Washington School Research Center

Bridging the Opportunity Gap

How Washington Elementary Schools are Meeting Achievement Standards

The Washington School Research Center (WSRC) is an independent research and data analysis center within Seattle Pacific University. The Center began in July 2000, funded through a gift from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Our mission is to conduct sound and objective research on student learning in the public schools, and to make the research findings available for educators, policy makers, and the general public for use in the improvement of schools. We believe that sound data and appropriate data analysis are vital components for the identification of school and classroom practices related to increased student academic achievement.

Jeffrey T. Fouts, Ed.D.	**Martin L. Abbott, Ph.D.**	**Duane B. Baker, Ed.D.**
Executive Director	Senior Researcher	Director
Professor of Education	Professor of Sociology	School Information Services

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A Research Report From
The Washington School Research Center

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BRIDGING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP:
How Elementary Schools Are Meeting Achievement Standards

INTRODUCTION

The 4th and 7th grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) scores for the past several years have indicated that the percentage of students meeting the new higher standards is not satisfactory, although improvement is being shown every year. There are indications, however, that while some elementary and middle/junior high schools are showing marked improvements, many others are struggling to adapt to the new expectations and to make the necessary changes.

As traditionally structured, American schools have found it more difficult to educate some students than others. In Washington State, as in most other states, the single best predictor of student achievement at the school level is the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch status (Abbott & Joireman, 2001). This fact has made comparing school-wide performance problematic. Therefore it has been difficult to identify the schools that are most successful at helping their students reach high standards.

With the *Just for the Kids* web-based data analysis system, we are now able to identify schools whose students are reaching high standards, while at the same considering a number of important variables. The system was designed to allow schools to compare their students' achievement with the most successful schools serving equally or more disadvantaged student populations. Comparisons of test data using this methodology indicate that schools with very similar student populations are able to bring a substantially larger number of students to standard than are other schools. For example, in 2001 a Washington elementary school with a free/reduced lunch population of 72% and 6.3% bilingual students had 72% of their students meeting or exceeding the standard on the 2001 4th grade math test, while a school with only 20% free/reduced lunch population and no bilingual students had only 27.9% meeting or exceeding the same standard.

> The single best predictor of student achievement at the school level is the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch status. This fact has made comparing school-wide performance problematic.

In this study we examine the practices of the schools whose students have been extraordinarily successful at meeting Washington's learning standards. Our purpose is to add to the growing body of research in this state that is identifying meaningful changes in the schools that lead to higher achievement for Washington students.

SCHOOL SELECTION

The selection of study schools began with a preliminary screening of all elementary schools in the OSPI database by researchers at the Washington School Research Center. The initial selection criteria included: the percent of the school's students eligible for free/reduced lunch (F/R); the percentage of students passing the 4th grade WASL reading, math, and writing assessments; and a composite score created from the average percent passing of these three assessments.[1] Due to findings in the research literature indicating a strong relationship between low income and student achievement, we grouped the schools according to high F/R (at or above 50%) or moderate F/R (25% – 49%). Additional criteria were not used if they did not assist in the clear identification of the final pool of study schools.

We examined three years of data (1999, 2000, 2001) in order to identify elementary schools that demonstrated either a consistently high composite passing rate on the 4th grade WASL, or a strong positive trajectory of passing rates with the latest year (2001) in the top group of schools. This approach yielded a pool of 22 schools that varied by F/R, building enrollment, and the two different longitudinal score patterns (i.e., either consistently high or strong positive trajectory). The achievement patterns of these schools were confirmed by an opportunity gap analysis[2] using the *Just for the Kids* database (for more information on this online performance assessment system, see www.spu.edu/wsrc).

The final number of schools selected was limited by the practical constraints of funding, time involvement of researchers, and the extensive number of individual interviews required. Research team members from the WSRC, OSPI, and principal and teacher practitioners from the State of Washington met to review the 22 schools. Examination of the pool of study schools included a matrix analysis (formed by the F/R and achievement pattern criteria) as well as consideration of such matters as geographical representation, rural/urban setting, and overall building enrollment. The result of this process was a final list of 16 study schools.

- Benjamin Franklin Elementary, Vancouver School District
- Coe Elementary, Seattle School District
- Farwell Elementary, Mead School District
- Happy Valley Elementary, Bellingham School District
- Hofstetter Elementary, Colville School District
- Larrabee Elementary, Bellingham School District
- Lewis & Clark Elementary, Richland School District

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[1] The composite score was created in order to identify schools relatively strong in all three areas, rather than schools that might only excel in one of the areas.

[2] The opportunity gap is obtained through the Just for the Kids website, and indicates the performance of a particular school compared to the highest performing schools in the state with equal or more disadvantaged students in order to point out what growth is possible for that school.

- Lidgerwood Elementary, Spokane School District
- Lind Elementary, Lind School District
- Logan Elementary, Spokane School District
- Lynndale Elementary, Edmonds School District
- Ness Elementary, West Valley School District
- Seth Woodard Elementary, West Valley School District
- Sumas Elementary, Nooksack Valley School District
- Whitney Elementary, Yakima School District
- Winlock Miller Elementary, Winlock School District

Description of Study Schools

The following graphs summarize each school's 4th grade WASL composite scores for the last three years. Also included in the graphs are two comparison lines: the state average of all 4th grade composite scores, and the average composite scores of the set of schools with similar F/R rates. In every case these schools demonstrate higher student academic achievement than either set of comparison schools. The average enrollment at the 16 schools was 340 students, and ranged in size from 136 to 497 students.
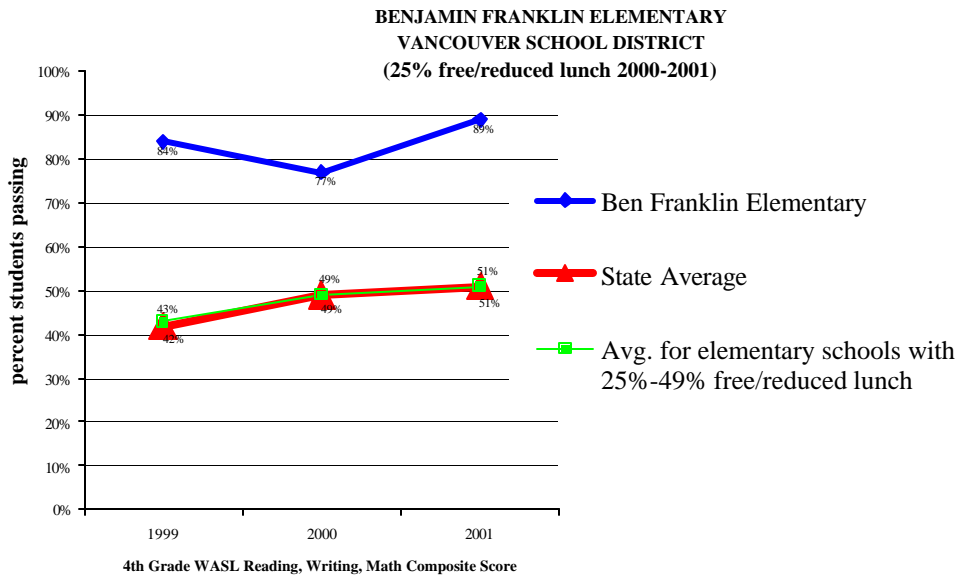
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ELEMENTARY
VANCOUVER SCHOOL DISTRICT
(25% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score

3

COE ELEMENTARY
SEATTLE SCHOOL DISTRICT
(28% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score
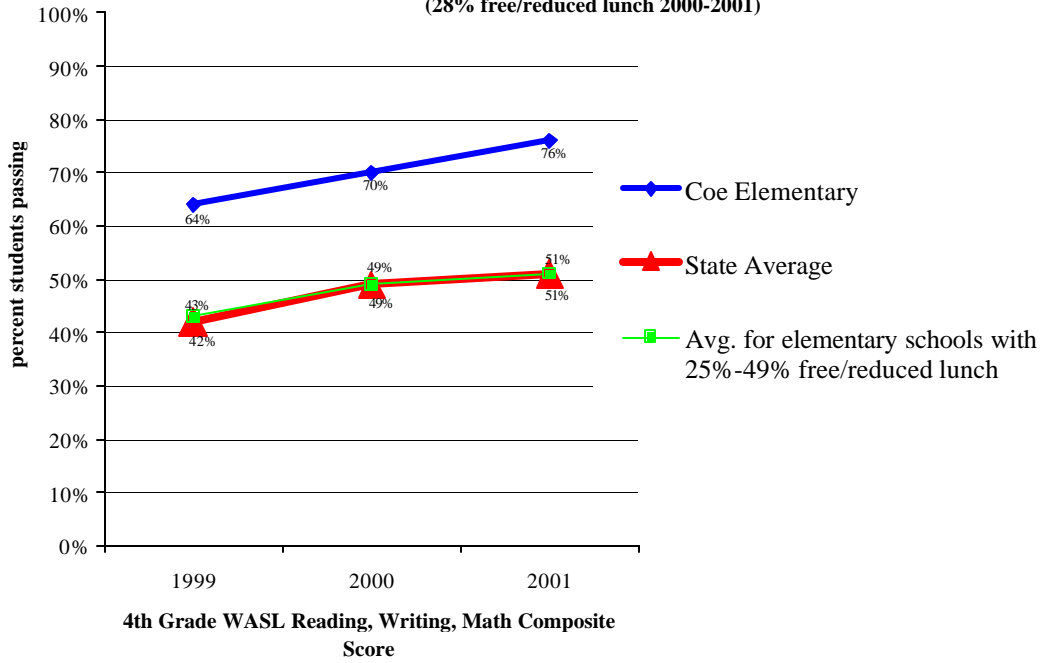
FARWELL ELEMENTARY
MEAD SCHOOL DISTRICT
(47% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)
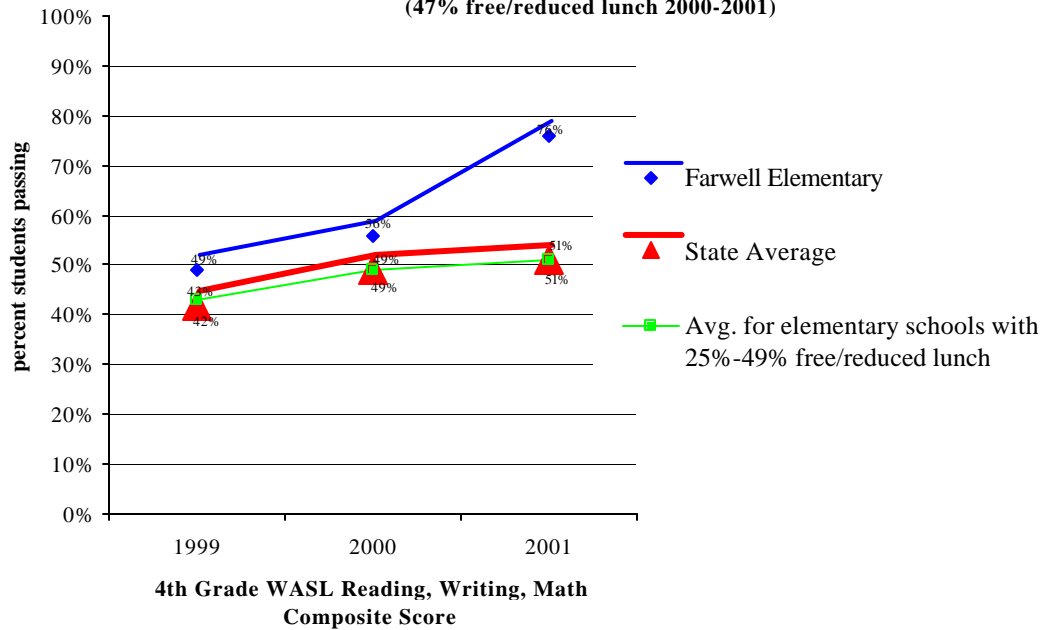
4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score

4

HAPPY ELEMENTARY
BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT
(28% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score

- Happy Valley Elementary
- State Average
- Avg. for elementary schools with 25%-49% free/reduced lunch
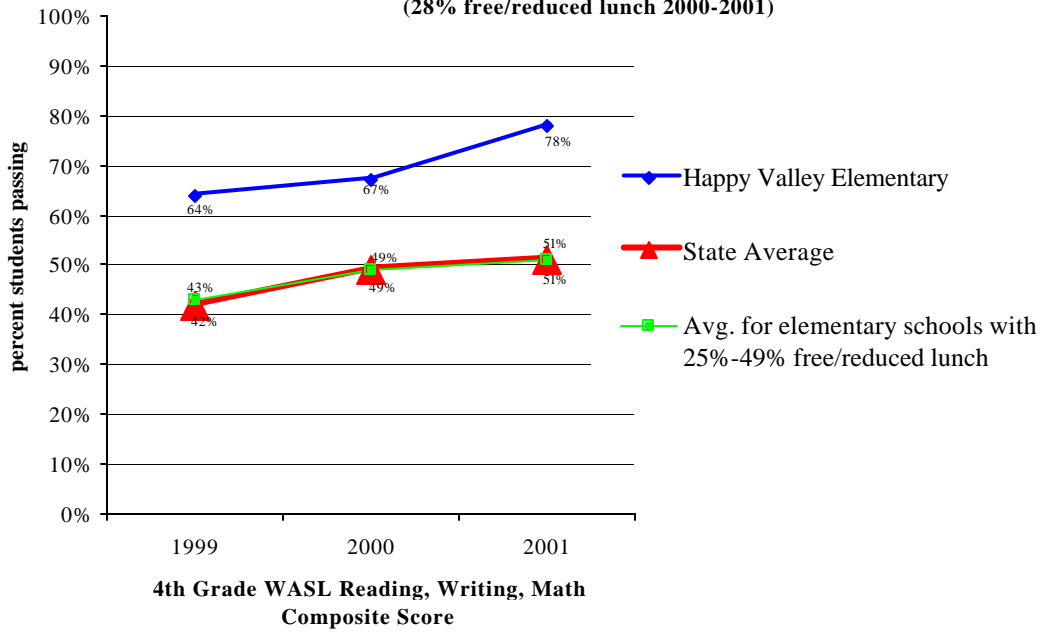
HOFSTETTER ELEMENTARY
COLVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT
(58% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score

- Hofstetter Elementary
- State Average
- Avg. for elementary schools with 50%+ free/reduced lunch

5
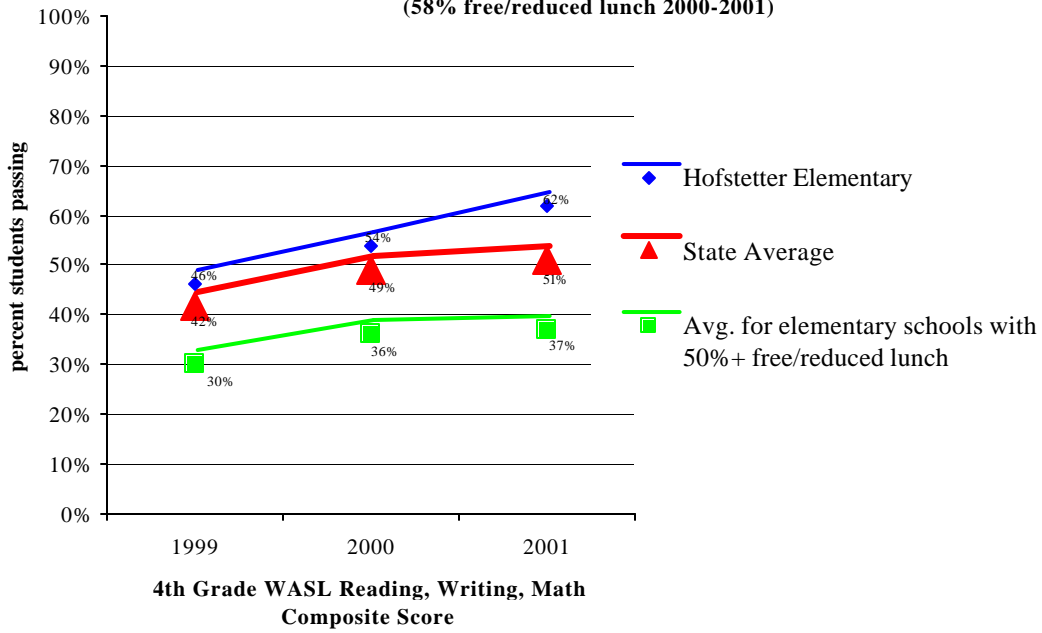
**LARRABEE ELEMENTARY
BELLINGHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT
(31% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)**

percent students passing

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score

- ◆ Larrabee Elementary
- ▲ State Average
- ◻ Avg. for elementary schools with 25%-49% free/reduced lunch
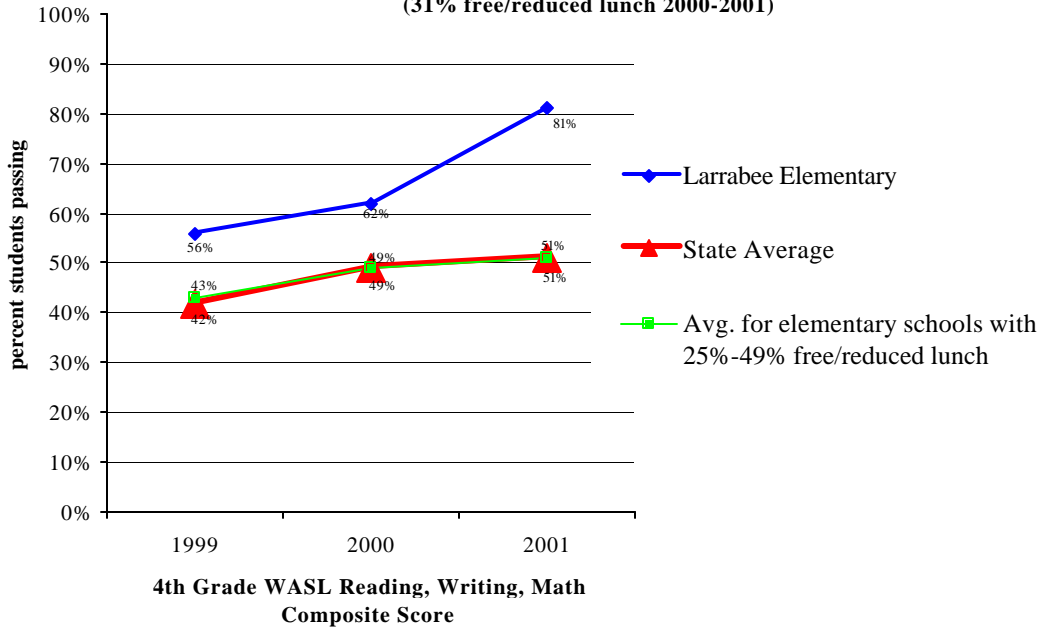
**LEWIS & CLARK ELEMENTARY
RICHLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT
(35% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)**

percent students passing

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score

- ◆ Lewis & Clark Elementary
- ▲ State Average
- ◻ Avg. for elementary schools with 25%-49% free/reduced lunch

6
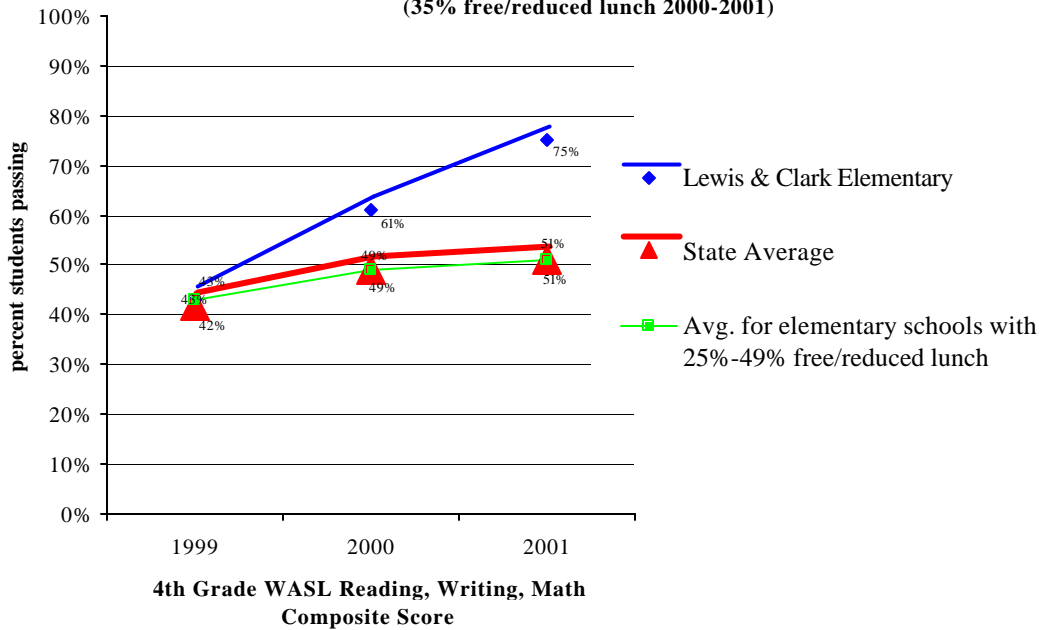
LIDGERWOOD ELEMENTARY
SPOKANE SCHOOL DISTRICT
(72% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

percent students passing

- ◆ Lidgerwood Elementary
- ▲ State Average
- ■ Avg. for elementary schools with 50%+ free/reduced lunch

Lidgerwood Elementary: 48%, 58%, 61%
State Average: 42%, 49%, 51%
Avg. elementary schools 50%+ free/reduced lunch: 30%, 36%, 37%

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score

1999 2000 2001
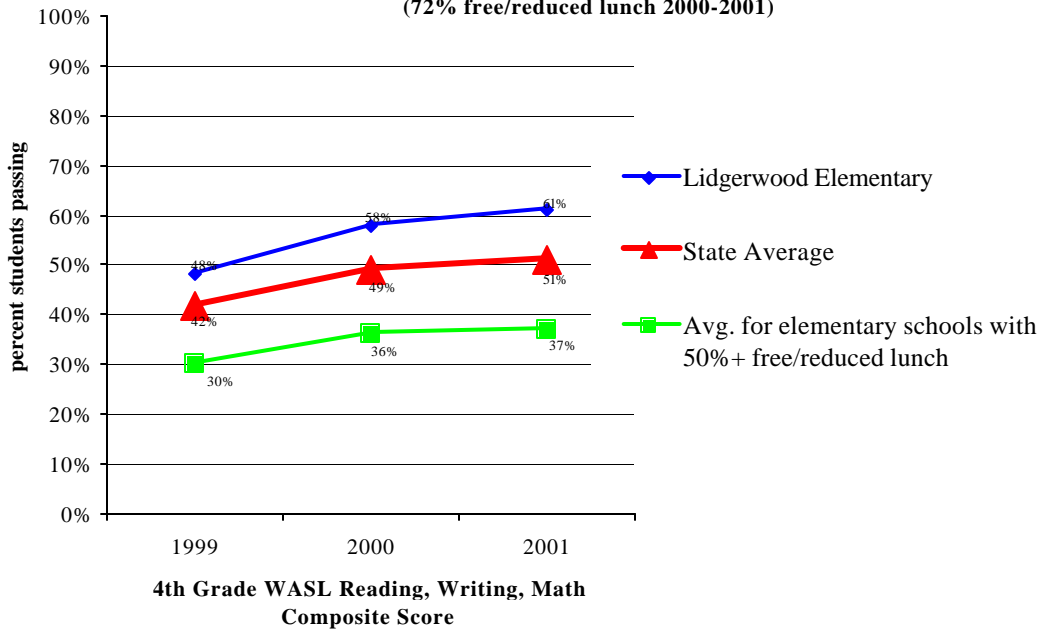
LIND ELEMENTARY
LIND SCHOOL DISTRICT
(67% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

percent students passing

- ◆ Lind Elementary
- ▲ State Average
- Avg. for elementary schools with 50%+ free/reduced lunch

Lind Elementary: 52%, 72%, 72%
State Average: 42%, 49%, 51%
Avg. elementary schools 50%+ free/reduced lunch: 30%, 36%, 37%

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score

1999 2000 2001

7
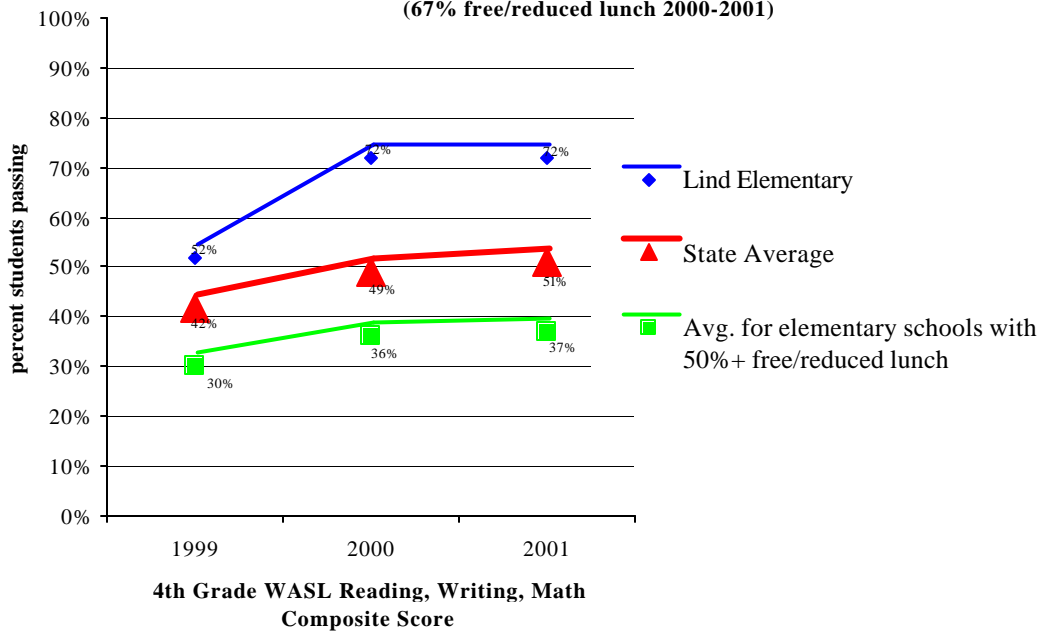
LOGAN ELEMENTARY
SPOKANE SCHOOL DISTRICT
(75% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

percent students passing

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

1999   2000   2001

- Logan Elementary
- State Average
- Avg. for elementary schools with 50%+ free/reduced lunch

53%
58%
42%
49%
51%
28%
30%
36%
37%

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score
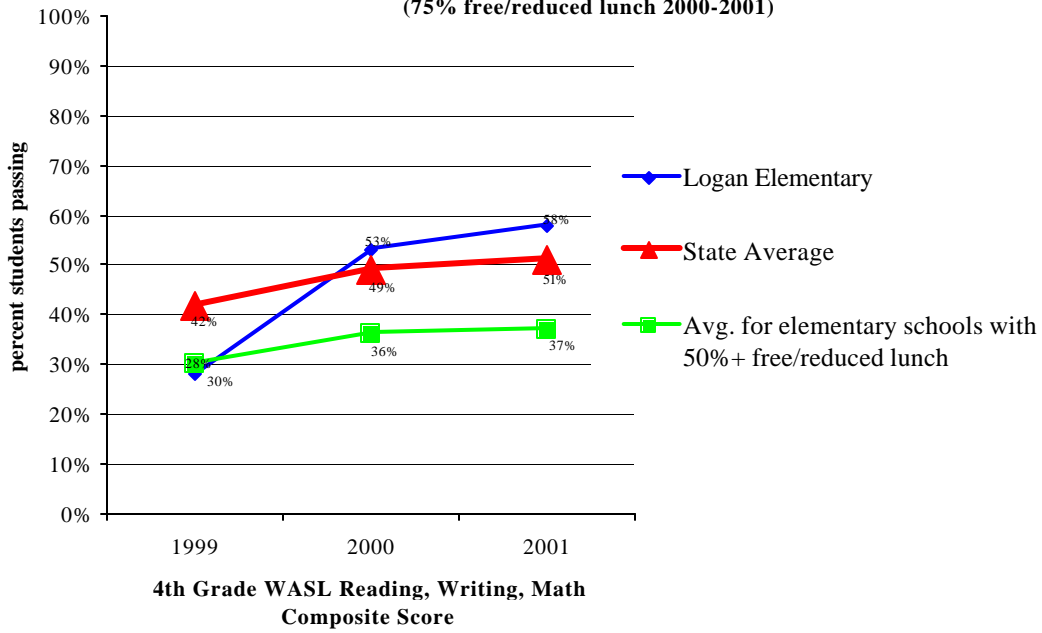
LYNNDALE ELEMENTARY
EDMONDS SCHOOL DISTRICT
(30% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

percent students passing

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

1999   2000   2001

- Lynndale Elementary
- State Average
- Avg. for elementary schools with 25%-49% free/reduced lunch

57%
78%
43%
40%
39%
49%
49%
51%
51%

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score
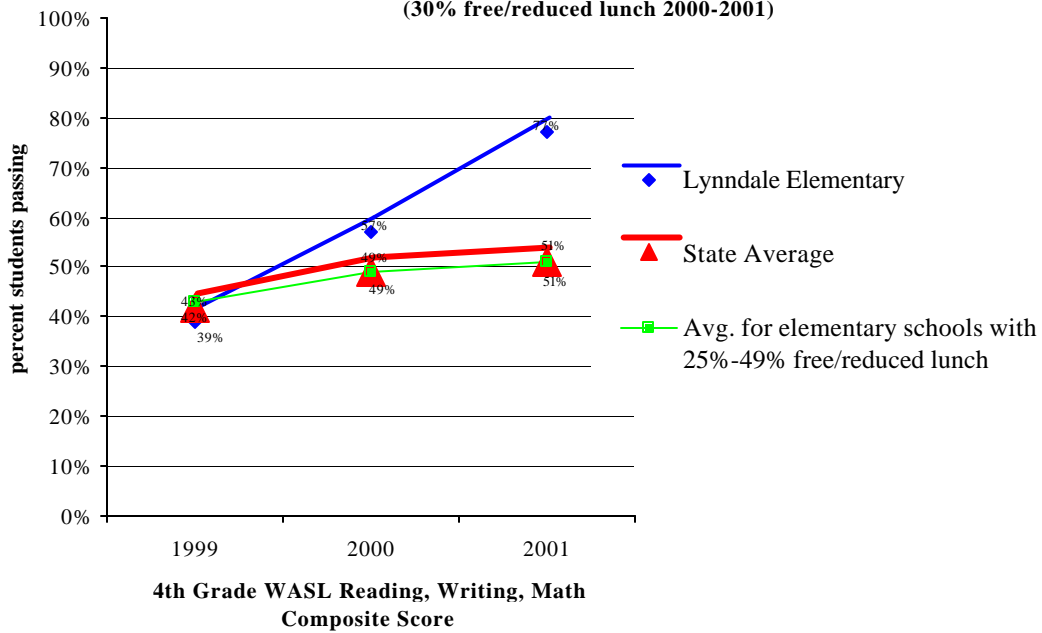
NESS ELEMENTARY
WEST VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT
(63% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score
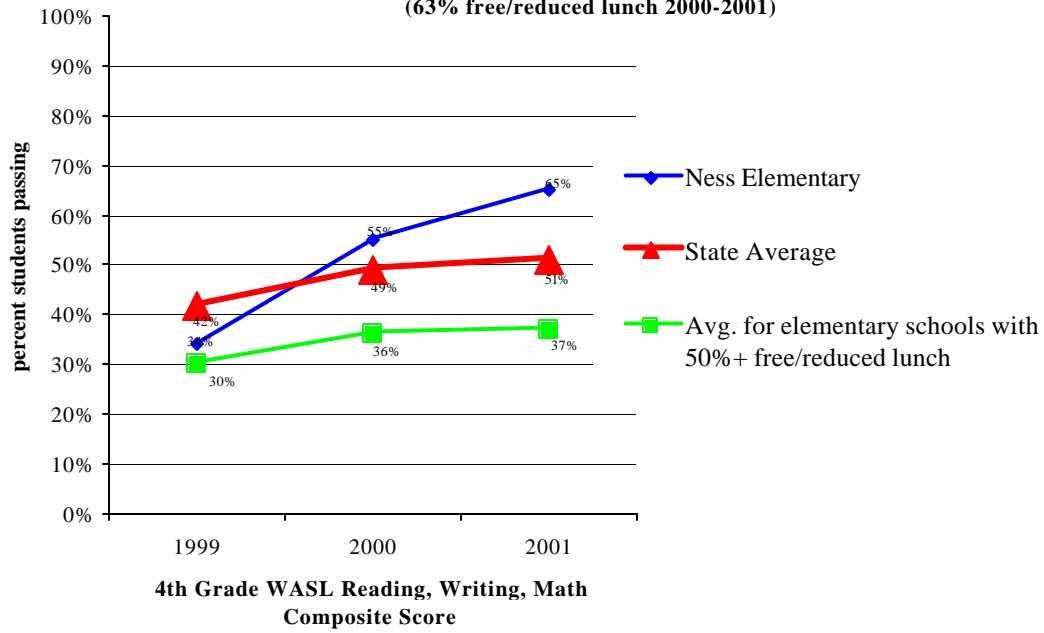
SETH WOODARD ELEMENTARY
WEST VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT
(39% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math
Composite Score

9
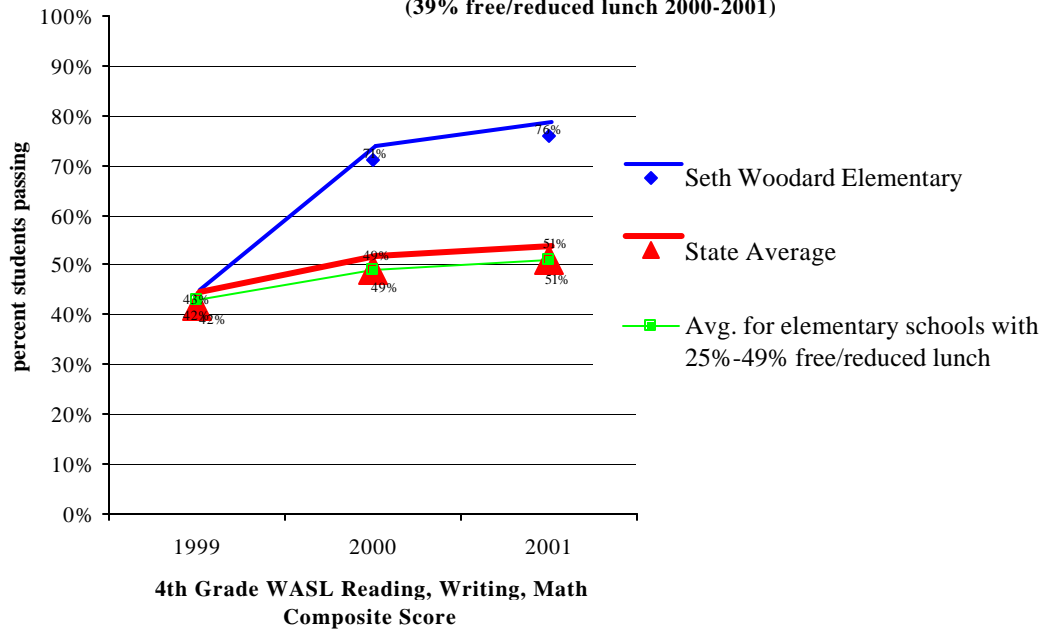
SUMAS ELEMENTARY
NOOKSACK VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT
(53% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score

Legend:
- Sumas Elementary
- State Average
- Avg. for elementary schools with 50%+ free/reduced lunch

Data points: 39%, 52%, 78%, 42%, 49%, 51%, 30%, 36%, 37%
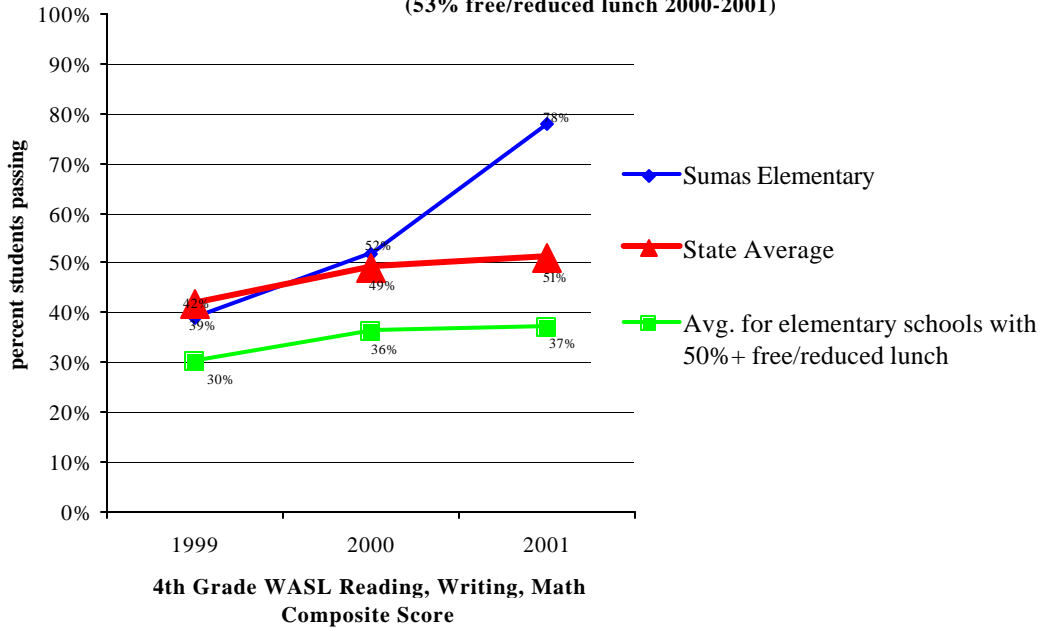
WHITNEY ELEMENTARY
YAKIMA SCHOOL DISTRICT
(73% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score

Legend:
- Whitney Elementary
- State Average
- Avg. for elementary schools with 50%+ free/reduced lunch

Data points: 26%, 42%, 63%, 42%, 49%, 51%, 30%, 36%, 37%

10
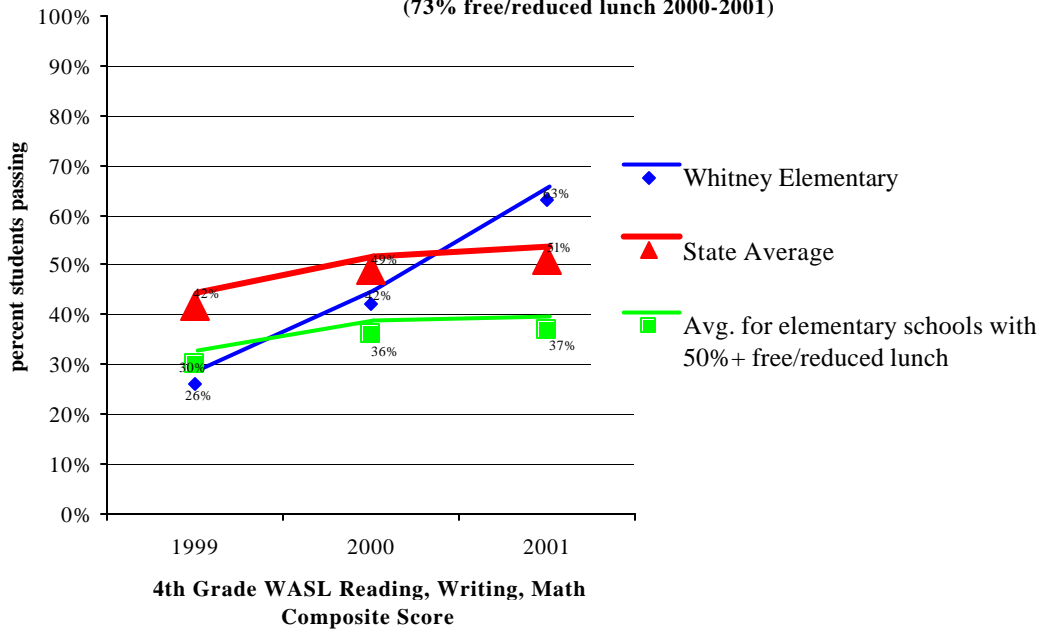
WINLOCK MILLER ELEMENTARY
WINLOCK SCHOOL DISTRICT
(50% free/reduced lunch 2000-2001)

Chart: percent students passing vs. 4th Grade WASL Reading, Writing, Math Composite Score (1999, 2000, 2001)

- Winlock Miller Elementary: 36%, 44%, 63%
- State Average: 42%, 49%, 51%
- Avg. for elementary schools with 50%+ free/reduced lunch: 30%, 36%, 37%
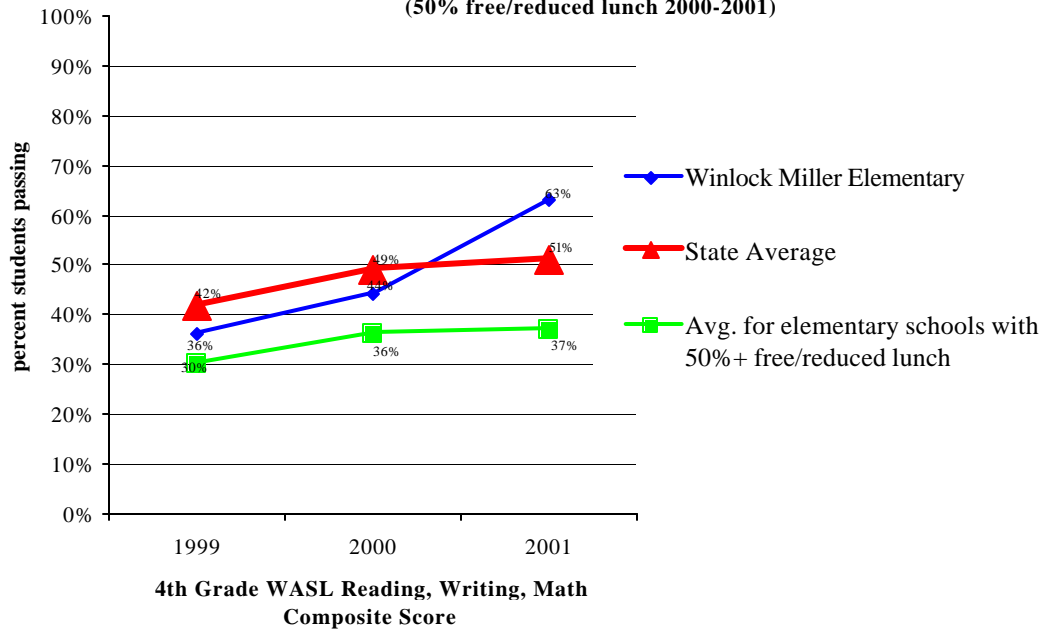
THE RESEARCH TEAMS

Three research teams were formed and commissioned to perform intensive interviews at each of the study schools. Teams were comprised of researchers from the Washington School Research Center, representatives from OSPI, and teachers and principals from various school districts throughout the state. Each of the three teams included at least one representative from WSRC and OSPI. Team members included the following:

- Duane Baker, Director, School Information Services, WSRC (*Team Leader and Project Director*)
- Martin Abbott, Senior Researcher, WSRC (*Team Leader*)
- Heather Robinson, Assistant Researcher, WSRC (*Assistant Team Leader*)
- Janna Dmochowsky, Principal, Hidden River Middle School, Monroe School District (*Team Leader*)
- Ray Houser, Principal, Northshore Junior High, Northshore School District
- Leslie Joseph, Teacher, Vista Elementary, Kennewick School District
- Julia Lockwood, Teacher, Audubon Elementary, Spokane School District
- Bill Paulson, Federal Programs, OSPI
- Sue Shannon, Senior Researcher, Research and Evaluation, OSPI
- Steve Sjolund, Teacher, Emerald Hills Elementary, Sumner School District
- Joan Yoshitomi, Special Assistant, Parental Involvement, OSPI
- Jeffrey Fouts, Executive Director, WSRC

THE PROCEDURES

Study schools were initially contacted by letter (Appendix A) and invited to participate in the Effective Practices study. All schools accepted, and were subsequently asked to schedule individual interviews with the principal and teachers. Principals were also asked to complete a mailed questionnaire (Appendix B) that provided the researchers with general information on the school's demographics, sources of outside funding, and curriculum. Participants were informed ahead of time about the nature of the interviews, which related to their school's success in reaching and maintaining high levels of student achievement in reading, writing, and math between 1999 and 2001.

Team leaders trained study team members in interview procedures, and a general meeting of all members was held to discuss the objectives of the study. Researchers then conducted interviews at their schools by asking the same open-ended questions:

1. To what do you attribute your strong WASL success over the last three years?
2. As Principal/Teacher, what role did you play in this success?

Research team members referred to written protocols (Appendix C) in order to ensure a standard approach to the interviews. The protocols also listed some areas of interest (e.g., teacher collaboration, professional development) to be explored when interviews were limited, even after the use of general prompts.

Team members were to interview teachers, principal, school leaders, and a representative of the district office. Schools were visited between November 2001 and February 2002, with individual interviews conducted by study teams during one school day each. Paid substitutes were provided for those schools that needed them in order to allow time for teacher interviews.

FINDINGS: WHAT THE EDUCATORS SAID

When asked to identify the reasons for their success, teachers, principals, and central office administrators were consistent in their responses. Findings were similar across schools and districts, resulting in several clearly identifiable themes. Four of these factors we have categorized as *primary factors* and we view these as essential elements of a successful and effective school because they were present in all or the vast majority of the 16 schools we visited. Without these factors in place it is doubtful that fundamental change can occur; nor is it likely that achievement gains will be more than short-term or modest. Primary factors include:

- A caring and collaborative professional environment
- Strong leadership
- Focused, intentional instruction
- The use of assessment to inform instruction

A second group of educator responses revealed other important factors that were present in some, but not all, of the schools. While important, these factors were not felt to be as critical to the development of an effective school as were the primary factors. In some cases, such as school size, educators talked about these aspects of their schools as factors that *enabled* them to accomplish the primary factors leading to improvements in achievement.

> **Without these factors in place it is doubtful that fundamental change can occur; nor is it likely that achievement gains will be more than short-term or modest increases.**

In other words, while these factors may have worked to help develop a successful school environment in some locales, other schools were able to accomplish the task without these factors playing an important role—or at least they were not mentioned by the educators. This second group of factors includes:

- Small school size
- District support
- Lack of student and staff mobility
- Parent and Community Involvement
- Professional development

The Primary Factors

A Caring and Collaborative Professional Environment

Analysis of interview data indicated that the most compelling factor leading to a school's success is related to teachers' positive attitudes and beliefs about their work. Repeatedly, teachers, principals, and even central office administrators discussed the

importance of working together, of believing in and caring about students, and of functioning in a collaborative, "family-like" environment.

Community. Teachers said that caring about each other and caring about students is at the heart of their success. This holds true despite differences in teaching style, classroom management practices, and even philosophy of education. A successful staff is one that likes each other, respects each other, and is united in doing whatever they can to help kids learn. "It's fun to work here;" "This is a good place to be;" "We really *like* each other;" and "Why would I want to work anywhere else?" were some of the comments made by teachers when discussing the reasons for their success. Faculty members across schools agreed on the necessity of respectful and collaborative communication, and suggested that mutual trust and support are basic elements of a productive and effective staff as well. Teachers emphasized the importance of being able to share opinions, suggestions, and requests for help in a safe and supportive environment. As one teacher put it, "It's like family here. We really support each other 100%." Another teacher concurred: "We are good at communicating. We problem-solve together. We work collectively to help each student as much as possible. We work with the same focus- to do what is best for kids." Likewise, a teacher commented, "We don't always agree, but we respect each other's talents. We're not fighting for the stage, we all want to see these kids be successful."

> "It's fun to work here."
>
> "This is a good place to be."
>
> "We really *like* each other."
>
> "Why would I want to work anywhere else?"

Concern for Students. Not only do teachers care about each other, interviews revealed a real and shared concern for students. As one instructional assistant noted, "They (the teaching staff) really do care about kids. They're not just interested in getting kids through the grades." Teachers work hard to provide a safe and supportive environment for kids, and the comment of one was echoed by many others: "We put children first . . .each kid belongs to every teacher." A principal summed up the sentiments of many, reflecting that "If a kid needs a band-aid, everyone at this school is a nurse." Another stated, "They are no longer *my* kids to teach, now they are *our* kids to teach." Comments such as these made it clear that in these schools, caring, respect, and community are essential to their success.

> "They are no longer *my* kids to teach, now they are *our* kids to teach."

Strong Leadership

While teacher attitude was the most important factor noted by those interviewed, another important theme was the necessity of strong leadership. Visionary, student-centered leadership emerged as a critical aspect of school effectiveness. Teachers discussed several attributes of successful principal-leaders, describing them as "facilitators," "supportive of efforts in the classroom," "trusting," "positive," "mediators

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between teachers and the district office," "without a big ego," and "flexible [in use of resources]." For example, the principal of one school was described as "a leader from behind. He lets teachers take control. It's about the kids; the teachers are second. He is willing to move things around, be flexible to help kids." One staff member described her principal as "the most supportive principal I've ever worked with, . . . she trusts my professional judgment and doesn't have to control everything." Others appreciate their principal knowing and sharing current research from the field both "nationally and statewide." Leaders value their teachers and treat them as professionals. As one principal noted, "I need them to be fairly self-sufficient. I need them to demonstrate problem-solving and thinking abilities."

In a few buildings where strong principal leadership was not present, teachers assumed this leadership role. These teachers were generally experienced, respected professionals that provided the instructional leadership in the building with the approval of the principal. But in both situations, the building leadership was able to focus adult efforts in a positive and constructive manner.

Focused, Intentional Instruction

In addition to strong leadership and a caring and respectful staff, effective schools are deliberate and intentional in the way they approach instruction. Common academic language with a focus on the essentials, high expectations for students, and collaboration within and across grade levels and characterize the efforts of these schools.

Focusing on the Essentials. A number of interviewees noted that they have increased the amount of time they spend teaching reading and writing in an effort to help students reach their academic potential. For example, in one building, teachers spend 60-90 minutes every day on both reading and writing, and another 75 minutes on math and problem solving. In many cases this has meant taking a "minimalist" approach to other subjects. As one principal noted, "I am not paying a lot of attention to science and social studies. I'm not even doing an observation in either of those areas this year. I am spending all my time and energy on writing, reading, and problem-solving." For some teachers this "focus on the essentials" has meant giving up their favorite activities. As one teacher put it, "We made a professional decision to put away our pet projects." Another stated that "We have to give up the whale unit and spend more time with reading and writing," while yet another commented, "We can't teach these things just because the adults like them and think they're fun." Admittedly this is not easily done. "Some of the fun has gone out of school. Everything (now) is intentional. Nothing is frivolous," remarked one teacher, while another said, "You feel guilty if you're doing something just for fun."

> "We made a professional decision to put away our pet projects."
>
> "We have to give up the whale unit and spend more time with reading and writing."

High Expectations. Teacher, administrator, and parent expectations are also important in a school's success, according to interview data. Interviewees observed that even though a high number of their students often come from low-income homes, this is not an excuse for poor performance. "Poverty is not a reason for students not to learn," said one teacher. High expectations and commitment to students' needs are a priority according to a majority of these teachers, and there is an assumption that "all children can succeed." As one teacher observed, "We believe that every kid can learn and it's our job to figure out how we can get them there." Another stated that "We don't give up, we're pretty tenacious that way," while yet another said, "We don't use SES [socio-economic status] as an excuse for how we educate students."

> "We don't use SES [socio-economic status] as an excuse for how we educate students."

High expectations and determination drive teacher efforts to align and focus the curriculum. An example of one school's deliberate efforts to focus instruction follows:

> Grade level "content committees" meet regularly (a minimum of once a month, sometimes as often as weekly) to plan, discuss curriculum and "best practice" methods, and the latest research. One teacher said, "We truly believe it helps. We meet together, we plan intentionally, and we work across grade levels." The staff . . . starts with the EALRs and then selects and/or designs curriculum to meet the standards. An emphasis on writing has resulted in the establishment and utilization of "color-coded portfolios" for every student and teachers refer to and update these portfolios on a regular basis. Fourth grade teachers meet weekly or bi-weekly to design and discuss classroom-based writing assessments (prompts). The students are taught to use rubrics, and staff members conference regularly with their individual students. In addition, a number of different curriculums are utilized emphasizing small group instruction that is focused on "theme work and webbing."

> In some cases, teachers are provided with time specifically for collaboration; where this isn't the case, they *find* the time because it benefits the kids. Collaboration, it seems, is a function of their attitude.

Collaboration. The intentional focus on curriculum and instruction is dependent on the willingness of teachers to collaborate. Indeed, in successful schools teachers spend a significant amount of time collaborating both formally and informally. In some cases, teachers are provided with time specifically for collaboration; where this is not the case, they *find* the time because it benefits the kids. Collaboration, it seems, is a function of their attitude. One staff member described these efforts, noting that collaborative time is used to "make content area connections, have cross grade level discussions, and hold cross age activities around curriculum… the increase in collaboration has tightened the curriculum…the end result is that no one is working in isolation anymore." Teachers referred frequently to the benefits of collaboration and teaming. According to one kindergarten teacher, the "number one reason" her students

are successful is because of her collaboration with the other K-2 teachers. During this time, they stress common methods and common vocabulary.

The Use of Assessment Data to Inform Instruction

The level of assessment literacy is high among teachers and administrators in these schools, and they consistently make a conscious effort to use any available assessment data to improve student learning. Data from the WASL in particular is analyzed and discussed on a regular basis. As one principal noted, "benchmarks and assessments guide what we teach instead of textbooks." Ongoing formative assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process in these schools, as are standardized test results. In addition to WASL and ITBS results, a number of other assessment tools are used to monitor student learning. These include, but are not limited to, running records, STAR, QRI, Accelerated Reader, Four Square Writing, IRI, DRA, and Flint-Kudor. No single assessment tool appeared to be used more often than another; rather, tools were selected based on the goals and needs of each particular school and grade level.

It is not uncommon for WASL results to be used to identify a school's weak areas, as well as to develop academic goals for the coming year. These goals then become the focus of instruction and of the professional development agenda. Interventions are designed for students not meeting standard, particularly those who might "fall through the cracks." One school's efforts serve as an example of the intentional and deliberate use of assessment data:

> The staff makes predictions of WASL performance based on previous ITBS scores. They then administer and use the data collected from the highly touted district 3rd grade writing prompt and involve their students in the development of instructional and assessment strategies. The 3rd grade assessment is administered to all 3rd grade students in the district, and then scored by elementary principals and staff.

Educators in these schools have come to accept the fact that the WASL is "not a 4th grade test," although in some cases the fourth grade teacher appeared to be, at least initially, the "WASL advocate" in the building. Stated one teacher, "The WASL is not a 4th grade test . . . it trickles all the way down to kindergarten." And although not all teachers are convinced of the appropriateness of the WASL, they are willing to work to ensure that students are successful on it. Said one, "I think we've overdone testing. We're teaching too much to the test and not to the whole child." On the other hand, "There's a level of pride here. We don't have a choice [in the WASL] so we're going to do the best we can."

> "The WASL is not a 4th grade test . . . it trickles all the way down to kindergarten."
>
> "We know it's a whole-staff effort. We all looked at what we were teaching and cut out the 'fluff.' Our central focus is our students. We stay on track."

Teachers and principals also believe that their success is due, in part, to the fact that they recognized the significance of the reform efforts relatively early and moved ahead to make it part of their work. One teacher reflected on this commitment, saying, "I believe one of the reasons we are so successful is that we got on board early with the WASL and other movements. We started making changes before we were asked to by the district." Not that it was easily done. "We went through a real attitude shift," recalled one teacher. "We know it's a whole-staff effort. We all looked at what we were teaching and cut out the 'fluff.' Our central focus is our students. We stay on track."

Assessment data are also used to individualize and extend instruction. For example, one school assesses students, places them in groups and/or programs designed to meet their educational needs, and then reassesses them on a regular basis. Groups are flexible, and students are moved whenever it is determined they will benefit from a new placement. Teachers themselves use the assessments to make changes in their teaching. At another school extended day programs were created to help prepare students for the WASL, and classroom volunteers provide one-on-one help in the classroom setting. One teacher's comment was typical: "Those who need help get help . . . when we find a child [in need of support] we intervene as quickly and thoroughly as possible."

The Secondary Factors

Small School Size

The average enrollment at the sixteen schools was 340 students and ranged in size from 136 to 497 students. At several of the smaller schools teachers and administrators discussed the importance of being in a small school, noting that it encourages a sense of community and support among teachers, students and families. Teachers have a chance to get to know their students and their families and are able to give them more personalized instruction. As one teacher explained, "We know every student, and that translates into kids knowing someone is always watching them and willing to redirect them if necessary." Besides fostering a sense of community, several other benefits of small schools were noted. First, with a small school and small staff, it is easier to collaborate, easier to "see the common focus," and less likely that factions among staff members will develop. Many of those interviewed referred to their school as "family-like communities," where everyone cares about everyone else. One teacher noted that relationships extend beyond the building: teachers are colleagues and also friends. "Every person here is a mom or dad-type parent to these kids," said one staff member. School size was seen as a factor that promoted close relationships that enhanced student learning, an enabling factor not present at the large schools in the sample.

Lack of Student and Staff Mobility

Although not a factor at all schools, student mobility did emerge as an element mentioned several times. When students stay in one school "from start to finish,"

teachers are able to track their progress, identify weaknesses, and provide appropriate assistance. Continuity in learning is a big part of student success, and as one teacher noted, "We can expect something to be taught or covered."

Teacher stability is also related to school success, according to many of those interviewed. It was not unusual to hear teachers say that "People have been here a long time, and they want to stay; it is a good place to be." In these schools there are seldom vacancies, and when one does open up, they are "highly sought."   In one case, teachers had been at the school for an average of 10.5 years, resulting in a high degree of autonomy and focus. Veteran teachers are valued for their ability to see the big picture and for their ability to mentor newer teachers. These teachers are often leaders in their buildings whose knowledge and expertise are valued by newer teachers and administrators alike.

District Support

Most schools believe that their success is due at least in part to the level of district support they receive. On the other hand, a few schools believe they are effective *despite* their relationship with the district. While specific decisions and efforts to increase student achievement are often made at the building level, schools nevertheless appreciate the direction and support they receive from the district. According to one teacher, "In this district it is my experience that when there are bumps in the road, downtown is there for you." Teachers and administrators alike discussed the importance of having the district recognize their accomplishments. Several teachers expressed concern at the tendency of district personnel to "produce too much curriculum. . . . They tell us to integrate, yet they develop the curriculum as separate subjects and we are supposed to cover it all."

> Most schools believe that their success is due at least in part to the level of district support they receive. On the other hand, a few schools believe they are effective *despite* their relationship with the district.

Parent and Community Involvement

There was general agreement among interviewees that a dynamic and supportive community can greatly influence the work of a school. In a number of these schools, the high level of involvement of parents and others was because there had been a conscious effort on the part of the educators to solicit the involvement. As one teacher stated, "Owning educational issues is a community problem, and the whole school is taking ownership of the tests." A number of schools have been intentional about involving families in the reform process and have seen increases in the number of parents who take part in school activities, from volunteering in the classroom to teaching enrichment classes. In one school, for example, parents "don't just organize camp and bake sales, they are committed to enriching academic offerings for their kids." Each of the PTA board members has specific responsibilities that have resulted in a variety of before and after school enrichment programs, including world language, math, science, music and art

classes. One described the art program as "incredible…students that wouldn't get excited about literature or writing are getting excited." The bottom line seems to be that while schools can do their work *without* an active and supportive parent group, their work is greatly enhanced when parents and community members *do* get involved.

Professional Development

Many teachers and administrators identified professional development as an important factor in their success, and even though it was approached in a variety of ways, efforts were consistently intentional, focused, and teacher-driven. Sometimes the professional development was financially supported by the district, and sometimes not. While districts and ESDs were generally recognized as being supportive of a school's professional development agenda, it was clear that the most effective activities were those that originated at the building level. Staff development meetings were one way in which teachers shared their knowledge and skills, although a significant amount of "continuing education" seemed to take place instead through informal collaboration.

FINDINGS: WHAT THE RESEARCHERS PERCEIVED

During the course of the project we had the opportunity to interview more than 175 teachers and school and district administrators. Their insights into the reasons for their success are illuminating and important. We attempted to sort out and understand the teacher and administrator perspectives during the visit, in team debriefing sessions after the visit, and in meetings of all the teams at the end of the visits. We believe we have captured accurately the views of the educators through their words and explanations, for the most part, in the preceding section.

At the same time, there were instances, we noticed, when the teachers and educators talked in terms that reflected certain "givens" or basic assumptions that, in their minds, did not even need to be stated, or of which they may not have been consciously aware. The visiting teams discussed these issues and we recognized that there were instances where there were deeper philosophical or pragmatic positions adopted by the educators that were a vital part of their success—maybe even the foundation of their success—but had not been articulated during the visit. In addition, there were many things that the educators *did not* say. We believe that adding these observations contribute to the larger picture of successful reform in a high standards environment.

A Fundamental Characteristic

When the three teams came together for a day of discussions and summation at the conclusion of the school visits, our impressions were that these schools all shared one general trait that was at the foundation of their success, something deeper than what the summary of educator comments showed. Teachers

A fundamental characteristic of all of these schools is that the majority of the educators are "on board" with the state reform efforts.

and principals mentioned it a few times during the visits, and the theme is visible just below the surface of many of their comments and the summary above. We believe that it is important for it to be stated explicitly. *A fundamental characteristic of all of these schools is that the majority of the educators are "on board" with the state reform efforts.* At the most basic level, this requires a clear understanding that the current direction of state reform is built on a different set of beliefs about the school enterprise. The reform requires a narrowing of the curriculum to "essential learnings," the setting of high standards for all students, the necessary changes in instructional strategies, regular assessments (WASL), and accountability. This is a very different approach to elementary education, and one that many teachers have not heretofore experienced.

Being "on board" appears to manifest itself three different ways. First, there are a large number of educators at these schools who believe that this has been a positive development for education and are participating in the changes willingly, if not in a leadership role. A second group of teachers is perhaps less convinced of its value but accepts what they see as the positive aspects of reform and is willing to work with colleagues to give it a chance. And a third group of teachers is much more skeptical but has acquiesced and goes along with their colleagues doing what has to be done.

> A fundamental characteristic of these schools is that the educators have all agreed, either because of philosophical belief, acceptance, or acquiescence, to move the school in a certain direction. A logical necessity of this agreement is the personal willingness of each teacher to give up long-held beliefs and practices at the school and in the classroom.

Nonetheless, *a fundamental characteristic of these schools is that the educators have all agreed, either because of philosophical belief, acceptance, or acquiescence, to move the school in a certain direction.*

A second important component of this fundamental characteristic is a logical necessity—*the personal willingness of each teacher to give up long-held beliefs and practices at the school and in the classroom.* This is a very difficult thing for many teachers to do. In a number of cases this is being done for "the sake of the kids." In other instances it is being done because "this is the way the game is now played." Teachers at these schools have refocused their efforts even though as they stated above, "Some of the fun has gone out of the school." If the educators in these schools had doubts about their students' capabilities to meet the standards, regardless of socio-economic status or ethnicity, those beliefs have also changed. To the contrary, these educators' beliefs about the capabilities of their students had been buoyed by the academic success of their students because of the reform changes.

What the Educators Did Not Say

Finally, we think it is important to note what the educators we interviewed did not say. Interestingly, while interviewees named more than 30 specific curricula and instructional practices, few of these were mentioned more than once. This suggests that

while curricular materials, instructional strategies, and environmental practices are not unimportant, neither do teachers and administrators view them as driving factors in the school's success. Such evidence supports previous research findings that showed that fundamental and philosophical changes about teacher beliefs, attitudes, and professional culture are more strongly correlated with academic gains than are specific curricular or instructional program changes. Similarly, the educators did not point to or mention any influx of new resources as vital to their success. Other than an occasional grant, our analysis of the principals' school summary reports did not reveal any extra resources available to the school more than other schools. What was obvious was that the resources that did exist were used strategically to help the school achieve very specific goals.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Higher standards for student achievement have become an expectation for all of Washington's schools. Over the last several years the students in some elementary schools have been more successful at meeting the new standards than have students in other schools. In fact, some students from schools with relatively high levels of poverty have shown that student achievement of the standards is possible. This is not an easy task for schools, but nonetheless, with the proper modifications to the school and professional environment, these schools have shown that substantial levels of achievement are within reach.

In this study we sought to identify the changes that these successful schools had made that enabled them to "beat the odds," given their student populations. To identify why these schools have been successful, we chose to listen to the educators themselves, as they described their approaches to school reform and the new standards as measured by the WASL. We then tried to identify themes and common changes that had characterized their responses. Because all of the research teams consisted of experienced educators, we also considered our own impressions of these schools' characteristics in drawing our conclusions.

The explanations given by the school educators were similar across schools and districts. We identified four *primary factors* that appear to have led to the necessary changes in the school to enhance student achievement. First, the *school and professional environment* is one in which adults put the well being of others, both adults and students, as the foremost concern. These schools are places where the adults care about each other, like where they work, and work hard together for the sake of the students. Second, there is *strong leadership* at these schools that has articulated a vision and set clear goals for the adults in the school. Whether by direct means or by more indirect approaches, such as the delegation of responsibilities, the leadership in the school has been strong and appreciated. Third, the curriculum and instruction in the schools is *focused and intentional*, addressing the state's essential learnings. Teachers in these

> The explanations given by the school educators were similar across schools and districts.

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schools believe that their students, regardless of background, can learn what is required. With all adults working collaboratively with a common focus the results have been affirmative. Fourth, *assessment results inform instruction*. WASL and other assessment results are seen as important sources of information for identifying strengths and weaknesses of students individually and of the school as a whole. Such information is used to provide necessary instruction and to guide the professional development of the teachers.

In addition, we also identified a second group of factors that were present in some, but not all, of the schools. While the educators in the schools identified the factors as important to their success, we noticed that many times they were factors that *enabled* or aided the adults at the school in developing the four *primary* factors. These *secondary* factors included small school size, district support, lack of student and staff mobility, parental and community involvement, and professional development. These factors may be helpful, but apparently are not mandatory. For example, large schools and schools without substantial district support have also been successful in the reform effort.

Finally, we tried to look "deeper" at the educators at these schools to identify any unspoken but implied characteristics that appeared to be present in all locales. We concluded that these schools shared one general trait that was at the foundation of their success. Succinctly stated:

> *A fundamental characteristic of all of these schools is that the majority of the educators are "on board" with the state reform efforts. The educators have all agreed, either because of philosophical belief, acceptance, or acquiescence, to move the school in a certain direction. A logical necessity of this trait is the personal willingness of each teacher to give up long-held beliefs and practices at the school and in the classroom.*

Without the necessary acceptance of the idea of a high standards environment and all that it implies, other efforts will achieve little.

Other Research Findings in Washington State

The findings presented here are not surprising, nor are they unique. Over the last few years several related studies have identified many of the same factors as important for school success in a high standards educational environment. For example, results from four different studies in Washington State consistently found that clearly defined goals, strong leadership, collaboration, focused instruction, and commitment to reform are at the heart of school improvement efforts (Fouts, 1999; Fouts, Stuen, Andersen, & Parnell, 2000; Lake, Hill, O'Toole, & Celio, 1999; Lake, McCarthy, Taggart, & Celio, 2001). There is also evidence that schools with smaller percentages of students meeting standards do not have these factors present, and in fact may exhibit the strong opposites of these characteristics (see; McCarthy & Celio, 2001; Fouts & Stuen-Brown, 2002).

> These changes represent a deep philosophical shift in the educational approach and a drastic change in the professional environment in which most teachers have spent their entire careers.

The success of a number of elementary schools in the state over the last several years has demonstrated that high academic standards are achievable by a large majority of students at the schools—and this includes students from disadvantaged or low socio-economic backgrounds. The research findings have been consistent for several years: schools that are guided by certain beliefs and focus their energies in certain directions can go a long way in helping their students attain high levels of achievement. *These changes represent a deep philosophical shift in the educational approach and a drastic change in the professional environment in which most teachers have spent their entire careers.* It appears to us that this educator understanding is a prerequisite before any school can reach its potential under the current reform efforts.

Implications for Washington's Elementary Schools

For those schools that are yet to achieve this high level of success, we believe that these findings provide specific implications for school improvement.

➢ It is conceivable that many teachers do not understand the true depth or nature of the philosophical assumptions underlying a high standards environment, nor the true nature and depth of the changes required in the professional environment. Professional development strategies must start at this level, and only with understanding of the underlying philosophy should professional development activities proceed into specific techniques for bringing about the needed changes.

➢ For the reform effort to move forward at any given school, teachers must be "on board" with the direction of school reform. Without the necessary acceptance of the idea of a high standards environment and all that it implies, other efforts will achieve little. If this acceptance is not forthcoming, then the third leg of the reform movement, accountability, must become a reality.

➢ Leadership training for principals and/or key teachers should help them to first understand the nature and scope of the changes that are needed at the school, and only then should specifics, such as curriculum development, be attempted.

Implications for Washington's Middle and Junior High Schools

Although we did not visit middle and junior high schools, we believe that the lessons learned from the elementary schools hold value for educators in the middle grades. While there are certainly differences between the elementary and middle grade schools, the expectations of a high standards environment are much the same. As at the elementary schools, at the middle grades there are clear learning objectives in the form of

the *essential learnings*, a high stakes state assessment (the 7th grade WASL), and the expectation that all students will achieve at a high level.

In fact, we suggest that the findings at the elementary schools can and should be very instructive to the middle level schools as they attempt to adjust to a high standards environment. Many of the lessons learned from the elementary schools are directly applicable to the middle level schools. For example, in successful elementary schools teachers have recognized that the 4th grade WASL assessment is a reflection of the learning that has happened in grade K through 4, and not just a concern of the 4th grade teacher. Consequently, elementary teachers in high achieving schools are collaborating down through the grades, working to align the curriculum, teaching with a common language, and sharing successful teaching strategies and information on student strengths and weaknesses. In like manner, the 7th grade WASL assessment is not a "7th grade teacher concern," but rather is the direct responsibility of the 5th, 6th, and 7th grade teachers in a school system. Just as the elementary teachers worked collaboratively down the grade levels, so to must 7th grade teachers work collaboratively with 5th and 6th grade teachers to enhance student achievement. Of course, this is made difficult by several factors, including our grade structures where 5th and/or 6th grade teachers may be in different buildings. Nonetheless, the idea is the same—in a high standards environment a new approach to curriculum and instruction is necessary, and successful middle and junior high schools will recognize this fact and adjust accordingly.

> While there are certainly differences between the elementary and middle grade schools, the expectations of a high standards environment are much the same.

If middle or junior high schools have not already done so, they will greatly enhance their students' chances for success by learning from the experiences of elementary schools. The implications for the elementary schools mentioned above apply equally to the middle grade schools. In fact, the challenges at these schools may be even greater than at the elementary schools. The traditional professional environments of these schools generally involve more teacher isolation, less collaboration, and more curriculum diversity than at the elementary grades, suggesting that the needed philosophical shift will be more difficult to obtain. However, if student achievement is to reach the desired level, this will need to happen.

> If middle or junior high schools have not already done so, they will greatly enhance their students' chances for success by learning from the experiences of elementary schools.

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Appendix A   Letter to Principals

October 17, 2001

Dear

The Washington School Research Center at Seattle Pacific University is conducting a study on effective school practices in a high standards educational environment in Washington State. Over the next several months we will be sending four-person research teams to visit 15 high performing elementary schools around the state. Their purpose is to identify the characteristics of successful schools.

Researchers from the Washington School Research Center, OSPI, and representatives from various school districts across the state examined data on over 1100 elementary schools in Washington. They selected schools for study based on the socio-economic status of the students in the school and the overall success of the students on the WASL from 1999 through 2001. After careful review of these factors _____ school has emerged as a school that has either consistently improved its scores or scored consistently high on the WASL over these three years.

Using these criteria, your school has emerged as one of the top schools in the state and we would very much like to include your school in our research. This research would consist primarily of a one-day visit to your school during which you and your teachers would be interviewed about _____ success. There will be no expenses for your school associated with your participation, and we will be happy to compensate the school for a substitute for the day to make teachers available for the interviews.

We consider the work you are doing with students extremely important and effective. The results of this research will be made available to all educators in the state and will help further the progress of school reform. Please consider this as a recognition of the fine work you are doing at _____ and a chance to share your success with others.

You will be receiving a phone call in the next few days to discuss your willingness to participate in this study and to provide more details about the process. We look forward to talking with you about this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey T. Fouts
Executive Director

Appendix B   Principals' Questionnaire

Washington Just for the Kids
Effective Practices Study
Principal Questionnaire

As part of the Promising Practices study, we would like to ask that you respond to the following items. If you need more room than is provided to attach a separate piece of paper. We can pick up your responses during our visit to your school, and would be pleased to answer any questions you might have about the items. Please feel free to call us prior to the visit if it would be helpful. Your primary contact at the Washington School Research Center is Heather Robinson at (425) 744-1062.

Also included below is a short list of documents that we would like to review. If you could have those ready for us when we visit, it would be very helpful for the study.

Thank you for all of your assistance. We look forward to visiting with you.

1. Please list any external resources your school has received over the last 3 years

   <u>Source</u>   <u>Purpose</u>   <u>Amount</u>

2. How many teachers in your school? How many are new in the last three years?

   _____   _____

3. How long have you served as Principal at this school? _____

4. How many release days per year are provided for professional development activities? _____

5. Do you have a formal discipline program? If so, what is it called?
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____ _____

6. How many students do you have in your school? _____

7. How many computers do you have available for student use? _____

8. How much of the school day (in minutes) is devoted to math?
   _____

   How much to reading? _____
   How much to writing? _____
   How is this monitored?

   _____
   _____
   _____

9. Please list any before school, during school, after school enrichment, or co-curricular/extra curricular activities at your school.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

10. Please provide a list of all certificated teachers, identifying for each teacher the number of years <u>in the teaching profession</u> and the number of years <u>taught in your school</u>.

Teacher Name	# years in teaching	# of years in your school
_____		
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Please provide the following documents

Learning Improvement Plan
School Performance Reports

THANK YOU!

Appendix C   Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol

The protocols that follow include open-ended interview questions and a number of subject areas to keep in mind. If these areas are not addressed by the open-ended responses, even after general probes are used, some of the suggested questions might be helpful.

The purpose of probes in interviews is to enable the person being interviewed to be as informative as possible in their responses. They are neutral prompts that encourage additional information, but do not suggest specific answers. Some examples of probes are "How is that?" or "In what ways?" and so on.

The protocols below include some follow-up questions that might be helpful for obtaining further information when probes do not result in covering the areas. Since follow-up questions should touch on whatever the interviewee has already said, there is no best way of phrasing them. These are only suggestions.

I. Principal Interview

Introductory, open-ended questions

1. To what do you attribute your strong WASL success over the last three years? (This question will be sent prior to the interview)
2. As Principal, what role did you play in this process?

Specific areas for follow-up questions

The use of WASL or other assessment data
(How have you used WASL results at   School?)

Changes over the last 5 years
(How has your work as Principal changed from 3 years ago?)
(How is the school different now than 3 years ago?)

Nature of the curricula
(Which features of your curricula have been important?)

Teacher collaboration
(To what extent do teachers from different grades discuss learning goals and progress?)

Professional development
(Do you have a plan for how professional development is used at –   School?)

Teacher accountability
(Do teachers have a system for keeping track of student achievement?

School governance
(How has the governance system been helpful, or not helpful, in the success here?)

District office
(Has the central office been helpful in your efforts?)

Parental involvement
(How would you describe parental involvement at   School?)

Morale
(How would you describe the morale at   School?)

Final Question
Is there anything else you would like to add?

II. Teacher Interview

Introductory, open-ended questions

1. To what do you attribute your strong WASL success over the last three years?

2. How did you, individually or as a group, contribute to this success?

Specific areas for follow-up questions

Teacher views of students
(Do you think all the students here are capable of achieving the state standards?)

In-school assessments
(Do you think the assessments that you use have been helpful in the success here?)
(How do you use assessment data?)

Changes over the last 5 years
(How is your teaching different now than it was 3 years ago?)
(How is the school different now than 3 years ago?)

Nature of the curricula
(Which features of your curricula have been important?)
(How much of the school day - in minutes - is devoted to math, reading & writing?)

Teacher collaboration
(To what extent do teachers from different grades discuss learning goals and progress?)

Professional development
(Do you have a plan for how professional development is used at   School?)

Teacher accountability
(Do teachers have a system for keeping track of student achievement?

School governance
(How has the governance system at   been helpful, or not helpful, here?)

District office
(Has the central office been helpful in your efforts?)

Parental involvement
(How would you describe parental involvement at   School?)

Morale
(How would you describe the morale at   School?)

Final Question
Is there anything else you would like to add?

II. Central Office Instructional Personnel Interview

1. To what do you attribute the strong WASL success over the last three years at ____ School?

2. What role did the principal play in this process?

3. How did the central office contribute to this success?

4. How are resources allocated to the schools for achievement improvement?

5. Is there a formal or informal accountability system for teachers and principals in the district?

Final Question

Is there anything else you would like to add?