California Comprehensive Center
at WestEd

Raising All Boats:
Identifying and Profiling High-Performing California School Districts

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Acknowledgments

Executive Summary

This study is designed to increase understanding of the district's role in school improvement and factors contributing to the success of districts and their schools. American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, has identified high-performing districts in California to learn from their success and to share their practices with others. We have focused on selected district and school leaders' perspectives on the strategies they considered most influential in their success, with a particular emphasis on the interaction between these districts and their schools.

The study builds on previous work carried out by AIR as part of the California Comprehensive Center, in which we have identified and profiled high-performing schools, turnaround schools, districts performing well with students in special education, and a matched sample of lower and higher performing schools for the purpose of knowledge sharing through school visitations. Similar to our previous studies, we have defined "high performance" such that districts could be empirically identified based on clearly specified criteria. These criteria were informed by input provided by California policymakers and practitioners (i.e., representatives of the California Department of Education and the Curriculum and Instruction Steering Committee of the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association).

The districts identified in this study are "raising all boats." By this, we mean that virtually all schools and student subgroups are performing substantially better than statistically predicted during a four-year period compared to similar districts in California. This definition of high performance adds to previous definitions in that it takes into account not only overall performance but also performance of individual schools and subgroups of students.

To simplify the analyses, we included only unified school districts, which enroll more than 70 percent of California's public school students. After defining high performance and identifying 30 California unified districts that met the high-performing criteria, we selected six to feature in this study: Carmel, Coast, Glendale, Redondo Beach, San Marcos, and Temecula Valley Unified. These six districts were selected to maximize sample diversity in terms of district size, student demographics, region of the state, and urbanicity. In each of these six districts, we conducted interviews with a leader from the district office and three principals from a randomly selected elementary school, middle grades school, and high school to inquire as to the strategies perceived as most contributing to their success.

The main strategies identified by at least six respondents across three districts included:
1. A clear instructional vision and process
2. Support for struggling students
3. Strong district and school leadership
4. An emphasis on collaboration

These strategies largely align with what has been found in the literature on high-performing districts.

Respondents also were asked to identify their main challenges and solutions to the challenges. The identified challenges included:

- Budget cuts
- Meeting the academic needs of all students
- Staff resistance to change
- Relationship with the teachers' union

Although respondents across districts identified similar strategies, they also approached the road to high performance in different ways, depending on their district size, their student population, and their reform history. Thus, we do not conclude from these findings a clear "one size fits all" recipe for district and school success. These findings suggest that the pursuit of excellence may need to be tailored, at least somewhat, to each unique situation. This seems to suggest the advantage of coupling clear goals, methods for measuring progress, and accountability with local flexibility in regard to goal realization.

At the same time, we believe that other districts can learn from the common elements and specific examples summarized in this report. As an example, one respondent reported that the district had already engaged in knowledge sharing by training other districts in the use of an instructional framework. The California Department of Education and County Offices of Education may wish to consider serving as brokers of this expertise by setting up structures for sharing these strategies with other districts and schools across the state. District and school leaders can be important resources in assisting other districts facing the important task of improving learning for all students.

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Introduction

To better understand the district's role in school improvement and factors contributing to the success of districts and their schools, American Institutes for Research (AIR), as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, conducted this study to identify high-performing districts in California, to learn from their success, and to share their practices with others. The study focused on selected district and school leaders' perspectives on the strategies they considered most influential in their success, with a particular emphasis on the interaction between these districts and their schools.

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Study Questions

This study answers two main questions:
1. How might high performance be usefully defined and measured in California school districts?
2. What are district and school leader perceptions of effective strategies in a sample of high-performing districts?

To simplify the analyses, we included only unified school districts, which enroll more than 70 percent of California's public school students. In the future, this same approach could be applied to elementary and high school districts.

Study Background

Districts play an important role in improving schools and ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education. With the federal No Child Left Behind Act and the increased emphasis on measuring school and district performance, the role of the school district in instructional improvement was brought to light. While school districts used to function mainly as administrative entities focusing on hiring, budgeting, and operations, they are now expected to serve more as instructional change agents, emphasizing school and district improvement (Sykes, O'Day, & Ford, 2009). However, this change has not been easy for many districts. This study attempts to identify, name, and describe districts that appear to have been especially successful in this endeavor.

Select Literature on High-Performing Districts

Researchers and policymakers have used various methods to identify high-performing districts (see, for example, Zavadsky, 2009, for a description of five districts that have won the Broad Prize for Urban Education). Often, these analyses are related to improved student achievement on standardized tests (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; WestEd, 2002). Other student level indicators such as attendance, graduation, and promotion rates also have been used (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2005).

High-performing districts also have been identified on the basis of actual achievement, such as, substantially outperforming predicted test scores using demographically controlled estimation models (Bowers, 2008; Bowers, 2010). Other criteria to ensure various populations are considered include focusing on districts that are high performing and serve predominantly low income students (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001), selecting districts that have both high-performing elementary and secondary schools (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, Hogan, Koschoreck, & Smith, 2000), or choosing districts in which the achievement gap is closing across grade levels and race/ethnicity (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Sykes, O'Day, and Ford (2009) refer to three spheres of district activity to support systemwide instructional effectiveness: the political, administrative, and professional spheres.
1. At the *political level*, district administrators need to secure buy-in of internal and external stakeholders (e.g., staff, parents, the school board) around a vision focusing on instructional improvement as well as manage fiscal resources in support of this vision.
2. At the *administrative level,* they need to align policies and practices with the instructional vision in terms of district and school leadership; curriculum, instruction, and assessment; data systems and achievement monitoring; support systems for students; and human resources, including hiring, retention, and evaluation of staff.
3. At the *professional level*, districts must build a collaborative culture and professionalism through teacher and leadership professional learning and capacity building in support of the instructional vision.

Prior research has found that high-performing districts rely on specific policies, programs, and practices designed to promote high achievement. These districts are said to focus on a limited number of goals to prevent overload and distractions (Bowers, 2008; Crotti, Mattson Almanzan, Flynn, Haas, & Tucker, 2012; Dailey, Fleischman, Gil, Holtzman, O'Day, & Vosmer,

2005). Human resource policies have been shown to play an important role in providing a stable workforce and recruiting and retaining the best candidates (Bowers, 2008; Zavadsky, 2009).

Another characteristic cited for high-achieving organizations is a commitment to targeted, effective staff development that fosters desirable classroom change (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Dailey et al., 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Skrla et al., 2000; Thompson, Sykes, & Skrla, 2008). Beyond professional development, high-performing districts have been found to promote teamwork and a professional community (Anderson, 2003). These efforts may include collegial workgroups (e.g., grade-level teams, school improvement teams), sharing of expertise, networking of teachers and principals across schools, and cross-role leadership and school improvement teams at school and district levels (Anderson, 2003).

In addition, high-performing districts have been characterized by their data systems and monitoring of student achievement (Anderson, 2003). These school districts also may use organizationwide systems (Bowers, 2008; Skrla et al., 2000) or formal accountability practices (Thompson et al., 2008) to help monitor achievement.

District and School Selection Methodology

Similar to Bowers (2008; 2010), we selected high-performing districts for this study based primarily on actual achievement substantially exceeding predicted test scores using demographically controlled estimation models. However, recognizing that strong performance for the majority of students alone can mask relatively poor performance for some schools and some groups of students, we also include "raising all boats" as a selection criterion. Thus, we identify districts that were high performing overall as well as for the vast majority of their schools and subpopulations. We believe this approach provides stronger evidence of a unique, far-reaching district contribution. This study is particularly interested in the nature of district and school interactions at sites showing unusual success at "raising all boats."

District Achievement Index

Toward this end, we first developed a district achievement index (DAI) that represents the difference between actual academic performance and what is statistically predicted based on the characteristics and composition of the students enrolled.[1] The DAI is a single number, ranging from -2 to 2, that measures the difference between a district's actual and predicted performance on the California Standards Tests (CSTs) in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics and on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in mathematics during four school years (2007–08 through 2010–11).[2] DAIs were calculated for all students in the

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[1] We excluded adult education schools, juvenile court schools, county schools, and direct funded charter schools from the analyses to eliminate test results not affiliated with the district.
[2] The range of -2 to 2 is in terms of standard deviations from the mean. We estimated regressions separately for mathematics and ELA, using grade-level data weighted by the number of students with test scores in the grade. The average standardized mean scale CST and CAHSEE scores were the dependent variables. The independent variables were district, grade-level and school year indicators, and the grade-level test-taker characteristics as control variables. The primary coefficients of interest are those on the district indicators, otherwise known as district fixed-effects, which comprise the DAI. To aid in interpretation, we centered our DAI around zero by

district and for the following student subgroups: African Americans, Asians, English learners, Hispanics, white students, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and students in special education.

An index greater than zero indicates that a district performed better than statistically predicted, and an index that is less than zero indicates performance that is worse than predicted. Statistically predicted performance is based on the achievement of similar districts across the state; that is, those serving comparable percentages of students by subgroup. These subgroups include African Americans, Asians, English learners, Hispanics, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders, students who identify with two or more races, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and students in special education. To ensure that these analyses were as comparable as possible, we limited them to unified school districts (i.e., districts serving grades K–12, which enroll more than 70 percent of California's public school students).

Second, to identify districts "raising all boats," we developed an additional criterion for district selection. This was a school achievement index (SAI), which is analogous to the DAI except calculated for each school in the district. As mentioned, these criteria were reviewed and refined through interactions with members of CDE, CISC, and WestEd.

High-Performing District Criteria

Based on their average DAI in mathematics and ELA throughout the four years, we ranked all unified districts in the state. In selecting a sample for further study, we considered only districts with average DAIs in the top 50 statewide, which represent 16 percent (or 50 out of 307) of the districts in our analysis (see Exhibit 1). Our decision to select from the top 50 districts was driven by a desire to limit our sample to top performers and, at the same time, to be sufficiently broad to allow diversity in terms of district size and student demographics. In addition, districts had to pass the following school-level and subgroup-level criteria to be considered:

1. Eighty percent (80 percent) or more of the students in the district were in schools performing better than predicted for both ELA and mathematics (based on their SAI).
2. At least 97 percent of students in the district were in schools performing in the top three quarters (75 percent) of all schools in unified districts for both ELA and mathematics (based on their SAI).
3. Seventy-five percent (75 percent) or more of student subgroups in the district were performing better than predicted (based on the subgroup DAI).
4. All student subgroups (100 percent) were performing in the top three quarters (75 percent) of all districts in either ELA or mathematics (based on the subgroup DAI).

We chose these cut points based on input from the advisors listed previously and on sensitivity analyses we conducted related to alternative cut points. Our goal was to produce a sample of districts that was relatively limited in number but also sufficiently diverse to be of policy interest.

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subtracting the mean of the district fixed effects from each district's regression coefficient. Hence, a zero DAI is interpreted as the effect for the average district holding student characteristics constant.

As shown in Exhibit 1, 30 out of 307 unified districts statewide (or 10 percent) met all criteria and had DAIs in the top 50 (for a list of all 30 districts, see Appendix A). Note that we divided Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) into its eight local districts for the purposes of this study. Because LAUSD is so much larger than any other district in the state, we considered it more useful and interesting to examine the performance of each of its subdistricts individually.

Exhibit 1. Number and Percentage of California Unified Districts That Met the High-Performing Criteria

	N	%
Total number of unified districts*	307	100%
Districts with DAIs greater than zero in both ELA and mathematics	126	41%
Districts Eligible to Meet High-Performing Criteria	**126**	**100%**
Met Criterion 1 only	84	67%
Met Criteria 1 and 2	76	60%
Met Criteria 1, 2, and 3	40	32%
Met Criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4	38	29%
Met All Prior Criteria and in Top 50 DAI** (of districts eligible to meet high-performing criteria: 126 districts)	**30**	**24%**
Met All Prior Criteria and in Top 50 DAI (of all unified districts: 307 districts)	**30**	**10%**

*Includes all unified districts (with LAUSD broken into eight local districts) that tested 95 percent or more of their students in both ELA and mathematics across the 2007–08 through 2010–11 school years. Thirty-eight districts did not meet this requirement and were excluded from analysis.

**Eight districts met all of the high-performing criteria but did not rank among the 50 districts with the highest average ELA and mathematics DAI.

Only two fifths of all districts (41 percent) performed higher than statistically predicted with DAIs in both ELA and mathematics greater than zero. After identifying overall district high performance, we applied criteria to identify districts with a substantial majority of high-performing schools (Criteria 1 and 2) and subgroups (Criteria 3 and 4). As shown, 60 percent of eligible districts met both Criteria 1 and 2, and less than one third (29 percent) of eligible districts met all four criteria. Within the top 50 districts with the highest DAI, only 30 districts (24 percent of all eligible districts) met all four criteria. Thus, eight districts met all four criteria but did not perform in the top 50 overall.

Selection of District Sample

From the 30 districts that met all criteria and had DAIs in the top 50, we selected seven districts for further study based on our desire to investigate districts of varying sizes, numbers of schools, percentages of students in poverty, and geographic and urbanicity diversity. Within each of these seven districts, we randomly selected one elementary school, one middle grades school, and one high school for participation in the study.

With the assistance of CDE and CISC staff, we contacted the selected districts to recruit them for the study. Of the initial seven districts, one declined to participate. In another district, one of the selected schools was replaced due to a new principal. The final sample included six districts and 18 schools. These districts are: Carmel, Coast, Glendale, Redondo Beach, San Marcos, and Temecula Valley Unified.

Exhibit 2 illustrates how our sample of six districts (represented by triangles) performed in relation to other high-performing districts that met all criteria (represented by crosses), other high-performing districts that did not meet the criteria (represented by hollowed circles), and low-performing districts that did not meet the criteria (represented by solid circles). The high-performing districts that did not meet the criteria, shown in the upper right quadrant, demonstrate that, although many unified districts in California are performing higher than predicted, these districts also have substantial numbers of students and/or subgroups in relatively poor-performing schools.

Exhibit 2. Distribution of DAI in ELA and Mathematics for California Unified Districts During 2007–08 Through 2010–11
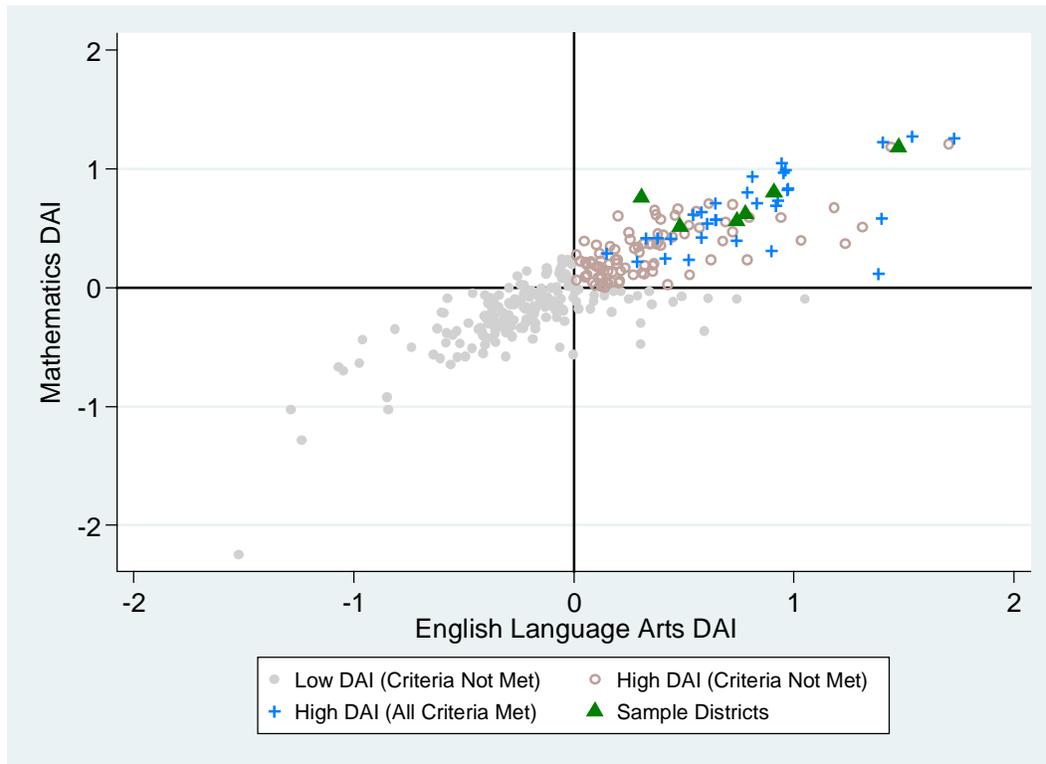
NOTES: Low DAI is defined as districts with DAIs equal to or below zero in either ELA or mathematics.
High DAI is defined as districts with DAIs greater than zero in both ELA and mathematics.

As shown, the highest performing districts (in the upper right corner of the exhibit) were not necessarily selected for our sample. Instead, we sought a final sample of districts that was as representative as possible of the wide range of unified districts in California in terms of size, region, urbanicity, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and the percentage of English learners.

Further performance differences between districts with high DAIs versus districts with low DAIs and between districts that met the high-performing criteria versus districts that did not meet the criteria are summarized in Exhibits 3 and 4. Exhibit 3 shows that the average DAI gets bigger for districts identified as high performing and for the subset of districts meeting all the high-performing criteria. Exhibit 4 also shows that there are large performance gaps between districts that met our criteria and those that did not.

Exhibit 3. District Achievement Index Data for California Unified Districts

	Number of Districts	Overall DAI		
		Avg ELA/Math	ELA	Math
Low DAI (criteria not met)	181	-0.20	-0.24	-0.16
High DAI (criteria not met)	96	0.30	0.25	0.35
High DAI (all criteria met)	30	0.74	0.66	0.82
Unified Districts in Sample	6			
Carmel		1.33	1.18	1.48
Coast		0.53	0.76	0.31
Glendale		0.70	0.62	0.78
Redondo Beach		0.65	0.56	0.74
San Marcos		0.86	0.80	0.91
Temecula Valley		0.50	0.51	0.48

NOTES: Data for district groups are weighted averages.
Low DAI is defined as districts with DAIs equal to or below zero in either ELA or mathematics.
High DAI is defined as districts with DAIs greater than zero in both ELA and mathematics.

Exhibit 4. High-Performing Criteria Data for California Unified Districts

	Number of Districts (n = 307)	Criteria 1 >= 80% students in schools performing better than predicted		Criteria 2 >= 97% students in schools performing in the top 75% of all schools		Criteria 3 >= 75% of subgroups are performing better than predicted		Criteria 4 100% of subgroups are in the top 75% of all districts	
		ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
Low DAI (criteria not met)	181	32%	38%	68%	76%	28%	33%	63%	67%
High DAI (criteria not met)	96	70%	74%	90%	93%	66%	71%	92%	94%
High DAI (all criteria met)	30	97%	98%	99%	100%	97%	94%	100%	100%
Unified Districts in Sample	6								
Carmel		99%	100%	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Coast		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	75%	100%	100%
Glendale		81%	97%	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Redondo Beach		99%	100%	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
San Marcos		99%	99%	99%	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Temecula Valley		99%	100%	99%	100%	86%	86%	100%	100%

NOTES: Data for district groups are weighted averages.
Low DAI is defined as districts with DAIs equal to or below zero in either ELA or mathematics.
High DAI is defined as districts with DAIs greater than zero in both ELA and mathematics.

Sampled District Demographics

By design, as shown in Exhibit 5, half of the six selected districts (Glendale, San Marcos, and Temecula Valley) had an enrollment above the state average for unified districts (13,925 students). They also had a total number of schools above or equal to the state average for unified districts (19 schools). In addition, half of the districts (Coast, Glendale, and San Marcos) had a percentage of English learners above the state average of 24 percent. The same districts also had 45 percent or more of their students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, although only one district (Coast) had a percentage higher than the state average of 60 percent. Selected districts were located in the central (two districts) and southern (four districts) regions of the state, as well as in cities (three districts), suburbs (two districts), and rural (one district) areas. Overall, the sample for this study is fairly representative of unified districts statewide but somewhat lower than average in terms of the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

Exhibit 5. Demographic Overview of Selected Unified Districts, 2010–11

Unified District	County	Region	Urbanicity	Enrollment	Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	Hispanic or Latino	African American	Asian	White	English Learners
Carmel	Monterey	Central	Suburb	2,239	21%	25%	1%	3%	64%	15%
Coast	San Luis Obispo	Central	Rural	763	62%	51%	0%	2%	42%	34%
Glendale	Los Angeles	South	City	26,327	45%	25%	1%	12%	55%	30%
Redondo Beach	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	8,397	21%	25%	6%	10%	52%	8%
San Marcos	San Diego	South	City	18,612	45%	50%	3%	5%	39%	25%
Temecula Valley	Riverside	South	City	30,225	18%	31%	4%	4%	48%	6%
Weighted Averages for Unified Districts in California				**13,925**	**60%**	**52%**	**8%**	**8%**	**25%**	**24%**

NOTE: Data are representative of schools in each district included in the analyses, as specified in the methodology section.

Data Collection and Analysis

We interviewed the six district leaders and 18 randomly selected school leaders to obtain information about the strategies they believed had made their district and schools successful. During a one-hour phone interview, we discussed the main policies, programs, and practices the district and school leaders associated with their districts' and schools' high performance. We focused on the relationship between the district and schools and solicited input from both district and school leaders regarding this relationship and the main success strategies to gauge the agreement across the four respondents within each district.

To guide the discussion, we organized an interview protocol relating to strategies identified in the literature (e.g., cohesive instructional vision, district support for schools, strong leadership and staff, teacher and school collaboration, and use of data to monitor performance). However, discussion was not limited to these strategies because respondents were asked to outline the three main contributing factors to their districts' and schools' high performance without specifically mentioning the strategies from the literature. After the interviews had been transcribed, we developed a coding scheme based on themes from the literature and what we heard from the interviews. We then coded the data after ensuring consistency in interpretation across coders through coding and discussion of a common set of interview data. We analyzed

the data across themes and developed an "analysis rule" that at least six of the 24 respondents (or 25 percent) across at least three of the six districts had to report on a theme for the theme to be included.

Limitations of the Study

It should be noted that this study focused on district and school leaders' perceptions of success. Thus, it is a limited perspective, and the findings should be interpreted with this in mind. This type of study would be strengthened by obtaining a broader range of perspectives to include— teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders—and by conducting site visits to the districts and schools to observe practice. Although we have included these broader data collection activities in prior studies we have conducted of this type, as mentioned at the onset of this paper, the broader activities were not possible within the scope of the current effort. However, even with a broader range of perspectives, this type of study is limited by its reliance on perceptions of what has produced the strong, observed results. No causal relationship between these perceptions and results can be inferred.

Reported Strategies Across Districts

As noted, the 24 interview respondents (six district administrators and 18 principals) were asked to identify and discuss the three main contributing factors to their districts' and schools' high performance without interviewers mentioning the strategies identified in the literature. This section focuses mainly on districtwide strategies. When school-level strategies are included, this is noted.

For a strategy to be considered "cross-cutting" for the purposes of this report, at least two of the four respondents (50 percent) in each district across at least three of the six districts (50 percent) had to identify it. The strategies meeting these criteria included:

1. A clear instructional vision and process (six districts)
2. Support for struggling students (four districts)
3. Strong district and school leadership (three districts)
4. An emphasis on collaboration (three districts)

A Clear Instructional Vision and Process

All six districts reported having a clear vision and process focused on instructional improvement. In three of the districts (Glendale, San Marcos, and Temecula Valley), this vision and process centered on instructional frameworks such as Essential Elements of Instruction and Focus of Results. Other common elements across districts included goal setting (Carmel, Glendale, Redondo Beach, and San Marcos), a focus on professional development in support of the district's vision (Coast, Glendale, San Marcos, and Temecula Valley), and standards- or research-based practices (all districts).

Use of Instructional Frameworks

Both San Marcos and Temecula Valley use the Essential Elements of Instruction framework (called Essential Components of Instruction in Temecula Valley). The framework is based on

Madeline Hunter's research at the University of California, Los Angeles, on effective instruction, which became popular in the 1970s and 1980s. The framework includes these elements: Learning objective (the teacher sets the objective at an appropriate level); Anticipatory set (the teacher focuses students for the lesson); Teaching to the objective (the teacher plans activities, questions, and information to teach the desired concepts and skills required of students to perform the objective); Monitor and adjust (the teacher checks for student understanding and adjusts teaching as needed); Motivation (the teacher uses strategies to increase students' effort and attention throughout the lesson); Retention (the teacher uses strategies to promote long- and short- term memory of the content); Active participation (the teacher uses strategies to mentally engage students with the content being taught); and Closure (the teacher has students summarize their learning).[3]

San Marcos Unified. The district respondents in San Marcos, Superintendent Dr. Kevin Holt and Assistant Superintendent Gina Bishop,[4] described using the Essential Elements of Instruction (EEI) framework for the past 20 years, with a focus on effective instructional strategies, professional development, district and school administrator walkthroughs and feedback, and monthly principal and vice principal meetings as contributing to student performance. In addition, in the past five years, the district has focused on standards-based instruction. District administrators, in collaboration with teachers, identified essential standards and developed a pacing guide and benchmark tests that created a common expectation in the district. Interventions have been put in place for struggling learners who have been identified through the use of the results on benchmark tests. One of the district administrators explained the dual focus on standards and effective instructional strategies: "if you teach them the right things but don't deliver it in an effective way, then the students won't retain the information or understand it well enough to perform…You have to have both pieces in place."

Principals set three school goals (e.g., increase student achievement, including all subgroups; increase the use of effective instructional strategies; cultivate a culture of collaboration) and meet with district administrators three times during the year to discuss progress.

Furthermore, the district administrators noted that San Marcos has a strong commitment to professional development. For example, initially the district trained the principals in EEI, who in turn trained teachers. Now, the district has created a cadre of EEI teacher leaders who support EEI implementation and provide professional development at the sites. All teachers and administrators new to the district receive 30 hours of professional development in EEI over two years. One of the principal respondents noted that the district is being recognized for its implementation of EEI and is training other districts in the framework. Another principal described EEI as "a common language" that "keeps us focused."

Temecula Valley Unified. The Superintendent of Temecula Valley Unified, Timothy Ritter, also described using the Essential Components of Instruction framework during the past five years. He noted that the district focuses on four instructional strategies:

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[3] For more information about these elements, see:
http://www.hope.edu/academic/education/wessman/2block/unit4/hunter2.htm
[4] Note that, in two districts, two district administrators participated in the district interview at the same time.

1. Developing and teaching to a specific objective and communicating that objective to students
2. Using strategies that engage all students in learning throughout the lesson
3. Monitoring student learning and adjusting lessons appropriately
4. Providing immediate and descriptive feedback to students

Mr. Ritter explained that all teachers and administrators have been trained on these strategies through the use of Title II funds. All teachers are expected to use these strategies with fidelity, and all classroom observations and evaluations use the strategies as a primary focus. Four district administrators visit sites two days a week to meet with principals, observe classrooms, look for the four behaviors, and provide feedback.

In addition, teams of principals meet monthly to work on one of the four components (e.g., student engagement). The focus at each school is chosen based on observational data as well as input from teacher survey data. Teachers also conduct peer observations at their own sites, focusing on one component at a time, according to the district administrator.

One of the principals furthermore described the district's focus on standards. The district identified key ELA and mathematics standards, developed summative assessments, and provided sample lessons to grade-level teams. "Everybody's focused on the same thing…a singular focus on best practices, on the most essential standards; it just leads to high achievement."

Another principal described the district's approach as "a common language with common training and expectations…It's had a great impact." The principal explained that, in a big district like Temecula Valley (with 27 schools), you need a common language and philosophy about instructional practice that create clear expectations for new teachers, help get veteran teachers onboard, and make students benefit from the same instructional practices from classroom to classroom.

Glendale Unified. The superintendent, Dr. Richard Sheehan, in Glendale Unified described the Focus on Results framework as based on "continuity and the use of 'like-vocabulary' throughout the district." Focus on Results is a process developed by an external company that helps to identify the unique needs of a district and its schools as opposed to promoting a "one size fits all" approach, according to the company's website.[5] The superintendent noted that Glendale has been using Focus on Results process for eight years.

Each of the 30 schools in the district has an instructional leadership team, consisting of the principal, vice principal, teacher specialists, and teacher representatives. School team members identify their instructional focus (e.g., writing, reading comprehension, critical thinking) and the staff development needed to realize it. They also identify areas in which they are not successful and three strategies to address the areas through the use of SMARTE goals (specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic, timely, touching every student). A central team also identifies districtwide challenges (e.g., a focus on English learners has been a priority for the

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[5] For more information about Focus on Results, see: http://www.focusonresults.net/

past five years). Quarterly Focus on Results meetings, which include all district and school team members, are used to share research and discuss issues to be brought back to sites.

Respondents also reported using a multitiered staff development approach. The district has a cadre of internal presenters (administrators, teacher specialists, and teachers), who train the instructional leadership teams, who then in turn train their school staff. This is paid for with Title I funds.

The Glendale superintendent described how the Focus on Results process was implemented over time in three cohorts of schools, one cohort at a time. First, the process was implemented with the lower performing schools in the district, next the middle performers, and last the high-performing schools. This latter set of schools was described as initially resistant, but the superintendent went on to say that "by now they have taken it [on] and done outstanding work."

Ten district staff each work with trios of principals. They hold monthly principal meetings and do walkthroughs with the school leadership team twice a year to identify best practices and challenges. As one of the Glendale principals noted, "I really feel as though Focus on Results has been key…I think the impact has been unbelievably positive and very successful." (For more information about Glendale Unified, see the district profile in Appendix B.)

Other Clear Vision Approaches

The remaining three districts (Carmel, Coast, and Redondo Beach Unified) cited different instructional visions and processes, but all included a focus on standards and research-based practices. The descriptions of their approaches to vision are somewhat less detailed than those for the three districts described previously. However, for a more comprehensive description of two of these districts (Coast and Redondo Beach), see the profiles presented in Appendix B.

Carmel Unified has used a strategic planning process since 2005, with involvement of principals through an administrative council that meets twice a month. According to Superintendent Marvin Biasotti and Director of Curriculum and Instruction Edmund Gross, the district used to have a district plan, with input from a 30 member stakeholder planning team that caused the district to direct resources toward initiatives that were tangential to the mission. Now, the district has three overarching goals that have not changed during the past seven years: increase student achievement, provide superior facilities and ensure that all schools are safe and nurturing, and increase efficiency of district support systems. The objectives and supporting activities focused on student learning outcomes and support systems may change, but the overall goals do not change. The superintendent noted that the plan is reviewed and revised each year, but "it changes in nuance rather than wholesale shift to the next fad." The school board adopts the plan every year, and the superintendent goes to each of the six schools in the district to present and discuss the plan with staff.

The superintendent also described a district focus on standards and student assessment results, which in turn has informed best instructional practices. The respondent principals also focused on goal setting and standards, with one principal explaining that "the goal setting has caused us to be more strategic and intentional." Another principal stated, "we have been very strategic in

what we have asked of teachers; not piling a lot on their plate but just picking a few things to focus on."

Coast Unified Superintendent Chris Adams reported implementing literacy strategies (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) during the past four years, in particular due to an increase in the Hispanic community (the district currently has about 50 percent Hispanic students). All teachers were trained in literacy strategies during a summer institute, in which teachers also developed lesson plans. The teachers received professional development stipends, which were paid by general funds. The professional development was followed up with five days of coaching, helping teachers to implement literacy strategies in every class.

The district also has focused on identifying the key standards. The superintendent described how teachers were heavily involved in this process: "We turned it back to the teachers and said, 'you own it. It's your curriculum. You're the expert. You're going to define the standards.'" Standards were kept if they were tested on the California Standards Test or the California High School Exit Exam and if they were pivotal for moving to the next grade or subject. Career technical education standards were included as well.

The principal respondents appeared to agree with the main district strategies reported by the superintendent. One principal noted that "the kids know from grade to grade what the [teacher] expectations are…and that they are uniform." Another principal described the district's focus as "a common language and consistency in the classroom." The third principal we interviewed said that, with the common expectations, the key instructional standards, and associated benchmark assessments, "we're all focused on the same thing." (For more information about Coast Unified, see the district profile in Appendix B.)

Redondo Beach Unified. The focus in the district changed in 2006–07 with a new superintendent, who had a different vision for students, focusing on the whole child, high expectations through monitoring of goals, and implementation of research-based strategies and programs, according to the Assistant Superintendent Dr. Annette Alpern. At this time, the district also implemented standards-based report cards, which changed instruction and assessment practices to focus on standard and substandard growth and performance.

One of the principals described an annual strategic planning process with stakeholder groups. This included teachers, administrators, parents, board members, community members, and city officials as well as a facilitator. In the planning process, they identified strengths and weaknesses and then developed goals and action plans for how to achieve the goals. These goals focus on academics as well as school culture and climate in support of the whole-child vision.

One of the principals reported a similar goal-setting process takes place at the school level. Another principal described the districtwide vision of the whole child as not being just about academics but also other areas, such as physical education, nutrition, vocal and instrumental music, and gardening programs. (For more information about Redondo Beach Unified, see the district profile in Appendix B.)

Note that, in the next three sections, we name the districts that reported the cross-cutting strategies in the beginning of each section. However, subsequently within each section, we report more detailed strategies across districts without mentioning district names in most cases.

Support for Struggling Students

A strategy cited across four districts (Carmel, Coast, Glendale, and Temecula Valley) was a focus on and support for struggling students. As one district administrator reported, "It took some time to realize…but that effort [support programs for students] has greatly reduced the number of students who are not proficient in this district." Response to Intervention (RTI), early intervention, extended learning time, targeted instruction, transitioning support, and programming specifically for English learners were supports mentioned by respondents. While some of these strategies were discussed by district respondents, more principals reported supports for struggling students at the school level as a contributing factor to their success. In addition, respondents across all six districts provided examples of support for struggling students; thus, responses from all of the sample districts are included in this section.

Six respondents across four districts reported using RTI or some other form of early intervention system to identify struggling students. RTI is a multilevel prevention system that identifies and provides support for struggling students.[6] As one high school principal described, "we have a goal of no kid…moving through their high school career without…having opportunities, having supports…by name, by need." Four respondents (from different districts) reported using RTI to provide resources before students are failing. RTI was described by two respondents as bringing together various support programs for students and promoting targeted systemic efforts to support students.

Five respondents described regular team meetings to identify students to receive interventions. These team meetings usually include teachers, reading and resource specialists, and counselors. During the meetings, the team reportedly reviews data to identify struggling students, assess student progress, and ensure that students are receiving appropriate levels of intervention. Teachers suggest to the RTI team students who may benefit from services. Across districts, respondents reported that professional development relating to RTI consisted of either attendance at an outside conference, internal professional development provided by the principal, or the use of outside experts to provide feedback to school staff about RTI implementation.

While RTI can provide a systemic method to identify struggling students, a common approach reported across five districts to support struggling students was to provide additional instructional time. Respondents indicated that this additional time occurred during the day or after school and that it might be associated with supports that were part of RTI, afterschool

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[6] RTI is a multilevel prevention system that includes three levels of intensity or prevention. The primary prevention level includes high-quality core instruction. The secondary level includes evidence-based intervention(s) of moderate intensity. The tertiary prevention level includes individualized intervention(s) of increased intensity for students who show minimal response to secondary prevention. For more information about RTI, see: http://www.rti4success.org/

tutoring, or a program in which local volunteers read to elementary children with low-literacy skills.

At the secondary level, the additional instructional time was described as an elective class for providing support in a specific subject area (e.g., an algebra intervention support class) or part of an elective class or study hall time in which students receive additional assistance. Respondents reported using programs such as Fast ForWord[7] (a program to build reading and language skills) and I Pass[8] (a program that provides additional instruction in mathematics for students at the secondary level) during the additional instruction time.

Although at the secondary level principals reported that additional instructional minutes could occur through the strategic use of elective courses, at the elementary level nine respondents described the use of targeted instruction. As described by respondents, targeted instruction occurred when a reading, speech, or teacher specialist either would work with students in small groups in the classroom or would pull students from class to work with them. In one district, targeted instruction occurred for about 30 minutes a day during a set daily reading time for which students were matched by literacy level.

Helping students transition between school levels was also a strategy mentioned by three principals and one district administrator. At the middle school level, the transition support included thoughtful assignment of teachers. In one school, students had the same teacher for English and history and the same teacher for mathematics and science. As the principal reported, this scheduling "gave one teacher the ability to get to know [the students] a little bit better," and "it gave our students the ability to get settled into the middle school schedule."

Another middle school used a "core" group, where the English, history, and science teachers all have a core group of students. Both of these teacher assignments were created with the intention of fostering greater relationships and continuity between teachers and students. For transition to high school, respondents reported using the Link Crew[9] program, a transition program for high school freshman that includes a peer mentoring component.

Respondents from all districts also described different supports provided specifically for English learner students. These supports included having a special curriculum and smaller classes for English learners, new materials, targeted tutoring, the use of an English learner coordinator to work with teachers, and the integration of high-level English learners into regular English classes while still providing English learner support.

Strong District and School Leadership

Strong district and school leadership was reported by respondents in three districts (Glendale, Redondo Beach, and San Marcos) as a main source of their success. In addition, respondents from the other three districts in our sample also described aspects of leadership as contributing

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[7] For more information about this program, see: http://www.scilearn.com/Fast_ForWord
[8] For more information about this program, see: http://www.ilearn.com/index.html
[9] For more information about this program, see: http://www.boomerangproject.com/high-school-transition

to their high performance. In this section, we summarize these findings in four areas: district leadership, flexible leadership, principal leadership, and teacher leadership.

The tenure of the superintendents across the six districts was quite stable, with an average of 5.3 years in their current positions. One superintendent had been in his position for 12 years, and two superintendents reported two years on the job. However, even among these two-year superintendents, one had been with the district 11 years, and the other noted that he was only the fourth superintendent in the district during the past 30 years. In addition, respondents from three districts also reported stable and supportive school boards.

Apart from leadership stability, sixteen respondents across five districts reported strong district leadership, and the most common words they used to describe the leadership apart from "strong," were "supportive," "accessible," "visible," and "hands-on." One principal noted, "There is this overarching feeling of support. I never feel like it's a gotcha. I never feel like you're going to be embarrassed or ridiculed or yelled at. I've seen that in some districts. It's teamwork. The assistant sups recognize that they are support people…And then in turn that's how we treat people that work for us."

Respondents also described their superintendents as instructional leaders who have clear visions and high expectations, spend time at school sites, interact with staff, and who provide professional development. One principal noted, "There's something very powerful when you have a superintendent who spends an entire day emphasizing how committed he is to that goal and to that vision and doesn't just sit in the back and say he's committed, but actually presents and leads you through activities, it speaks volumes." Another principal in a different district described the superintendent and his impact this way: "He's actively involved (and) visits school sites on a regular basis. He listens to our input on certain decision making. I think it's been a big factor in our success."

Another aspect of leadership noted by ten respondents (in five districts) was the autonomy and flexibility that districts afforded schools within the context of clear goals coupled with district accountability. The quotes below from principals in three of the sampled districts illustrate this leadership model:

> [The Focus on Results process is] a skeleton to hang something on but it's not dictated what the muscle hanging on the bone has to be. That has to come from your data and from your reflection and from your awareness of where you are as a staff in terms of strengths and weaknesses instructionally.

> We had the basic backbone of what RTI would look like but I think one of the things that they did that was good was they always let each school determine the exact structure for things. They certainly had input, but they allowed for autonomy because each school has its own culture and its own things that will work and things that won't work.

> We have a lot of autonomy. We have a lot of freedom but we also have a lot of conversations… It comes down to communication and showing results.

Nine respondents (five district leaders and four principals) across five districts also reported strong school-level leadership characterized by principals as instructional leaders as well as strong collaborative relationships with the district and other schools. Both district- and school-level respondents reported high expectations for principals. They indicated that they have to be able to implement the district vision, contribute to district goal setting, set and implement goals at their sites, train teachers and staff, regularly monitor instruction, and provide feedback to teachers.

Districts, in turn, provide support through regular meetings, professional development, and opportunities to collaborate across sites. Respondents from two of the larger districts described working within cohorts of schools. This enables them to observe lessons at different sites, debrief about the observations, and provide feedback to teachers. These activities are designed to ensure consistency across the district.

In one of these districts, administrators work with trios of principals. One principal described the impact of this process: "We develop some strong friendships as a part of that so professionally and interpersonally there's that level of support …I've worked at the elementary and secondary level…and at the secondary level you will have five, seven members of an administrative team. At the elementary level it is not uncommon to have just one and so there could be no one else to talk to and problem solve. And so at the elementary level in particular, these trios have been very helpful."

Finally, strong teacher leadership was noted by six respondents in four districts. They described teachers serving on district and school teams to assist in goal setting, identifying key instructional standards, developing assessments, and providing professional development. One principal described a key benefit of this process, "People aren't blindsided by stuff because they've participated in creating it."

Another district respondent reported teacher leaders who are in charge of collaboration time at their sites and train other teachers in the district's instructional framework. This district administrator noted that, "the teacher leadership piece is huge in terms of building leadership and collaboration capacity…At each school we have leadership teams that meet with the principals and are part of the goal setting at the schools and working with their colleagues during collaboration time…and then also the EEI [Elements of Effective Instruction] teacher leaders because that has been a real key to our success."

An Emphasis on Collaboration

Respondents from three districts (Carmel, San Marcos, and Temecula Valley) referred to an emphasis on districtwide collaboration, with a particular focus on professional learning communities (PLCs) as one of the main factors contributing to their success. In addition, respondents across all six districts mentioned examples of collaboration, so responses from all of the sample districts are included in this section.

Thirteen respondents across five districts described their district or school collaborative cultures using terms such as "trust," "professionalism," "fun competitiveness," "a camaraderie," and "a big family." Respondents reported meeting on a regular basis to learn from research,

from each other, and to share ideas and best practices. For example, one middle school principal described four meetings a month: one with all principals (K–12), one with feeder school principals (a vertical principals' meeting), one with middle school principals, and an informal middle school principals' meeting without district representatives.

Principals also described visiting each others' sites to learn about and observe their best practices. One of these principals said, "It's forced us to reexamine the way we teach, how instruction should look at the school, elements of high quality instruction, and our challenges."

All districts reported having a weekly teacher collaboration time, which was often built into their teacher contracts. Seven respondents across three districts discussed the usefulness of their PLCs. Two district administrators described how their districts had trained teachers to work in PLCs, specifically relating to the four questions developed by Dufour & Eaker (1998):
1. What do we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know they are learning?
3. How will we respond when they don't learn?
4. How will we respond when they do learn?

These questions relate to training teachers on standards (1), assessments (2), interventions (3), and enrichments (4). Another district respondent reported developing "collaborative norms," which specify areas for teachers to work on during collaboration time. This allows us "to clearly define how this is going to be different than a department meeting and to separate the focus on student work and student learning from department administrivia."

A principal at a middle school described the impact of PLCs on her school and district, "I think it's probably had the greatest impact of any single program we've ever done…When teachers have the opportunity on a regular basis to collaborate and talk about their students, talk about their best practices, share their data, and devise plans to improve their instructional practices, all things that are inherent in a PLC, it makes us stronger as a school and district."

Challenges and Solutions in the Improvement Process

Respondents also were asked to describe the challenges they encountered while trying to achieve and maintain their high performance as well as their solutions to these challenges. The following met our reporting criteria of at least six respondents across three districts reporting a challenge:
- Budget cuts (19 respondents)
- Meeting the academic needs of all students (14 respondents)
- Staff resistance to change (12 respondents)
- Relationship with the teachers' union (9 respondents)

Budget Cuts

Nineteen respondents across all six districts mentioned the consecutive years of budget cuts as a challenge. Although these respondents generally said they tried to keep budgetary reductions away from the classroom and students, 14 noted that the cuts have resulted in class-size increases and/or staff reductions. Staff described "doing more with less." They also mentioned

implementing new practices to meet students' and parents' additional needs, created by families losing their homes and families separating due to economic stress. Respondents expressed concern about the impact that these increased demands may have on staff morale and teacher burnout. Furthermore, one principal questioned whether the impact of the budget cuts would ultimately be reflected in student performance where they would "begin to see a stagnation of academic performance…or even…a step back."

Although a large majority of the 24 respondents identified budget cuts as a major challenge, six respondents across four districts discussed factors that have helped them weather the fiscal crisis. A district administrator stated that their large size and equivalent funding level has so far allowed them to maintain their district staff and student programs and that this was something with which smaller districts with less overall funding in the area have struggled. This district administrator said that another factor that has helped are the multiple grants from external sources that they have applied for and won, but such grants are "starting to dry up." Respondents in three other districts mentioned receiving financial support from the community and education foundations. Respondents in two districts described having fewer budgetary strains than other districts due to their basic aid status,[10] which they say allows them to attract high-quality staff because of their larger salaries, better benefits, and lower class sizes than other districts and makes them less susceptible to cuts in state funds.

Meeting the Academic Needs of All Students

Fourteen respondents in five districts reported struggling with meeting the academic needs of all students, in particular, their low-performing students. One district administrator expressed frustration about the district's inability to close the achievement gap for their English learners and students in special education and was "not sure how realistic" that goal was. Balancing the need for remediation among low-performing students while advancing their higher performing students, without creating academic tracks, was a concern expressed by two school administrators with diverse socioeconomic populations.

Seven respondents in four districts discussed the strategies they are developing to address these challenges. Three principals said they are either currently analyzing or plan to analyze disaggregated academic data to develop concrete strategies for serving gender and ethnic subgroups. Another principal in a racially and socioeconomically diverse area stated that the school will work on further engaging the community in all of its students' education and making all parents feel welcome at the school. A district administrator and three principals also mentioned intentions to continue to strengthen instructional strategies and RTI models so that students receive effective initial instruction and less remediation (see the Support for Struggling Students section for more information about these strategies).

Staff Resistance to Change

Another common challenge reported by 12 respondents in all six districts was staff resistance and apprehension to the implementation of new district and schoolwide practices. These

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[10] "Basic aid" districts in California are districts that have high property tax revenues and therefore do not receive general purpose funding from the state. About 100 of 1,000 districts in California are "basic aid" districts. (Source: http://www.edsource.org/iss_fin_sys_revlimits.html)

respondents expressed that "people don't like change," especially in education. One district administrator described "the teacher, who just goes into the classroom, closes the door and resorts to their older behaviors." Another district encountered opposition from a principal who "dragged his feet" when the district began to implement standards-based instruction and who did not hold teachers at the school accountable for the new practices. Respondents also stated that there was sometimes slow adoption of new practices that staff were not used to, which one principal administrator described as an "implementation dip."

Another commonly reported challenge dealt with teacher performance. Various actions were taken to deal with these problems. Sixteen respondents across six districts reported the use of systematic teacher evaluation and supervision as a tool to provide teachers feedback, identify teachers to receive additional coaching and training, improve teacher practice, particularly of low-performing staff, and create documentation necessary to release staff, if needed.

While respondents stated completing the documentation necessary to fire a teacher might be time consuming, they also reported the need "to meet those challenges and to take them on because we can't sit back and accept unacceptable performance." Due to the challenges of releasing tenured teachers, six respondents (across three districts) also reported the importance of releasing probationary teachers who were not performing to expectations.

About half of the respondents (11 from five districts) also reported tackling teacher performance problems by having "difficult conversations" with staff, "moving staff to strengths," or counseling staff out of the profession. Some respondents reported moving teachers to other positions that aligned better with their strengths (e.g., working with smaller groups of students, teaching another subject area) or suggesting to a teacher that he or she should consider another profession. One principal noted that these difficult conversations are "one of the things, as educators, as administrators, we haven't done often enough."

Other respondents reported dealing with staffing issues by being transparent, presenting data and evidence for the needed change, and providing staff with professional development and support. We heard that these strategies were necessary because staff needed to "know that you thought of them in the process" and to communicate that "it's not the students' responsibility to change to meet the needs of the teacher; it's the teacher's responsibility to change to meet the needs of the students and the parents." One respondent said that putting these reassurances in place required a lot of time and energy in the beginning of the process but made his job easier moving forward.

Relationship With the Teachers' Union

Maintaining a positive relationship with the teachers' union was cited as a challenge among nine respondents in three districts. A district administrator and principal in the same district mentioned receiving pushback from the union after the district started to implement new practices. However, this initial resistance was generally reported to end when teachers began to see student growth result.

Respondents also discussed the difficulties encountered when negotiating time for professional development and furlough days with unions. One principal described how conflict between the

union and the school administration negatively impacted the school culture so much that teachers "did not want to come" to work. A district administrator complained about how the unnecessary time and money spent "battling" their union took them away from their "real work." Respondents also stated that the decreased amount of funds available, due to budget cuts, related layoffs, stagnant salaries, or salary reductions, was putting an additional strain on their relationship with the unions.

Respondents in three districts discussed having little or no conflict with their unions. They indicated that positive relationships were maintained by collaborating about decision making and having open and continuous communication. As one principal said, these allow for "almost no surprises." Two district respondents reported that their union and administration met regularly to discuss school-level issues and get suggestions.

Another respondent reported that potential contention was reduced by using a mutually agreed upon teacher salary formula and teacher evaluation process. As another example of cooperation, the union in another district requested specific contract language about collaboration time and a commitment to schoolwide interventions and enrichment models. The reported concern was that their contracts ensure necessary time and resources from the district to support student learning.

Advice to Other Districts and Schools

When asked to provide other schools and districts with advice for improving and maintaining high performance, respondents suggested creating a narrow district and school instructional focus (12 respondents), creating support systems to allow staff to put the focus into practice (12 respondents), and hiring quality staff and maintaining high expectations (11 respondents).

Twelve respondents stressed the importance of creating a strong district and/or schoolwide focus that keeps student learning and strong instruction as goals. When determining a focus and goals, two district administrators recommended collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to identify areas of need. Respondents said that greater improvements can be seen when selecting a single focus to invest all resources in for consecutive years. A focused approach was compared to a "shotgun approach," which one principal described as doing too many initiatives at once to meet multiple needs or following fads in the hope that something will be effective. The unfocused approach can lead to confusion and frustration because "at the end of the day nobody really knows what's important," according to another principal.

As a next step to gain staff support for the vision, 12 respondents suggested creating support systems that promote professionalism and buy-in throughout the district and schools. In terms of promoting professionalism, one district administrator said, "If you want people to perform their best, you've got to treat them as if they've got a head on their shoulders and that they're committed to the same things that you're committed to which is student learning."

Investing in professional development and collaboration time and creating pathways for communication were suggestions for eliciting staff buy-in from three principals. A principal in a small district noted that it may be difficult to develop functional systems in large districts; however, it is more vital because the staff and community are more likely to feel

"disenfranchised." This principal recommended that large districts create "little districts within a district," where each assistant superintendent serves as the primary support for a group of schools.

Having patience with staff in the initial adoption of new practices was recommended by another principal. This principal recalled staff not progressing as quickly as desired but realized that staff needed to move slowly to become comfortable with the practices to increase the likelihood of success later on.

Eleven respondents advised other administrators to hire high-quality staff and maintain high expectations by holding teachers accountable for student achievement and implementation of mandated initiatives. Three of the respondents reported that being able to pay teachers a competitive salary and having a good reputation is an important aspect in their ability to secure high-quality teachers. A couple of principals also reported the importance of having a rigorous hiring process and taking the hiring process "very, very seriously." One of these principals described in detail the hiring process used at the school:

> There's a paper screen and then a ten minute phone interview and then there's the tribal half hour interview with administrators, teachers and parents and then after that if we still like you we will invite you back for a demonstration lesson. Those who make it past that point will be invited back to conference one on one with me and then I will make a recommendation to the district office….Once you go through a process like that, I can be pretty sure this isn't just somebody who is a good talker but somebody who truly has the skill level.

Respondents advised to not only hire quality staff but to maintain high levels of accountability. A district administrator explained how setting high expectations is an administrator's obligation because "if you see something wrong and you let it go, you're allowing it to happen." Similarly, when discussing holding staff accountable for new practices, a principal emphasized the need to check on staff during the process because "you can't expect what you're not willing to monitor." Another principal warned administrators of the intense work required to document and evaluate teacher performance but stated that it is necessary because not doing so "hurts the profession and it hurts the students and their learning."

Summary and Implications

In this project, we have attempted to statistically define high-performing districts as those "raising all boats," that is, with virtually all schools and student subgroups performing substantially better than statistically predicted over four years. We purposively designed this selection mechanism to identify sites where something extraordinary seemed to be happening districtwide. That is, many districts may look good on average even though they have some weak schools and/or some subpopulations who are not doing well. Our goal was to find districts in which the consistent high performance observed across the board seemed most likely due to a strong district influence.

Once identified, we focused on district and school leaders' perceptions of how their districts were able to accomplish this higher-than-predicted performance across schools and subgroups. Through 24 interviews across six high-performing districts, we inquired as to the strategies

district and school leaders considered most instrumental in contributing to their high-level performance. What we heard from these respondents included a clear vision centered on instructional improvement, specific supports for struggling students, strong district and school leadership, and an emphasis on collaboration. These strategies largely align with what has been found in the literature regarding high-performing districts.

Although respondents identified similar strategies across districts, they also approached the road to high performance in different ways, depending on their district size, their student population, and their reform history. Thus, we do not conclude from these findings a clear "one size fits all" recipe for district and school success. These findings suggest that the pursuit of excellence may need to be tailored, at least somewhat, to each unique situation. This seems to suggest the advantage of coupling clear goals, methods for measuring progress, and accountability with local flexibility in regard to goal realization.

At the same time, we believe that other districts can learn from the common elements and specific examples summarized in this report. As an example, one respondent reported that the respondent had already engaged in knowledge sharing by training other districts in the use of an instructional framework. The California Department of Education and County Offices of Education may wish to consider serving as brokers of this expertise by setting up structures for sharing these strategies with other districts and schools across the state. District and school leaders can be important resources in assisting other districts facing the important task of improving learning for all students.

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Appendix A: List of 30 Unified Districts Meeting All Criteria

All California Unified Districts Meeting the High-Performing Criteria Set for This Study (n=30), 2010–11

District	County	Region	Urbanicity	Enrollment	Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	English Learners	ELA DAI	Math DAI	Avg DAI
Arcadia	Los Angeles	South	City	9,666	16%	14%	0.12	1.39	0.75
Beverly Hills	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	4,648	5%	8%	0.82	0.97	0.90
Carlsbad	San Diego	South	City	11,023	23%	10%	0.73	0.93	0.83
Carmel *	Monterey	Central	Suburb	2,239	21%	15%	1.18	1.48	1.33
Coast *	San Luis Obispo	Central	Rural	763	62%	34%	0.76	0.31	0.53
Conejo Valley	Ventura	South	City	21,072	26%	15%	0.80	0.79	0.80
Coronado	San Diego	South	Suburb	3,139	8%	1%	0.99	0.96	0.98
El Segundo	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	3,198	13%	5%	0.64	0.58	0.61
Glendale *	Los Angeles	South	City	26,327	45%	30%	0.62	0.78	0.70
Glendora	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	7,274	19%	6%	0.40	0.74	0.57
La Canada	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	4,003	1%	5%	1.26	1.73	1.49
Laguna Beach	Orange	South	Suburb	3,028	13%	4%	0.94	0.81	0.87
Las Virgenes	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	11,348	7%	0%	0.97	0.95	0.96
Los Alamitos	Orange	South	Suburb	9,629	11%	2%	0.83	0.97	0.90
Manhattan Beach	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	6,615	2%	1%	1.23	1.40	1.32
Oak Park	Ventura	South	Suburb	4,002	4%	2%	1.05	0.95	1.00
Pacific Grove	Monterey	Central	Suburb	1,857	22%	4%	0.57	0.64	0.61
Piedmont City	Alameda	North	Suburb	2,555	3%	3%	1.27	1.54	1.41
Placentia-Yorba Linda	Orange	South	Suburb	25,810	25%	14%	0.42	0.58	0.50
Poway	San Diego	South	City	34,051	14%	13%	0.69	0.92	0.80
Redondo Beach *	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	8,397	21%	8%	0.56	0.74	0.65
Rocklin	Placer	North	Suburb	11,648	18%	0%	0.54	0.61	0.57
Saddleback Valley	Orange	South	Suburb	31,700	25%	18%	0.57	0.65	0.61
Saint Helena	Napa	North	Town	1,367	41%	27%	0.61	0.54	0.58
San Marcos *	San Diego	South	City	18,612	45%	25%	0.80	0.91	0.86
San Marino	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	3,193	2%	4%	0.58	1.40	0.99
Santa Monica-Malibu	Los Angeles	South	City	11,562	25%	11%	0.71	0.83	0.77
Scotts Valley	Santa Cruz	Central	Suburb	2,570	14%	2%	0.71	0.64	0.68
South Pasadena	Los Angeles	South	Suburb	4,415	11%	7%	0.31	0.90	0.60
Temecula Valley *	Riverside	South	City	30,225	18%	6%	0.51	0.48	0.50

*Districts selected for this study.

NOTES: Data are representative of schools in each district included in the analyses, as specified in the methodology section. The district achievement index (DAI) measures the difference between a district's actual and predicted performance on the California Standards Tests (CSTs) in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics and on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in Grade 10 mathematics, based on the characteristics and composition of the students enrolled, during four school years (2007–08 through 2010–11). An index greater than zero indicates that a district performed better than predicted, and an index that is less than zero indicates performance worse than predicted. For more information about the DAI, see the Methodology section of this report.

Appendix B: Selected District Profiles

In this appendix, we illustrate how district strategies operate in conjunction with each other as reported by leaders in three of the sampled districts: Coast Unified, Redondo Beach Unified, and Glendale Unified. These districts were chosen to represent different sizes, locations, and approaches.

Coast Unified

Coast Unified is a rural district in San Luis Obispo County, with five schools and about 760 students. Between 2007–08 and 2010–11, Coast Unified has shown academic achievement that is substantially higher than statistically predicted for most of its subgroups and schools. Based on their school achievement index (SAI) throughout the past four years, 100 percent of students in the district were in schools performing better than statistically predicted for both ELA and mathematics.

The majority of students in the district are Hispanic (51 percent), with white students comprising the next largest racial/ethnic group (42 percent). About three fifths (62 percent) of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and about one third (34 percent) are English learners (see Exhibit 5 for more demographic details). According to one of the principal respondents, about five years ago employment opportunities in the region changed from being agriculture based to service industry based. With this change in job opportunities, the student demographics changed as well, with a growing Hispanic and English learner population.

The superintendent, who has been with Coast since 2008, reported placing people in positions that emphasized their strengths. The superintendent had all administrators, school board members, and cabinet members complete an assessment aimed at identifying people's talents. Staff were placed into open positions based on those results. One principal explained, "I think there's a lot of specific purposeful movement going on." At least two of the four staff interviewed identified the following four district strategies as important in increasing student outcomes:

- An intentional focus on literacy
- Reaching out to and involving the Hispanic community
- Identifying key standards and aligning benchmark assessments to standards
- Selecting and providing student interventions matched to student needs

Focus on Literacy. All site respondents discussed the benefits of a week-long professional development opportunity focused on literacy strategies four years ago. The training was available for all teachers to participate. One respondent estimated that more than 80 percent of teachers districtwide participated, and those who completed the training received a stipend for their time. A principal mentioned that all the school's teachers, including those in music and physical education, participated in the literacy training.

Part of the training included creating lesson plans for the various literacy strategies discussed throughout the training. Respondents mentioned benefits of this training including strategies to teach reading, vocabulary, and note taking. One principal noted:

> *"Really what that [the literacy training] did for our site was put everybody on the same page. All of the practices in the classroom, whenever we read anything in the class, it always had the same process that went through it…That consistency from classroom to classroom really sped up the content that we could teach."*

Another principal explained that having common literacy practices across the district saves time, "We're saving time because we're not re-teaching process and procedures with kids…The kids come in knowing what to do, what to expect."

Involving the Hispanic Community. The district superintendent and two respondent principals referenced engaging the Hispanic community as an important aspect of students' success within Coast. The district paid one of the bilingual aides an extra hour daily to work with the administrators to teach them Spanish. A principal explained, "My parents at the school now know that if they come in and speak to me in Spanish, they're going to be understood." The principal continued to explain that he transmits the same message in English and Spanish through the automated calling system so that parents hear him speaking both languages: "I think it's important for the parents in my community who speak Spanish to hear my voice speaking Spanish." The district also funds multiple positions to help engage the Hispanic community: a full-time bilingual family advocate; a full time translator for notices (translated in less than 24 hours); and bilingual aides.

Another way the district reached out to the Hispanic community was by purchasing 500 licenses for Rosetta Stone (an online language-learning program) and offering approximately 50 licenses annually for parents interested in learning English (the district plans to give away the licenses until all 500 have been disseminated). The superintendent explained that he also encouraged Spanish-speaking families to "start speaking a higher level and using bigger vocabulary in your homes in Spanish so that your kids see there's a benefit to a higher level of thinking."

In addition, Coast Unified engages Spanish-speaking family members through a ten-week leadership academy. Day care and meals as well as a stipend are provided to parents who participate in the academy. The academy has presentations on a variety of topics, including the librarian discussing the importance of reading and the county board supervisor explaining the role of government. At the completion of the academy, the parents are placed in leadership positions throughout the community, including the parent teacher association board or site councils.

Key Standards and Benchmark Assessments. Both the superintendent and one of the principals explained the district's efforts in identifying key standards for each grade. Through this process, staff reviewed the CST and CAHSEE to determine which standards were assessed multiple times and also discussed whether the standard was "pivotal" for the child to move on

to the next grade level. According to the district administrator, this process helped teachers "own their standards."

After the teachers had identified the critical standards, the superintendent required teachers to develop their own benchmark assessments. Respondents noted some reluctance from staff to use the benchmark assessments and data from the assessments to make instructional decisions. One principal explained that he was able to overcome this challenge by explaining to staff that they were already doing much of this work, just not in a formalized manner.

Student Interventions. The three principals all mentioned the importance of interventions matched to student needs, based on data, as a component of district success. One principal also discussed how changing the school schedule facilitated students receiving additional supports as needed. Sixth graders moved to a block schedule that combined mathematics with science and English with social studies. The schedule was modified so that all seventh and eighth graders had electives at the same time, so students who needed additional interventions could receive them during this time from the appropriate content teachers.

Reported Challenges. When asked about challenges, two respondents mentioned getting people to buy in to the new district vision as a challenge. One principal explained that, given the demographic changes occurring in the district, the strategies and supports for students also needed to change. "We have to change because our kids have changed. If we don't, we're behind the curve...Let's get ahead of the curve, not put out fires."

Another principal mentioned the challenge of maintaining a year's growth for all students. He explained the perception that the efforts in the school to support students were focused on struggling students, but that the expectation was that all students would maintain at least a year's growth. The superintendent also mentioned the "negotiations process" with the union, including the calendar and regional salary schedules, as a challenge.

Advice to Others. The principal respondents focused on setting a clear vision. One principal explained, "Be very clear about what it is you want to accomplish and then take it a step at a time." Another principal encouraged others to have the "difficult discussions" necessary to meet the needs of students and parents. The superintendent advised helping teachers become "experts in their classroom."

Redondo Beach Unified

Redondo Beach Unified enrolls 8,400 students and is located in Los Angeles County, between Santa Monica and Long Beach. Based on their SAI during the past four years, all students in the district were in schools performing better than statistically predicted for both ELA and mathematics. In addition, all student subgroups in the district were performing better than predicted. Slightly more than half of the students are white (52 percent), a quarter are Hispanic, and about a fifth of students (21 percent) are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. (See Exhibit 5 for more details.)

Three main strategies were cited as important to the district's success:

- Strong leadership both at the district and school levels

- Research-based intervention strategies

- A vision focused on the whole child

Strong District Leadership. Dr. Steven Keller, hired in 2006, is the superintendent of Redondo Beach Unified. His vision, leadership, and development of principal leaders were cited by all the district's interviewees[11] as important to the district's success. All respondents described a process of flexible leadership coupled with clear goals and accountability. The leadership flexibility was characterized as empowering principals and encouraging risk taking. One principal said we are "empowered…to bring back and make things work within each" school site's unique culture, staff, and context. All three principals talked about the importance of the superintendent promoting "risk taking," which allowed them to try new ideas, to make mistakes, and to "be progressive." Examples of risk taking reported by the principals included reassigning personnel, implementing or considering a new program, using new approaches to seek outside funding, or making changes to something that is a tradition within the school, such as painting over a mural.

Besides describing the flexibility provided to principals, the respondents also spoke of mechanisms that provided oversight and support. The principal evaluation system serves as one such mechanism. As described by one principal, at the beginning of the year, the principals meet with the superintendent to set a list of goals. At these meetings, the superintendent provides feedback and guidance and ensures principals "support the overall strategic plan of the district." Throughout the year, the superintendent continues to meet with the principals and provide assistance. During these meetings, the superintendent shares concerns and provides additional support, such as coaches for new principals, if deemed appropriate. As the assistant superintendent stated, there is "a good network of taking care of new people, bringing them along, and matching them up." A meeting is held between the superintendent and principal at the end of the year to review the principal's progress and outcomes in relation to goals. Principals making inadequate progress are not brought back for the next school year.

In addition to the evaluations, principal capacity building occurs through the year. The monthly meetings are viewed as a time of collaboration among principals and an opportunity to share ideas. A principal also noted the superintendent uses these meetings as opportunities to point out "value-added" programs and "risk taking" by various principals. "Value-added," as defined by this principal, is showing how "you're adding value [to the district]…beyond being a principal." Examples included being "on a committee within the community" or being "the head of…a going-green [project] that you're integrating within the district." As one principal stated, the superintendent's "leadership style really encourages us and motivates us to want to do more and better at our individual school sites." A couple of respondents also noted the superintendent provides suggestions on how to improve, has candid conversations with principals when they are struggling, and provides coaching as needed.

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[11] For this school district, we interviewed the assistant superintendent.

Intervention Strategies. Three of the four respondents (the district administrator and two of the principals) cited the importance of research-based intervention strategies to the success of the district. According to the assistant superintendent, around 2005, the district began to consider intensive supports, such as materials, strategies, and programs, that could be available to students who needed them through a learning center. Some of the programs used within the district include Fast ForWord, a brain research-based program that builds reading and language skills for all types of learners,[12] Response to Intervention (RTI) a multilevel prevention system to support struggling students,[13] and iPass,[14] a program that provides additional instruction in mathematics for students at the secondary level. One principal also reported the district's Department of Curriculum and Instruction monitors the needs of English learners and ensures students have the appropriate interventions.

Focus on the Whole Child. Three respondents stated the importance of the focus on the whole child. As one respondent noted, when the superintendent was hired in 2006 he brought a "renewed focus on students' social and emotional well being." All respondents discussed partnerships with the community to provide and support additional resources to schools. They noted that the Beach Cities Health District provides physical education specialists for the elementary schools, that their parents are trained as art docents, and that their schools have gardens tended by parents. In addition to parent volunteers, respondents reported on fundraising by a parent educational foundation and parent teacher association. The foundation and parent teacher association provide grants and funding to augment the work of schools, such as providing funds for technology, music, sports, or other programming. Another program reported by a respondent was an antibullying program called Safe School Ambassadors.[15] One principal also noted the continued commitment to extracurricular activities such as vocal and instrumental music, physical education, foreign languages, intramural sports, and science camp.

Reported Challenges. All respondents reported constraints due to decreasing budgets and a general lack of time. As noted by the district administrator, the ongoing reductions in the budget are a challenge experienced throughout the state. She also noted that, in their district, thus far, cuts have been taken outside the classroom. However, she also said that this strategy becomes successively harder each year. For example, other respondents noted that class sizes have increased, principals cannot afford the technology they would like, and reductions in staff have occurred. These reductions, as one principal noted, strain teacher morale when staff workload increases and staff have "to do more with less."

Time constraints were another challenge reported by all respondents. The main time issue was limits set by the teachers' contract that limited the use of early release days for professional development and collaboration. The district administrator said this was one of the greatest challenges because it limits the ability to focus on instruction: "How do you ensure alignment from school to school or vertical articulation if you don't have dollars to be able to pay people to work after school?"

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[12] For more information about this program, see: http://www.scilearn.com/Fast_ForWord
[13] For more information about RTI, see: http://www.rti4success.org/
[14] For more information about this program, see: http://www.ilearn.com/index.html
[15] For more information about this program, see: http://www.rbusd.org/cms/page_view?d=x&piid=&vpid=1269552392586

Advice to Others. Respondents' primary advice (three of four respondents) was to always keep the focus on "what's best for students," not adults. Other advice (two of four respondents) included to "think outside the box" and "be bold." In addition, a couple of respondents advised on the importance of building relationships. One respondent elaborated, "If you have strong relationships…you're in a better position to be comfortable making…data-driven decisions…having…hard conversations and accepting accountability."

Glendale Unified

Glendale Unified, located just northeast of Los Angeles, was described by the superintendent as a "unique urban and suburban city." The district enrolls approximately 26,000 students, with white (55 percent) and Hispanic (25 percent) students as the majority. Forty-five percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 30 percent are English learners (see Exhibit 5 for more information). There is also a large Armenian population, as indicated by the percentage (31 percent) of all enrolled students speaking this language.

According to our analyses, all of the district's subgroups and the majority of their schools performed better than statistically predicted in ELA and mathematics between 2007–08 and 2010–11. Three main strategies were cited as important to this success:

- Focus on Results instructional framework
- Attention to struggling students and subgroups
- Strong district and principal leadership with high expectations and support

Focus on Results. The district uses an instructional framework called Focused on Results that incorporates school-specific instructional focus, school leadership teams, collaboration, and ongoing professional development. According to the superintendent, before the implementation of this approach, schools functioned as individual "islands of excellence." Focus on Results was bought in to provide a "framework that worked across the district" and allowed sites to "learn from each other."

This program was said to vary for each school, based on their area of focus. Each school selects an instructional focus based on their greatest weakness to target professional development, time, and resources. He said that over time, it is intended that the selected focus will be turned into a strength and something on which the school will "pride themselves as experts."

There are several structures in place for staff to collaborate, examine data, and obtain professional development based around their focus. First, each school has an instructional leadership team that meets regularly to receive training and conduct schoolwide trainings and meetings relating to effective instruction.

Second, schools meet with district staff quarterly in cohorts (two elementary school cohorts, one middle school cohort, and one high school cohort) to examine data, share ideas, study research, and reflect on the progress of each school's focus. In addition, groups of three principals, called trios, also meet monthly with a designated district staff to conduct classroom

observations and discuss the status of their schools. The school location for these meetings rotates monthly, and the members in the trio change annually.

Initially, an outside company trained and worked closely with district staff through the first stages of this process. However, as the district built their internal capacity to run the program, the outside company gradually stepped away from their leadership role and will eventually exit completely.

Respondents attributed the successful implementation and staff buy-in of the program to the strong framework together with the flexibility given to each school. According to one principal, "the fact that we've been able to take what they've given us and make it more of our own…has been essential and I think it's really helped us take a look at the areas that we need improvement on, the areas that we need to focus on and it really has helped us become stronger teachers and educators."

Related to the Focus on Results framework, all respondents discussed the district's commitment to using data in their decision making. The district's data analyses include a triangulation of state and federal accountability measures, benchmark results, and day-to-day teacher observations. Administrators were said to meet regularly to analyze these data and set SMARTE goals (specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic, timely, and touching every student) and target resources toward greatest needs. One principal commented on how the data-driven goal setting takes the focus away from blaming the student and motivates staff to be accountable and transparent.

Attention to Struggling Students. All respondents discussed a variety of approaches to addressing struggling student and subgroup performance. For example, it was reported that the district had made support for English learners a priority as a result of English learners being one of the district's lowest achieving groups during the past five years. Added supports for this population were said to include a new English language development curriculum for middle school, an ELA textbook adoption with English language development support materials for elementary school, an additional teacher specialist, and new computer software.

Principals also described specific programs at their schools for struggling students. For example, after consistently failing to meet state and federal accountability measures, it was reported that one school had placed students in cohorts to share the same English, history, and science teachers. The principal said that this allowed teachers to come together to discuss each student's needs and to develop individual improvement plans.

Another school was reported as focusing on students struggling in reading by offering intense support for small groups of students, afterschool tutoring, and a program to support oral language development for English learners new to the country. Another principal described the school's focus on exposing their English learners and students in special education to general education classes and high expectations to help them feel empowered and prepare them for the CSTs.

Strong District and Principal Leadership. The superintendent and principals recognized the district and school administrations' strong leadership. Two principals stated that their district administrators are accessible and supportive of schools' day-to-day activities as well as in times of emergency. As one principal commented, "The fact that their presence was here makes it easier for me and gives me support knowing that if I need anything I just have to turn around and they're there for us." Another principal said that the professionalism and collaboration among district administrators serve as a model for relationships among schools. The superintendent also attributed the district's high achievement to their high-quality principals and their ability to use the Focus on Results framework to their advantage.

Two respondents mentioned the district's policy to hire and give tenure to competent teachers. Potential teachers are put through a rigorous process that includes a paper screen; a telephone interview; in-person interviews with the district, school staff, and community; and a lesson demonstration. One principal stated that there is a clear message from the district that "the most important decision you will make is to give tenure."

Three respondents discussed the district's and their schools' willingness to tackle teacher performance issues. Two respondents discussed "targeting" consistently low-performing teachers to develop improvement plans. According to the superintendent, Glendale uses improvement plans "probably more than most districts." The improvement plan focuses on the supports administrators need to provide for the teacher to meet their expectations and can include things such as working with a coach or specialist and frequent classroom observations. According to one principal, "once we've identified the areas that they need help on, we can provide them with support and encouragement to get them to be the fantastic teacher they have the opportunity to be." Two respondents also discussed how the district periodically reexamines schools and moves administrators around sites to match leadership style to school culture. According to the superintendent, "we're not afraid to move people."

Reported Challenges. Although the superintendent reported that Glendale has been fortunate to avoid "any big site hits yet" as a result of the fiscal crisis, he anticipates major cuts in the future. He said these likely will include some staff reductions and class-size increases, which likely will decrease staff morale. The superintendent stated the budget cuts are the district's "greatest challenge" because "it impacts everything."

However, the superintendent also noted that the district's ability to withstand the fiscal crisis thus far is partly due to its size. The superintendent explained how the district's large size allows them to continue to pay for district administration and student programs that small districts have had to cut. The district also has tried to be creative by not filling jobs if attrition occurs and by moving teachers to sites where more funding is available. He noted that the district has been fortunate enough to have not enacted any furlough days yet.

All respondents mentioned a difficult relationship with the teachers' union. According to one principal, the administration historically had a positive relationship with the union. However, within the past five years, following a change in union leadership, the two groups "don't see eye to eye" on many issues, including initial resistance to Focus on Results and a general obligation bond for facilities and technology.

Advice to Others. Respondents mentioned that administrators in other districts may consider creating districtwide foundations and processes to facilitate improvement. One principal suggested administrators conduct self-assessments of their students' academic achievement to determine goals and then develop a plan to reach them. Two principals also said that these plans should include a systematic examination of their instruction and practices to ensure that students are receiving high-quality instruction. Finally, another respondent suggested creating a culture of high expectations that includes a staff development framework.