

# NEWSLETTER

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## DISTRICT SUPPORT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

### *Highlights From Three Districts*

**R**esearch on school improvement efforts consistently points to the advantages of a cohesive and supportive district leadership (Fullan et al., 2004; McFadden, 2009). Most importantly, the leadership is shared and distributed among other stakeholders to create a team of leaders who strive to uphold the vision of the district. Furthermore, willingness to rely on data to continuously measure programs and initiatives to find the most effective ones is a critical factor among districts that have made exemplary progress toward improvement. Effective leadership entails ongoing learning through professional development and coaching as a necessary component to sustain improvement. Leaders must be unassuming enough to know that they also are students in the process of reaching the goals they wish to attain.

### Introduction

In 2009, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement staff conducted interviews with leaders in nine districts across the United States to identify sites in which high-need, low-performing schools had made substantial gains and the ways in which school improvement funds were utilized to support improvement efforts. In addition, with the growing crisis in regard to high school improvement needs, we address various supports that these districts are utilizing to help keep students in school and on the path to graduation.

We found that a strong framework for improvement, shared leadership between district and school personnel, resource support, tiered intervention, and an emphasis on the use of data were common practices among those that had made significant strides in improving the achievement of students. In this Newsletter, we highlight three districts that have been particularly successful in raising student achievement—even though they differ in their specific strategies, fund allocation, and demographic composition. A description of some district funding

for school improvement and specific programs and initiatives targeted for high schools are presented in the following case studies.

## Anne Arundel County Schools, Maryland

School and district improvement efforts in Maryland are supported by the structure and consistency of the Bridge to Excellence, the statewide framework for school improvement, but effective leadership for implementing school improvement has been the focus for Anne Arundel County Schools (AACPS). In addition, school improvement funds are used to support schools in improvement and corrective action. Developing strong leadership structures has helped AACPS bring its 12 high schools to satisfactory performance by meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2008. Emphasis for the 2009–10 year will be to continue the high school initiatives and add support for improvement for the 19 middle schools. The vast majority of AACPS's elementary schools are making AYP, but the district and schools have teamed up to deliver strong continuous improvement efforts by placing emphasis on strong leadership capacity building and offering innovative support for the district's secondary schools.

### *Focus on Collaboration*

AACPS is a diverse, suburban district with 74,000 students. Five of the district's middle schools are currently in year 1 or year 2 of improvement status, and one middle school is in corrective action (one made AYP in 2008). AACPS encompasses Annapolis City, which has one of the highest percentages of subsidized housing in the country—approximately a third of the students live below the federal poverty line. Twenty-two percent of the students in the district are African American, 67 percent are white, 6 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are Asian.

According to Martha Pogonowski, the director of School Continuous Improvement, the district has provided a number of resources to all schools in need of improvement. Every school in improvement status is assigned an AYP specialist. These are exemplary teachers within the district who move into an advisory and consultative role to help the school analyze data, monitor student progress, develop interventions, plan collaboratively, and provide job-embedded professional development to teachers. The AYP specialists receive regular support and professional development from the district office to build their skills in assisting schools to move ahead.

In addition, the district “ramps up” its instructional coaching and personnel support for assessment and accountability and professional development for the schools in need of improvement. “I see coaching and professional development as very closely linked. We rarely do one without the other,” Ms. Pogonowski said.

The Achievement Steering Committees in all the schools in year 2 of improvement and beyond facilitate collaborative leadership and planning. These committees are made up of school personnel in collaboration with a leadership team from the district office. In this way, leaders from the school and the district work together to make important decisions for the school and support each other. The steering committees meet regularly at the individual school where district leaders are able to provide direct and first-hand support to schools. Pogonowski describes an example of how effective these meetings can be. “At one of the meetings last year, the superintendent was at the table when the school leadership team expressed their need for a wireless laptop lab to help their students. The superintendent got on his Blackberry right away, and the school had their portable laptop lab soon after.”

The district also is making an effort to engage the diverse communities in schools and in the

*Developing strong leadership structures has helped AACPS bring its 12 high schools to satisfactory performance by meeting AYP in 2008.*

improvement process. The district maintains an Office of Equity Assurance and Human Relations to address the needs of minority students. Personnel from this office reach out to the African American and Latino communities by partnering with service organizations and churches. The superintendent meets regularly with African American church leaders to exchange ideas on ways to better serve students.

### *High School Improvement Efforts*

For the last four years, AACPS has placed particular emphasis on improving its 12 high schools. Several of the high schools were in need of improvement, and the high school in Annapolis City, which is heavily impacted by poverty, showed particularly dramatic needs. The city high school, in corrective action four years ago, was "zero-based" or reconstituted—the entire school, including the principal, needed to interview for positions if they wished to remain at the school. This high school underwent an intensive program change along with the restaffing.

A specially crafted summer program, supported by a state school-improvement grant, provided extended learning time for struggling students. The program enrolled more than 100 students each summer in an intensive instructional program, providing individual tutoring to students. The program has been particularly successful at fostering relationships between students and teachers. According to Pogonowski, this is imperative before the school can focus on academic needs. In addition, the high school intensified efforts to recruit traditionally underserved students into their international baccalaureate program that was in place prior to the restructuring. A ninth-grade academy along with an advisory program for all students was implemented with intense support from the district and the school leadership. The middle college program, a partnership with Sojourner Douglas College, provides 20 struggling ninth-grade students with intensive small-group

instruction right on the campus of the college. This year-old program is showing some positive anecdotal outcomes.

School-improvement funds also are used to provide the high school in corrective action with a case manager who works with students in danger of not graduating. The funds also are used to support a full-time assistant to work with English as a second language (ESL) students. Also, the district has been investing heavily in interactive technology for schools in improvement to provide the students with the same opportunities offered to other high schools that are not deemed in need of improvement. The funds used to sustain the technology also are drawn from the state school improvement funds.

Another substantial initiative at the high school level is the signature program or a theme-based curriculum. These signatures start at the high school level and reach down into their feeder middle and elementary schools. Pogonowski stated, "One high school has decided to make its signature or 'brand' homeland security." They have worked with community partners to infuse the curriculum with a "lens" of homeland security over the courses. Within the feeder system, the decision to emphasize a theme of homeland security drives some of the professional development choices as well as curricula integration that occurs.

Parent outreach also has been an important part of the high school restructuring. Some high schools hold regular social gatherings, such as a ninth-grade parent barbeque in August, where families and staff build positive relationships that carry over into the school year. AACPS's implementation of strategies and programs aimed specifically at improving their high schools has resulted in steady improvement in scores on the Maryland High School Assessment, and all high schools in AACPS met the 2008 AYP standard.

## Lima City Schools, Ohio

Lima City Schools has used a multifaceted approach to district improvement, which has been driven by the Ohio Improvement Program (OIP). OIP, like the Bridge to Excellence in Maryland, provides districts with a framework by which to evaluate the needs of their district and plan for improvement. Lima City Schools are acting as a pilot site for OIP. Although effective district leadership and a structured framework for improvement have certainly been an important part of the change process, the emphasis for Lima City has been on effective instruction and student learning.

Lima City's 4,500 students in 11 schools represent a population with diverse learning needs. Seventy-six percent of the students qualify for the free or reduced-price lunch program, and 20 percent of the students are eligible for special education services. Forty-one percent are African American, 43 percent are white, 14 percent are multiracial, 1 percent is Hispanic, and 1 percent is Asian or American Indian. Seven out of the 11 schools are deemed in need of improvement, with the three middle schools having been in improvement the longest. Lima City's improvement efforts have focused largely on their middle schools.

### *Tiered Interventions*

The OIP provides a tiered model of prevention and intervention for districts which supports continuous development and consistency of the services and resources provided to districts in need of improvement. In addition, a structure for principal-led building teams is included to address the academic and behavioral needs of all students. Karel Oxley, superintendent of Lima City Schools, describes the tiered strategies as a "pyramid" where all students in the district receive universal interventions, but as students need more academic or behavioral support, other, more rigorous interventions are applied. Use of data helps building-level teams to assess the needs of individual students, then

academically struggling students receive targeted instruction at each tier focused on their specific needs. Students with moderate behavioral needs may meet the school social worker during the school day, and those with more intensive needs may have access to the services of community nonprofit groups, which have partnered with the school. Students and families even receive home visits from specialists who provide home-based support and counseling to the whole family.

### *Nonacademic Needs*

District leaders highlight their focus on meeting the nonacademic needs of students as a significant part of district improvement strategies. In collaboration with Ohio State University, the district functions as a pilot site for a statewide school improvement model stemming from the 21st Century Learning Community Learning Centers project. Each participating school is provided a coach from the university to work with staff to form a "very large and substantial community collaboration" initiative, according to district personnel interviewed. Parents are invited to participate in learning centers run by nonprofit organizations. This initiative grew out of data that showed that nonacademic barriers to learning such as lack of parent engagement and a lack of behavioral and mental health resources for the families can impede learning. Superintendent Oxley believes that these types of initiatives have helped them become a "unified collaborative force in the community with the parents."

### *Focus on Data*

A highly successful school improvement effort at Freedom Elementary in Lima City has provided a model for the continuing collaborative endeavor that has moved schools from "academic emergency" to "continuous improvement" in two or three years. Superintendent Oxley attributed the success to "huge data integrity," where the district monitors student academic progress very closely and provides the information and necessary supports to the schools.

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Freedom Elementary School, with a 90 percent poverty rate, has become an Ohio designated “effective” school as a result of these efforts. The district has expanded the extensive data system to all schools and is emphasizing the use of data to drive instruction to improve student achievement in its middle schools. Data are collected regularly on formative assessments and classroom observations by each principal. Then the principal meets with each of their teachers monthly to discuss students’ progress. If progress is stagnant or slow, they collaboratively discuss possible interventions. One of the principals interviewed stated that in recent months those meetings have become less necessary because the teachers have gained the capacity and the confidence to analyze the data on their own. Out of this emphasis on data and the teacher’s initiative to take on the data analysis, two elements have grown that have further propelled the district toward success; one is the shared leadership between principals and teachers, and the other is a system of transparent accountability. The initiative to keep and use data has even been taken up by the students. They have become highly involved in their progress through the regular and transparent use of data systems that is a focus of the district.

### *High School Improvement Efforts*

Lima City high schools have the advantage of being a demonstration site for Knowledge Works, a comprehensive school reform model paid for by a large grant for urban high schools from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation. The grant’s aim is to transform Ohio’s low-performing large high schools into smaller schools to promote more personal relationships between adults and students and to provide students with more personal attention.

Lima City high schools also participate in the state-funded Closing the Achievement Gap

(CTAG) program. The district’s high schools are a model site for instruction in new cultural competencies and culturally relevant pedagogy with the aim of training teachers to make the delivery of instruction more relevant to the lives of the students. CTAG provides mentors to help high schools with students who are at risk of failing or dropping out of high school. It placed particular emphasis on ninth-grade males. The district has experienced increased student growth as a result of being part of these initiatives. In the Ohio state ratings released in August 2009, two of Lima’s high schools—the Lima Senior High School of Multiple Intelligences and the Lima Senior High Progressive Academy—moved up to Effective and Continuous Improvement, respectively.

Although no Title I funds are allotted to high schools, the district does try to match the funds that are used at the elementary and middle school levels with general funds and grant dollars as detailed above. According to the superintendent, targeted services with these general and grant monies include building level coaches, data analysis, short cycle assessments, observations, and modeling of instructional strategies for the improvement of the high schools.

## **Long Beach Unified School District, California**

Hailed as one the best urban school districts in the nation by *Time* magazine and winner of the 2003–04 Broad Prize for Urban Education, Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) has had substantial success in supporting effective schools within a low-income urban environment. LBUSD’s superintendent, Chris Steinhouser, attributes LBUSD’s efforts to an alternative governance form. Reconstitution efforts in the past had not brought about the

results the district was seeking, so they applied an alternative-governance model based on a strong, universally applied, and centrally administered system.

The 88,000 students in LBUSD represent a culturally and linguistically diverse population. Twenty-five percent of students speak English as a second language, and 68 percent of the student qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. Fifty-two percent of students are Hispanic, 16 percent are African-American, 8 percent are Asian, 4 percent are American Indian, and 16 percent are white. LBUSD supports 45 elementary and 26 Grades K–8 or middle schools. Of the 10 high schools, six have enrollments in excess of 4,000 students.

### *Districtwide Standardization of Improvement Efforts*

According to the district leadership at LBUSD, they try very hard to stay one step ahead compared with other districts in California. Therefore, in regards to the way in which they utilize their Title I and school improvement funds, they described their current plan and also their plan for the coming years when more stimulus funds will be made available to school districts. Robert Tagorda, assistant to the superintendent, explained that currently, the district's school improvement funds are used mainly for professional development and analysis of data around the areas of concern such as English language learner instructional issues, and special education services. Furthermore, Mr. Tagorda stated that he had been consulted by the state Senate leader on how to best use the school improvement grants that will be made available. The state is prescribing the ways in which districts should allot the funds. Uses include data systems and enhancements of pre-existing systems; staff training on use of data systems; professional

development aimed at dropout prevention and high school and college readiness; and interventions such as peer tutoring programs. These are the ways in which the LBUSD foresees using the funds coming to them for the 2009–10 school year.

A major strength of the district lies in an overarching structure and philosophy that focuses on rigorous alignment of the common curricula with state standards, a common approach to instruction by all teachers, and frequent, common formative assessment. The district uses the same aligned instructional resources, common textbooks, pacing charts, and formative assessments in all schools. The district leadership we interviewed stated that this standardization of curriculum and instruction is vital to a district with high intradistrict mobility. The district has developed its own benchmark and summative assessments based on California state standards so that teachers can gauge the performance of their students year-round. These assessments are accompanied by a data-management system made available to teachers and parents. As Christine Dominguez, the deputy superintendent explained, "We have really moved to a culture where data is critical."

### *Data and a Response to Intervention Model*

LBUSD has only 8 percent of its students eligible for special education services (the national average is 15 percent). The district superintendent attributes this low rate to its strong instruction and tiered interventions. The tiered interventions are supported by extensive, job-embedded professional development for all teachers. LBUSD has a partnership with the California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) to train and mentor new teachers. The district hires most of its teachers from the pool of interns

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that are placed in the school district through CSULB's teacher-training program. In addition, all teachers (new and continuing) are required to take a course through the district on Essential Elements of Effective Instruction. Teachers are provided with training in differentiated instruction with a tiered response-to-intervention model, emphasizing that Tier I universal instruction is provided at the highest quality for all students.

Linked to the tiered intervention model is the district's rigorous policy of aligning the benchmark assessments to professional development. The district offers interventions based on students' individual needs gleaned from the assessment results. The interventions include additional reading and mathematics teachers and also extended school days or school-year support. Flexible grouping for instruction helps those students most in need of academic intervention, and teachers can keep track of progress through the district's comprehensive data system. According to Dominguez, "The middle schools will know right away which kids are having attention problems, behavioral problems, academic problems, because we have a whole data profile that follows the kids up through every grade level."

### *High School Improvement Efforts*

In an effort to reach the high school students most at risk of failing or dropping out of school, LBUSD has used state funds for school counselors and piloted Project TEAM, a program where counselors are handpicked to work with the far-below basic students. These counselors have approximately 200 students each (as opposed

to the 500 students normally on a counselor's caseload in the district). Project TEAM counselors meet with their students monthly and monitor their grades and behavior problems. They also make home visits and hold small-group sessions. Field trips and other motivational activities are included. Many of the students who have participated in Project TEAM have graduated and are attending college. Counselors continue to monitor the students while they are in college to help with the transition and also secure some type of support program for them in college. According to the district leadership, LBUSD has used categorical funding resources "in a different way" to implement the Project TEAM model, and their high school dropout rate has fallen 5 percent in the past four years. The district boasts a dropout rate that is lower than both the state and country average.

## Conclusion

Each of the three districts we have described has its own unique needs, and, therefore, each has approached its improvement efforts in a context-specific and tailored manner. However, strong, supportive district leadership, willingness among leaders to collaborate with school personnel, and consistent use of data to support resources and tiered intervention have emerged as common themes in all three of these case studies. Specifically, districts have creatively used funds, both public and private, to support high schools through initiatives that target both academic and nonacademic needs of adolescents. It is evident that in order for districts to accomplish the goal of student achievement, they must be willing to share leadership and utilize data to determine the best suited strategies and initiatives that work for the unique needs of the students.

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