enable differentiation at every level of the system. In addition, a new facilitation/coaching model of leadership must be developed that values everyone’s expertise while holding everyone to high standards.

Equity, Access, and Resources

We’ve had a philosophy [where] everybody got the same. So our low socioeconomic schools got the same [resources] as the high socioeconomic schools. It has been a struggle to shift the pattern after it has been [in place for a long time], to start saying, “this school needs more.” —Eastridge district administrator

The need to build capacity across the system increased the demand in all four of the districts for personalized and differentiated coaching and professional development, particularly at the school and classroom level. As teachers moved into more project-based learning models or developed other innovative teaching strategies, they created different demands for resources—more flexible transportation for field trips or for transporting students to and from internships for example, or collaborative time for teachers to develop integrated cross-disciplinary lessons, or space and time for student projects and performance exhibitions. As schools accommodate the changing needs of their teachers and students (particularly their high-needs students), the schools, in turn, demand more from the district. These demands are not always easily met with the traditional one-size-fits-all resource allocation model most districts use.

As the four districts grapple with finding ways to support changing demands, people at all levels of the system find themselves embroiled in discussions about equity, access, and values. Is it fair to ask all students to meet this goal? How will we support those low-achieving students who need extra help, time, and resources? At the same time, how will we provide our high-achieving students with the resources they need to be challenged? How can we meet these needs with increased demand on resources? How will we make the difficult choices we need to make to use our resources effectively in service of our goal? What is equitable? What is fair?

Two of the four districts, Eastridge and Olympic, worked with a consultant during the second year of the grant to examine how well their resource allocation aligned with their “each student college-ready” goal. This work illuminated for both districts areas where their resources were moving in line with their district goal and areas where their resources were not serving their goal and were even working at cross-purposes.²³ The move to create a portfolio of schools and educational options for students—differentiating at the school level—challenged traditional methods of staffing and resource allocation

²³ See Ramsey, B.S. (2008) *Funding the vision: Resource reallocation in service of student achievement* for a detailed description of this issue.

and raised questions of equity, especially in the case of Eastridge, which committed its alternative high schools to the same “each student college-ready” district goal. Held to that standard, schools that educate non-traditional students—typically credit-deficient, often with high social and emotional needs and difficult life situations—are at a disadvantage. The starting point for these students and for students from a traditional high school is not the same. This situation raises the question of what is an equitable resource allocation model. And how can student and school needs be determined when the metrics used to compare costs are based on “seat time” in traditional classrooms and cannot adequately account for non-traditional types of learning and schools? As one Olympic district administrator put it:

If you're a student coming into high school and you read and write at grade level or above, you might go to a school where the allocation of staff given to that school is the same as an allocation of staff given to a school that has a much larger percentage of kids that are below standard. And yet the time to get [these students] through high school is the same. And the goals at the end are the same. So, without a different resource mix, without some more autonomies or flexibilities in how you are going to get there, you've kind of created an unfair game. ...We haven't moved to a true equity-based resource allocation model. We don't know how to do that.

Like other school districts around the country, the four districts use grant funds and supplemental funds from programs such as Title 1 to support needier schools, but the choice of which school gets what has become a highly politicized debate, and the metrics used to determine need and allocation differ in each district. Deciding how to allocate resources is a thorny issue for any district. Such decisions challenge entrenched values and highlight competing allegiances.

Use of Data

The conversation that is in play right now [in the district] is, “what does it mean, both formally and informally, to gather data? What data? What measures success? What kind of success are we measuring?” ...Accountability is a big conversation. In coaching, so much of the data has been about looking at behaviors that have changed. The district's conversation has been much more around accountability, which is understandable. That's where the buck stops. But I think [these data conversations] can be mutually exclusive conversations. [The principal's] goal next year is to figure out how to better bring those conversations together. —Olympic instructional coach

Educational reformers and others interested in changing beliefs and behaviors know the power of data to create a sense of urgency for making transformative changes. Test scores, graduation rates, dropout rates, and other standard measures tell a district and a school how well they are doing in relation to other districts and schools in the state. When this data is disaggregated, the data can be even more powerful, telling successful schools, for example, that they are failing certain subgroups of students or pointing out discrepancies in attendance rates or graduation rates for particular student populations.

In our current climate of accountability emphasized by national mandates such as NCLB and high stakes standardized testing, districts, schools, and teachers continue to be

subject to demands for data from state and federal entities, and to be held responsible for what the data say. At the same time, differentiating instruction and developing new modes of collective and transparent leadership require another kind of data—more fine-grained and in-the-moment data that can tell a teacher whether a student has understood a concept or tell an administrator whether a teacher is improving her practice. Across the four districts, administrators and teachers alike are grappling with integrating these two different sets of data and figuring out how to make meaning out of what the data show.

Each of the four districts maintains an electronic data system that tracks student progress through high school. In each of the districts, teachers and administrators alike are dissatisfied with the flexibility and range of their data system. They do not trust the data, cannot access it in a timely or flexible manner, and in fact must visit several different sources of data (electronic and other) in order to gather an accurate and complete picture of a student. All districts find this frustrating. Some districts are exploring other options for gathering and disseminating student information. Of the four districts, Olympic has put the greatest proportion of resources toward improving its student data system. The district passed a bond to purchase a new student information system and a data warehouse that will track student demographic data, achievement data, financial data, and will perform analyses of the data as well. In addition, as part of their central office reorganization, the superintendent created an administrative position to oversee data collection, use, and dissemination.

All four of the districts also collect several kinds of data beyond what is required by the state and federal government. Surveys, focus groups, teacher reflections, student conferences, and annual questionnaires gather anecdotal and qualitative data that help teachers and administrators dig beneath the numbers, analyze attitudes, and disaggregate for different subgroups within the system. It is not necessarily lack of data that is the issue. It is, as several administrators put it, what to do with the data that is the problem.

With data, we gather a lot, but what are we doing with it? What's going to be different tomorrow? How much deeper do we need to go in the conversation?...We don't have any student information system that will give teachers and principals a deeper level than we have now with the [state standardized test]. We don't have any formative assessments that help teachers know diagnostically where kids are, where they're entering instruction, content-wise.

—Olympic district administrator

School administrators, who have used data as a basis for conversations about instruction with teachers, have discovered that discussions about data are powerful but that teachers are not always willing to consider what the data can tell them. Discussions about data can themselves be indicators of teacher attitudes, and administrators have found that they need to manage data conversations gently.

I did a printout of grade distributions for everyone in my school by grade level and subject. Oh my god it was like I had stripped people down to their underwear. They responded (they're very good people), and we did an hour of talking in small groups about grading and is it right for grade distributions to be different. It was amazing the number of people who'd never looked at their grade distributions before. —Eastridge assistant principal

My first year here was great. I just put out the data. I just said, "Let's look at this data. What is it telling us?" [The teachers] came to it themselves "okay we really aren't taking very good care of the kids of color that we have. And we're certainly not taking good care of our kids in poverty." At the end of that year we did a student video forum [and] I showed it to the staff. That's when things began to get a little rough. Our teachers did not want to hear what our kids had to say [which was], "you're not working me hard enough," and "there's a real social separation here that teachers help perpetuate." —Forest Hills principal

The focus on data in these four districts has also highlighted a lack of metrics to measure innovative teaching, non-traditional structures, and, perhaps most important for these four districts, levels of college readiness and rigor. In spite of well-known and widespread criticism of AP courses as preparation for college, districts point to the number of students enrolled in AP courses as evidence of a rigorous curriculum.²⁴ Given the wide variability of AP courses from site to site and the differing quality of the teaching, enrollment in an AP course is not necessarily a sufficient measure of college readiness. Without a comprehensive measure for college readiness, it is difficult for district and school administrators and teachers to tell whether they are moving toward their goal or not.

²⁴ See, for example, Steinbach, 2006 and Sacchetti, 2006.

Every time I see goals and data I figure out more things that I don't know, more things that I'm not sure about. Three years of doing this now, the only thing I'm relatively sure about is college eligibility. That's not even college readiness. It's a monumental task just trying to figure out what these things mean. —Eastridge principal

All we're measuring is the easiest stuff to measure, and we're going to continue to frustrate ourselves. We know that [rigor, relevance, and relationships] aren't measured by these [state standardized test scores]. The powerful teaching and learning gets put over to the side and the things that are getting measured are these numbers. —Eastridge principal

All four of the districts are working to define what they mean by college readiness. As they get clearer about their definitions, they may get closer to finding or developing a metric that they can use to measure progress toward their goal. When they do this, they move one very big step closer to achieving it.

I think part of what is often so dysfunctional is that we as educators have a tendency to be out of touch with our results. Accountability is about being in touch with reality, not setting up structures and disciplines so that you can just wander through life, through the work, without looking at whether you are meeting your goals. —Olympic district administrator

Our documentation of these four case study districts' efforts to move toward the "each student college-ready" goal has led us to a number of overarching questions that illustrate the underlying challenges these districts continue to face. This report has noted the ways that these questions have begun to be addressed, but they remain the central questions that frame our work with school districts and schools.

- How can a system support individual schools in making significant decisions that affect student achievement—decisions that often require significant authority—while simultaneously building coherence across the system? What overarching strategy should guide these decisions?
- What does "district support" mean, and what does it look like when schools take diverse approaches to ensure that their students learn? What is an equitable distribution of resources when students and the schools that serve them have different needs, and how should this be calculated?
- What structural changes need to be made as instructionally diverse "best practices" take hold across the system? How will the system meet non-traditional logistical and learning demands arising when, for example, alternative schools are pulled into the mix or when a school adopts inquiry- or project-based learning initiatives as a primary mode of instruction?
- What changes in beliefs and practice are required so that teaching and learning focus on more equitable outcomes for students?
- What cultural changes need to be made as teaching, learning, and leading become increasingly collaborative? How will the system incorporate time for collaboration and continuous adult learning at all levels of the system during the normal workday?
- How can a system build a culture of mutual accountability that is not primarily hierarchical and that recognizes accountability as reciprocal and multidirectional?
- What data matters to whom, and how can we collect, analyze, and use data effectively with people at all levels of the system?

I use the term “equal footing” all the time. It is not our job to sort and select. One of the biggest arguments we had here last year [was with] these teachers who, in my opinion, just weren’t getting it. They would say things they thought were very compassionate...like, “You know, some kids just want to be our garbage collectors. They want to be this, there’s nothing wrong. We all need garbage collectors, and we all need people who fix our sinks and things like that.” I said, “Listen to yourselves. You are in the business right now of deciding who is going to fix your sink. You’re coming from a position of privilege. What if you turned that whole notion on its head and said, ‘It isn’t our business. Our business is to put [students] out the door on the same footing as everyone else, so that [they] really can do whatever [they] want to do.’” —Forest Hills principal

At its heart, the issue of college readiness is an issue of choice. What kinds of choices are we offering our students when they graduate from high school? Will they be eligible and ready for further education? Will they be ready for more than transitional jobs in a world that has moved from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy? Will we continue to provide an excellent education for a few and an inadequate education for most? Will all students leave high school with access to a wide variety of options to pursue?

The goal these districts have set for themselves has exposed significant gaps in the four areas described in this report—finding a balance between differentiation and standardization, building capacity across the system, addressing equity, and using data. At the same time, the goal has generated important conversations at every level of the system about the nature and purpose of education. These are not easy conversations, and the answers to many of the questions posed above require deep changes in structure, policy, practice, and philosophy. What we’ve seen in these four districts is both encouraging and daunting.

We are encouraged by the enormous commitment of resources all four districts have made toward the goal of “each student college-ready.” We see evidence across all four sites of efforts to create collaboration and dialogue between central offices and schools, with varying degrees of shared decision making. We see willingness on the part of many district administrators to find ways of creating flexible systems that support strong site-based school cultures and yet ask for accountability on important measures of achievement. We see growing efforts at communication and transparency around data and resources. We also see pockets of both improving and exemplary practice where schools and teachers are sharply focused on instruction. Students are beginning to see themselves as college-goers, breeding new confidence and hope for themselves and their families. These are elements to build on.

CONCLUSION

What we find daunting in these districts is the continued lack of acceptance of the college-ready goal, particularly by teachers, even after three or more years of conversation and work around this goal. Some teachers' and administrators' deeply rooted low expectations toward low-performing, poor, and minority students, and their unwillingness to examine their own practice, continue to reinforce ineffective ways of working and impede progress toward the goal. Trust and communication, although increasing in some districts, remain issues, particularly between central offices and schools and between the district as a whole and the community that supports it. Funding inequities and lack of alignment of resources to the college-ready goal continue to challenge all four of the districts. As they move forward, the districts will be faced with increasingly hard choices for which they will need courage as well as knowledge and data.

The experience of these four districts has much to teach us. We can see that focusing on a common goal shifts the nature of business as usual in central offices and schools, opening up conversations and challenging entrenched practices and beliefs. Flexibility, transparency, communication, and willingness to engage in continuous learning are key attributes needed at all levels of the system for deep and substantive cultural changes to occur and be sustained. These districts have recognized the moral imperative behind the "each student college-ready" goal, and they have begun the work necessary to make that goal a reality rather than a promise. They have refocused on student achievement, they have begun to align their resources with their goal, and they have begun to build capacities in their staffs that go beyond what has been required of school personnel to date. We hope that they will find the courage and stamina to continue their good work.

Cascades School District is located in Cascades City, a small West Coast urban area surrounded by the urban sprawl of a larger city. The district’s catchment area is economically and racially diverse and highly mobile. District administrators and staff throughout the system have committed to redesigning their high schools and graduating all students college-ready. Two of the district’s four secondary schools (Glacier High School and Hood High School) have converted to smaller learning communities. The third secondary school, Adams High School, is an alternative school, and the fourth school, Peaks, is a stand-alone small school.

2006-2007 State Standardized Test Results (percentage of students meeting standard)				
Grade Level	Reading	Math	Writing	Science
3rd grade	60%	57%		
4th grade	65%	43%	47%	
5th grade	61%	47%		19%
6th grade	57%	30%		
7th grade	59%	37%	56%	
8th grade	58%	33%		24%
10th grade	72%	30%	77%	18%

Student Demographics	
Total enrollment	11,700
Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2%
Asian	8%
Black	20%
Hispanic	16%
White	49%
Special Programs (May 2007)	
Free or reduced-price meals	57%
Special education	13%
Transitional bilingual	9%
Other Information	
Annual dropout rate (2005-2006)	8%
On-time graduation rate (2005-2006)	67%
Extended graduation rate (2005-2006)	72%

Teacher Information (2006-2007)	
Classroom teachers	688
Average years of teacher experience	12
Percent of teachers with at least a master’s degree	55
Total number of teachers who teach core academic classes	588
Total number of core academic classes	1,551

*data from state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

APPENDIX B – OLYMPIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Olympic School District is located south of an urban West Coast city and encompasses ethnically and economically diverse communities. The district is committed to redesigning its four comprehensive high schools, two of which have converted to small schools, and has opened two freestanding small schools. In 2007, 63 percent of the student body consisted of ethnicities other than white. Students represented 80 nationalities and spoke 60 different languages.

2006-2007 State Standardized Test Results (percentage of students meeting standard)				
Grade Level	Reading	Math	Writing	Science
3rd grade	59%	57%		
4th grade	65%	41%	50%	
5th grade	58%	45%		19%
6th grade	60%	33%		
7th grade	62%	42%	58%	
8th grade	57%	38%		26%
10th grade	73%	38%	71%	28%

Student Demographics	
Total enrollment	17,360
Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2%
Asian	21%
Black	14%
Hispanic	25%
White	37%
Special Programs (May 2007)	
Free or reduced-price meals	54%
Special education	12%
Transitional bilingual	17%
Other Information	
Annual dropout rate (2005-2006)	6%
On-time graduation rate (2005-2006)	65%
Extended graduation rate (2005-2006)	70%

Teacher Information (2006-2007)	
Classroom teachers	972
Average years of teacher experience	11
Percent of teachers with at least a master's degree	54
Total number of teachers who teach core academic classes	760
Total number of core academic classes	1,737

*data from state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

Forest Hills School District’s student population is predominantly white and socioeconomically mixed. The district includes three traditional comprehensive high schools and one alternative high school, and the community generally perceives Forest Hills as a good district with many successful students. Traditionally, the local economy has been based on agriculture, fishing, and timber although recent decades saw more jobs in manufacturing and hospitality. The community is also home to a mid-sized state university.

2006-2007 State Standardized Test Results (percentage of students meeting standard)				
Grade Level	Reading	Math	Writing	Science
3rd grade	76%	73%		
4th grade	84%	70%	67%	
5th grade	81%	69%		51%
6th grade	74%	55%		
7th grade	77%	63%	75%	
8th grade	74%	62%		54%
10th grade	85%	65%	88%	53%

Student Demographics	
Total enrollment	10,714
Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2%
Asian	6%
Black	2%
Hispanic	9%
White	77%
Special Programs (May 2007)	
Free or reduced-price meals	32%
Special education	12%
Transitional bilingual	5%
Other Information	
Annual dropout rate (2005-2006)	5%
On-time graduation rate (2005-2006)	73%
Extended graduation rate (2005-2006)	76%

Teacher Information (2006-2007)	
Classroom teachers	617
Average years of teacher experience	12
Percent of teachers with at least a master’s degree	63
Total number of teachers who teach core academic classes	571
Total number of core academic classes	1414

*data from state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

APPENDIX D – EASTRIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Eastridge School District is a small, tightly knit district with a socioeconomically diverse student body. The district has three high schools, Riverview High School (RHS), Educational Alternatives High School (EAHS), and Valley High School (VHS). RHS is a traditional comprehensive high school divided into two semi-autonomous academies (Owl Academy and Falcon Academy). EAHS and VHS are both alternative high schools offering a variety of educational options. Over the years there has been a growing influx of students from neighboring districts who attend Eastridge’s two alternative education schools. These alternative students now comprise approximately half of the high school population in the district.

2006-2007 State Standardized Test Results (percentage of students meeting standard)				
Grade Level	Reading	Math	Writing	Science
3rd grade	69%	78%		
4th grade	85%	62%	59%	
5th grade	77%	68%		49%
6th grade	79%	59%		
7th grade	77%	59%	72%	
8th grade	70%	44%		44%
10th grade	82%	47%	86%	25%

Student Demographics	
Total enrollment	3022
Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2%
Asian	2%
Black	3%
Hispanic	5%
White	87%
Special Programs (May 2007)	
Free or reduced-price meals	45%
Special education	12%
Transitional bilingual	2%
Other Information	
Annual dropout rate (2006-2007)	0.6%
On-time graduation rate (2005-2006)	90%
Extended graduation rate (2005-2006)	93%

Teacher Information (2006-2007)	
Classroom teachers	206
Average years of teacher experience	14
Percent of teachers with at least a master’s degree	61
Total number of teachers who teach core academic classes	197
Total number of core academic classes	477

*data from state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

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