

Strategies

FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL CHANGE

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PANASONIC FOUNDATION

in cooperation with the
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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All Means All—Part 2

Edmund Burke said it long ago: “The equal treatment of unequals is the greatest injustice of all.” If *equality* of opportunity means that all students and all schools receive the same opportunities, supports, and resources, then equality will never lead to a closing of the stubborn achievement gap between privileged and underserved children. The gap will certainly never be closed, or even significantly narrowed, without a serious commitment to equity—*equity* meaning that students and schools are provided with support and resources sufficient to meet their unique needs.

This distinction is especially crucial in the context of standards-based accountability. Standards provide a common finish line for all students. But as Donald Gratz pointed out in an *Education Week* commentary (“Fixing the Race,” June 7, 2000), it would be absurd to argue that a race is fair because it has a common finish line even though runners begin the race from dramatically different starting points.

Some students start kindergarten well on their way to being readers, and others come to kindergarten with no knowledge of the alphabet. Some students live in stable, safe, language-rich homes, and others live in “broken” homes where there are few if any books or newspapers.

If the starting points are dramatically different and the finish line is the same, then equity is an empty slogan unless *differentiated* opportunities, supports, and resources are brought to bear on behalf of students and schools that face a longer or harder race. Lowering standards for some is a route leading to the “soft bigotry of low expectations” that

✦ If the starting points are dramatically different and the finish line is the same, then equity is an empty slogan unless...

President Bush has spoken about. But ignoring or dismissing the different distances or routes that students and schools must travel to achieve high standards is equally unjust.

Revisiting “All Means All”

Although an increasing number of districts are making significant progress toward becoming high-performance systems, to our knowledge none that are serving a diverse population in the United States have so far achieved that status—that is, if you define a high-performance school system as one where the overwhelming majority of students in *all* schools are meeting high standards of learning regardless of students’ ethnic or socioeconomic background and where the district decisively and effectively intervenes in schools where student performance is persistently low. What seems crucial at this juncture is to learn from the districts that have made substantive

progress and to build on the lessons that their stories contain.

In our last issue, we focused on three districts (Broward County, Florida; Chula Vista Elementary School District, California; and its neighbor to the north, San Diego City Schools) that have taken on the “All Means All” challenge and are implementing serious systemic changes that are resulting in a narrowing of the student achievement gap. In that issue we said we’d be devoting future issues to “further mapping and exploration” of the All Means All challenge. And so you will find in this issue case studies of three additional districts that are engaged in this critical work and have demonstrated success in narrowing the achievement gap: two California districts—Sacramento and South Pasadena—and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina.

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Looking at the six districts in the two "All Means All" issues of *Strategies*, we find a number of factors common to all, and some other factors common to most.

Factors Common to All

All of the six districts profiled in this issue and its predecessor have these factors in common:

- The school system takes as its overriding purpose enabling *all* students in *all* schools to meet high standards, and this purpose is evidenced not only by the district's statement of vision or mission, but also by its policies, resource allocations, teacher assignments and other HR practices, and other policies, practices, and structures.
- System leaders hold themselves, their central office colleagues, and schools accountable for meeting high standards of student performance.
- Data are systematically gathered and analyzed at the system and school levels for monitoring progress and pinpointing challenges.
- Professional development of teachers and school leaders is intensive, ongoing, and job-embedded.
- The district ensures that students and families in need receive health and social services.

Factors Common to Most

Most of the six districts featured in the two "All Means All" issues of *Strategies* also have these factors in common:

- They use multiple forms of assessment to measure the academic performance of students.
- An intensified focus on literacy and math is reflected in instructional time and professional development resources and adop-

tion of a uniform, districtwide curriculum.

- The district provides preschool for its neediest students.
- The district provides low-performing schools with intensified attention, services, and resources.
- After-school, Saturday, and/or summer instruction is available to students who need it.

Decentralize or Recentralize?

Two of the six districts (Chula Vista and South Pasadena) are strongly committed to decentralization in the form of school-based, shared decision making. And two of the districts (Charlotte-Mecklenburg and San Diego) have decisively recentralized decision-making authority, especially around curriculum and instruction. The fact that all four districts have made substantive progress in narrowing the achievement gap might indicate that the degree of centralized decision making on curriculum and instruction is not a critical success factor. It is worth noting that the two smallest districts featured in these issues are the most committed to decentralized decision-making authority. We think this topic warrants further study.

Union Response

In four of the six cases, district leaders have faced teacher union opposition. This opposition ranges from the strictly rhetorical to the all-out tactical. What these unions often resist is the way reforms are implemented as opposed to generalized efforts to close the achievement gap. We know that breaking through entrenched cultural patterns and creating collaborative norms can be extremely difficult. But whether reform can be sustained where all parties are not finding ways to work together remains doubtful.

—Scott Thompson, Editor

About the PANASONIC FOUNDATION

The Panasonic Foundation was established in 1984 by the Matsushita Electric Corporation of America. It works in long-term partnership with a select number of school districts that serve a large proportion of children in poverty to help them develop the system-level policies, practices, and structures necessary to improve achievement for ALL students: All Means All.

About the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The mission of the American Association of School Administrators, the organization of school system leaders, is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children.

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PANASONIC FOUNDATION
1 Panasonic Way, 1F-5, Secaucus, NJ 07094
201-392-4132
Sophie Sa, Executive Director
Scott Thompson, Assistant Director
<http://www.panasonic.com/foundation>

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, VA 22209
703-528-0700
Judy Seltz, Associate Executive Director, AASA
<http://www.aasa.org>

Strategies Staff
Writer: Gerald S. Cohen
Executive Editor: Sophie Sa
Editor: Scott Thompson
Consulting Editor: Kenneth Towel
Copy Editor: Kathleen Larson Florio
Design: Janin/Cliff Design, Inc.
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Sacramento, CA:

From Chaos to Achievement

Superintendent: James Sweeney
District Size: 52,000 students

Abstract

Sacramento City Unified School District was plagued by poor achievement, divisive board-administration-union relations, and unstable leadership until a slate of reform-minded board members was elected five years ago. The board appointed Jim Sweeney from inside the district to be superintendent, and he made it a priority to rebuild a climate of trust and improve student achievement. Sweeney submitted a three-year strategic plan in 1998 calling for 90 percent of students to achieve high standards in math and reading. Since then, a number of initiatives have been rolled out to support this goal, including intensive literacy instruction in middle and high schools.

Background

For a number of years, the district functioned like a ship lost at sea. It was torn by bickering and infighting among and between board members, union leaders, and district administrators. According to current board member Jay Schenirer, contracts and business deals were doled out through a system of patronage with little regard for the welfare of children.

As a result of years of poor management, district buildings were in disrepair, morale of teachers and administrators was poor, and student performance was among the

worst in the state. School buildings had graffiti on the walls, broken windows, and restrooms that didn't work. In the seven years between 1989 and 1996, the district went through six superintendents.

This chaos was accompanied by predictably low levels of student performance. Out of a total of 52,000 students—two-thirds from poor families and about a third speaking

 **A devastating report delivered to the board in 1996 described deplorable facilities and a lack of accountability.**

limited English—nearly half routinely scored in the bottom third in the nation on SAT-9 reading and math tests.

In 1995, disgusted by the state of the city's schools, then-mayor Joe Serna formed a commission to document the district's problems and suggest solutions. A devastating report delivered to the board in 1996 described deplorable facilities and a lack of accountability. Whether the problem was leaking roofs, outdated textbooks, or low student achievement, nobody—including the board itself—accepted responsibility. When the board virtually ignored the report, Serna turned to a local television station owner and other influential business and community leaders to create a political action committee to support a slate of four new board members—enough to turn the tide. The 4 were selected from 16 interviewed by Serna. The slate won, with endorsements by the *Sacramento Bee*, the local chamber of commerce, a coalition of building

trade unions, and the teachers union. The four, together with two like-minded holdovers, formed a majority of the new seven-member board.

A few months later, the board dismissed the superintendent, who had been hired by the previous board and who was showing no willingness to make changes. The board turned to Jim Sweeney, then the deputy superintendent. Sweeney had served as interim superintendent for a year beginning in 1994 and had a good working relationship with principals and teachers.

Sweeney was reappointed as interim superintendent in February 1997 and was selected as permanent superintendent in October. He negotiated a contract with no buyout clause and turned his attention to improving performance and accountability. Within a few months, he reassigned 5 top-level district administrators, as well as about 20 other central office staff members and 7 principals. A number of these administrators and staff members left the district shortly after their demotions. The resignments spawned 13 lawsuits, but the district forged ahead. (In the years since Sweeney became superintendent, he has been able to hire about 50 principals.)

Charting a New Course

Soon after taking the job, Sweeney went to work on a new strategic plan for the district. He took several board and cabinet members to El Paso, Texas, to visit the Ysleta Independent School District, which was similar to Sacramento in size and challenges but was succeeding with its stu-

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dents. He came away with a clarified sense of how to use core beliefs and data-based accountability as the basis for promoting change. Subsequently other groups, including principals and teachers, made the trip, for a total of about 200 people.

Back home, at a three-day retreat with his cabinet and the board members, Sweeney began to hammer out an Action Plan for Educating All Students. The board approved it in mid-1998. The plan, "**High Standards, Great Results,**" had several elements. One was dubbed the "**Seven Vital Signs,**" which put in place indicators against which the district's progress would be judged. Goals were set in (1) readiness for kindergarten, (2) student attendance, (3) reading, (4) math, (5) English-language learners, (6) high school graduation rates, and (7) transitions to college and the job market. All schools were held responsible for ensuring that 90 percent of their students achieved applicable Vital Signs goals by 2001. "The Vital Signs gave us a common language, a way of talking about achievement that was ours, not the state's," Sweeney explains.

The plan also outlined an accountability system to reach the district's math and reading goals. The system established five levels of school achievement based on the percentage of students in a building who were reading at or above the 50th percentile on standardized tests. At the top were Exemplary Schools, those where 80 percent or more of students were meeting the 50th percentile standard; Achieving Schools had 60 to 79 percent at standard; Emerging Schools had 40 to 59 percent; Low-Performing Schools had 20 to 39 percent; and Schools in

Achievement Crisis had less than 20 percent.

Meanwhile, during more than six months of conversation, the district mapped out nine components that it believed were necessary to get results. The components, dubbed the "**Puzzle Pieces,**" were site-based decision making and budgeting,



community support and services, high standards, accountability for results, core beliefs and trust, instruction, data-driven culture, parent participation, and staff development.

Sweeney says that after the Vital Signs and Puzzle Pieces were developed, he spent three months going to the schools explaining their purpose and gathering feedback. The district printed 50,000 brochures describing the plan and mailed them to parents and community residents. About 5,000 Vital Signs posters were printed and displayed in classrooms and district offices. After everyone had a chance to review the plan, Sweeney convened a meeting in March 1998 of 4,500 school employees at the ARCO sports arena, where the overwhelming majority of participants signed a pledge and received a "count me in" button.

"It was an emotional day," he recalled. "We talked about core beliefs. I said, 'Do me a favor. If you

don't believe that all kids can learn, then just leave.' Symbolically it was a big event. It got great coverage. I said, 'As long as I'm here this won't change dramatically.'"

Rising to the Challenge

To accomplish the ambitious goals of the Vital Signs, the district is ramping up supports for teachers and using data to ensure accountability. At the same time, Sweeney has worked hard to ensure that the strategic plan does not become yet another document on the shelf. All planning has been aligned to the goals, and implementation is closely monitored. Board members regularly discuss the strategic plan at meetings, and the board meets quarterly to review data that track progress on the plan's goals. Results on standardized tests are made available to the media at press conferences, and the district

publishes results on its school-rating categories.

Literacy Focus and Districtwide Professional Development

Before Sweeney's appointment, the district's schools used a mishmash of reading materials and instructional techniques. "We couldn't say we didn't know how to teach reading; we knew lots of ways of teaching it," says Kathi Cooper, associate superintendent for instruction and learning. And with only 3 of every 10 students reading at grade level, it was clear to Sweeney from the start that the improvement of reading skills had to be a top priority.

With a potential \$1.5 million grant from the Packard Humanities Institute contingent on the adoption of a research-based reading program, the district's senior leadership decided to replace a mix of reading curricula with a highly structured program: Open Court, a phonics-

based system. According to Sweeney, it's "the only one with any track record." After discussion with the union leaders and 17 forums with teachers, Open Court was adopted for grades K–3 in 1997 and grades 4–6 the following year. To improve math achievement, the district adopted the Saxon Math curriculum.

But Sweeney is the first to acknowledge that a curriculum change is not enough to improve performance. "Adopting won't get you there; implementation and professional development will," he says. "We've got to get out of the bonds, buses, and boards business. We meet weekly on implementation."

With the Packard funding in hand, which over four years would amount to more than \$10 million, the district hired a cadre of Open Court reading coaches. In the first year, all 28 coaches' salaries were supported by the grant. Gradually the district began to share the cost. Today, 22 coaches are fully supported by the 36 schools where they work.

In addition to the coaching, the district makes sure that all its new teachers receive basic training in reading at its New Teacher Institute. After graduating from the institute, they receive follow-up training once a month.

About 50 teachers a year also voluntarily attend an intensive six-day training session that occurs over three weeks. The training, called Classroom Language Arts Support, pairs teachers with coaches. The training begins with the coach filling in for the teacher and then reporting back to the teacher about what he or she learned about the teacher's students. This goes on for about a week, while the teacher receives professional development outside the classroom. In the third week the teacher re-enters the classroom and is observed and coached by the coach.

Use of Data

Data drive nearly everything in Sacramento. School performance is measured on reading, math, and student attendance. Every school must account for annual levels of achievement, as described earlier.

In addition, schools are given stretch goals, or annual performance



Four times a year principals and grade-level teachers meet for a full day to review student portfolios and test scores and to develop individual student learning plans.

targets. The targets are set by the district based on the proportion of students who move from one quartile to the next on the standardized tests. Attendance and graduation rates also are factored in. Schools are ranked on a 100-point scale and are awarded gold, silver, or bronze pennants for their performance. Those that meet their target are publicly recognized; those that don't meet their target receive coaching for principals and teachers and assistance from district-assigned quality-review teams in developing improvement plans. The stretch goals have since been aligned with California's accountability formula—the Academic Performance Index.

Every principal is acutely aware of the levels of achievement and stretch goals for his or her school. The district collects and makes available the achievement quartile breakdowns for every school, as well as the scores on reading assessments conducted every six weeks in elementary schools. The school's progress in meeting district goals is addressed in one-on-one sessions that associate superintendents have twice a year with every principal.

Elementary School Focus

The wholesale adoption of Open Court and Saxon Math provided the foundation on which other elementary reforms, such as academic conferences and focus school reviews, have been implemented.

A process for examining student assessment data and monitoring student progress was institutionalized through the **academic conferences**. Four times a year principals and grade-level teachers meet for a full day to review student portfolios and test scores, using a schema to discuss each student and to develop individual student learning plans. William Ellerbee, associate superintendent for elementary education, maintains that the conferences have increased teachers' understanding of the academic and emotional needs of their students.

In addition, the district implemented what it calls **focus school reviews**. In this program, low-performing elementary schools are visited for three days by an associate superintendent for elementary education (there are two) and the district's Instructional Learning Support Team. The reviews, which include classroom observations and interviews with the principal, teachers, and sometimes parents, focus on the three core areas of instruction: Open Court, Saxon Math, and English language development. A report on the team's findings and recommendations is delivered to the full staff, and a follow-up review takes place within a year.

According to Ellerbee and Susan Miller, the district's other associate superintendent for elementary education, the reviews usually find that when student performance is lagging, it's because of poor instruction in the core areas. The solution is to retrain faculty. Another common finding is that the principal and teachers have poorly implemented

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or not implemented the academic conferences. In one school the solution was to reassign two teachers who were perceived as dragging down the entire staff. Ellerbee and Miller say when the school reopened in the fall last year, the atmosphere was dramatically improved. In another school, the principal was reassigned.

New-principal mentoring programs also were put in place for first- and second-year principals. Every new principal is assigned a veteran principal as a mentor. The mentors meet weekly with their charges and once a month with Ellerbee or Miller. All mentors commit to a two-year stint.

Although the district is committed to Open Court as a reading program, it has allowed two schools to stick with the Success for All program developed at Johns Hopkins University. Sandy Olson, the Success for All facilitator at Earl Warren Elementary School, says the district allows them to stay with Success for All because it has been so successful. "In one year, we went from 129 students not being able to read at 1st grade level, to 32 students," she says.

Middle School Focus

The district has taken the unusual step of providing intensive reading instruction for middle school and high school students who are two or more years below grade level—scoring at the 40th percentile or below on the SAT-9.

Each of the two programs the district uses—*LANGUAGE!* and *Reach* (previously known as Corrective Reading)—operates out of a school-based literacy training center with 20 teacher coaches. All middle schools and high schools were required to adopt one of the programs, and all middle school and high school language arts teachers

are funded by the district to be trained in one of the programs.

Susan Warburton, a district coordinator of adolescent literacy, says the training lasts eight days. *LANGUAGE!* "is an accelerated program that brings students up to grade as soon as possible with phonemic awareness for manipulat-

The home-visit program was so successful at improving student attitudes and quality of homework that Governor Gray Davis decided to implement it statewide in 1999.

ing sounds, building words and vocabulary, and fluency builders."

Teachers implement the curriculum in daily two-hour blocks. Students stay in the intervention programs for the full year. Warburton says students identified at the lowest level of reading—3rd grade or lower—generally take three years to get to 9th grade performance levels.

Middle school students who are two years or more below grade level also have access to math interventions. Thus far, the math and reading interventions have been very successful. Evan Lum, associate superintendent for middle school education, says only about 30 percent of middle school students were at grade level when the interventions began. Today, about 50 percent are at grade level in reading and 53 percent are at grade level in math.

Reading interventions begun in the middle schools are continuing in the high schools. These results, too, have been encouraging. At one high school, half the freshman class of 800 needed reading intervention four years ago. Two years later, only 200 in a class of about the same size needed the interventions. This year, only 92 needed intervention.

Also, every middle school teacher has participated in eight training sessions with a consultant, Ernest Stachoski, on the elements of good teaching. Other instruction on understanding data is provided by David Ramirez, a testing consultant from Texas.

To more effectively reach students considered at risk, state categorical funds are being used to support home visits by some middle school teachers. The visits, which generally occur in September and April, began in 1998 after the faith-based Sacramento Area Congregations Together approached the district with the idea. Sweeney agreed to spend \$20,000 per school for nine schools to cover the \$27 an hour teachers received for the visits. The home-visit program was so successful at improving student attitudes and quality of homework that Governor Gray Davis decided to implement it statewide in 1999.

High School Focus

Sacramento's high schools are plagued by high dropout rates, poor performance on state assessments and SATs, relatively low numbers of students going to college, and high numbers of students who need remediation when they get to college.

Associate Superintendent Richard Owen acknowledges that there will be initial failures on California's new high school exit exams. "But if we stay the course, the preparation below 10th grade will improve. We will close the achievement gap."

The biggest high school initiative is a project dubbed E21 that will result in a complete revamping of how high school students are schooled in Sacramento. The initiative will be bankrolled with an \$8 million, five-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and \$4 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. "The

strategy in a nutshell is that we are going to transform our larger comprehensive high schools into smaller learning communities," Owen says. "Research says small schools and standards tend to equalize achievement across ethnic groups."

Sacramento has nine high schools. Each will be split into small units with no more than 300 students. Teacher-student ratios will drop, and counselors will be assigned caseloads of about 15 students.

Owen says that within five years, in addition to the nine restructured high schools, the district will also have nine small charter high schools. Each learning community and charter school will have a theme, and each school will have an improvement coordinator who will act as a change agent. The positions are funded from the Carnegie grant, with a chamber of commerce group called Linking Education and Economic Development serving as the fiscal agent. Some improvement coordinators have been selected from outside of education. One, for example, was in the diplomatic corps. Others come from the business sector. Owen says the coordinators are receiving training from Harvard University's Change Leadership Group.

Every high school student will take the University of California curriculum requirements, and a state grant will support more AP courses. The grant will allow high-poverty schools to offer as many AP courses as they want without having to worry about small enrollment.

Results

The gains Sacramento has made since Sweeney took charge are impressive. The district attributes the improvement to its focus on accountability, improved teacher coaching, a redesigned curriculum, extra attention for low-performing schools and students, and high standards. Consider the following:

- In 1999, within a year after adopting Open Court and Saxon Math, the average math and English scores rose in all but 4 of the city's 60 elementary schools over the previous year. The district claims that average gains were triple the state average in reading and double the state average in math. Some schools saw their scores rise

 **In 1999, 16 schools had fewer than 20 percent of students performing at grade level on the SAT-9. Last year there were only two.**

almost 50 percent. (A recent study written by Margaret Moustafa and Robert Land, two researchers from California State University at Los Angeles, challenges the claim of tripling and doubling state averages. First, they note that Sacramento compared the scores in one grade in 1998 to scores in the same grade in 1999, rather than following the children from one grade to the next and comparing their scores. When the authors compared the results of students on the SAT-9 as they moved, for example, from 2nd to 3rd grade, they found they raised their scores by only 2 percentage points.) Sweeney notes that "2nd grade scores have gone from the 35th to the 54th in average student national percentile rank, and 3rd grade from 29th to 44th. When we compare cohort groups over time, the improvement in performance is even more dramatic."

- In 1999, only two schools were recognized as exemplary. Last year, eight were recognized.
- In 1999, 21 schools earned "School-on-the-Move" awards. Last year, the number was 31.
- In 1999, 16 schools had fewer than 20 percent of students performing

at grade level on the SAT-9. Last year there were only two.

Ongoing Challenges

Despite its achievements, the district continues to face hurdles. Although teacher morale has improved under Sweeney's leadership, Manuel Villarreal, executive director of the teachers union, says that many teachers are still disheartened. "Overall, teachers are not enthralled with the methods of implementation of reform." He also says, "The schools that are strong in high achievement have been strong for years. The schools that were struggling 10 years ago are still struggling today."

District leadership has had difficult relations with the union in the past, and there were two ugly strikes in the late '80s and early '90s. School board member Jay Schenirer says of the union-district relations, "They are not what they were, which was awful, but the process of building trust will go on for a long time." Sweeney acknowledges the tensions and adds that the district loses about 10 percent of its teaching force every year. Many go to the two wealthier districts that abut Sacramento.

Schenirer says the district also needs to begin paying attention to other areas of the curriculum that have been neglected because of the emphasis on math and literacy. They include the arts, citizenship, science, and social studies.

Finally, what continues to challenge Sacramento is the condition of the state budget—the same challenge that every district in California is facing. The state's growing deficit is forcing many districts to curtail reform activities and to increase their search for nonpublic sources for funding. Sacramento currently faces a \$6.8 million deficit, which explains the need to rely on private sources, for example, to fund its high school improvement coordinator positions. ◀

South Pasadena, CA:

8 Rocking the Boat

Superintendent: Michael Hendricks
District Size: 3,800 students

Abstract

South Pasadena, a predominantly middle-class community, has seen recent changes in demographics due to an influx of lower-income renters and ESL students. In the school district, these changes have resulted in widening achievement gaps among students, greater and more diverse literacy needs for ESL students, and growing referrals to special education. In response, the district committed itself to the creation of data-analysis teams at each school, shared decision making, new content standards, rubric-based report cards, open enrollment for AP courses, new partnerships with outside experts, and major investments in professional development. Results on multiple assessments have been encouraging, but more work remains.

Background

The South Pasadena Unified School District has five schools: three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The district has historically been viewed as high performing in a residential community that is stable and well heeled. Its quiet tree-lined streets and compact central business district offer a pleasant alternative to booming and sometimes chaotic Los Angeles, nine miles to the southwest. For years, Angelenos have looked to the community as a safe and comfortable place to raise and school their children.

Over the last decade, however, economic and demographic issues have challenged the district. Califor-

nia's recession in the early 1990s resulted in widespread corporate downsizing, and some of the communities hit hardest were those of white-collar wage earners. The recession contributed to growing rates of transience and economic diversity. The construction of multifamily housing and rental properties attracted lower-income families willing to spend high percentages of their income on rental housing so that their children could attend better schools. The once predominantly white district now serves a student

 **The former superintendent started the conversation by saying, "Do you think our kids are doing well because of us or in spite of us?"**

body that is 41 percent white, 32 percent Asian, 18 percent Hispanic, 7 percent African American, and the remainder from other ethnic groups. About 7 percent of these students have limited English proficiency, and about 10 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Les Adelson, who was superintendent for nine years until becoming superintendent in a K-8 district in northern California in July, says gaps began to emerge soon after the demographics started to shift. Results of SAT-9 tests and other assessments showed that ESL and economically disadvantaged students were not meeting district targets even as other students were meeting or exceeding the targets. The data also showed a widening literacy gap among incoming kindergarten students. Referrals for special education and identifications of stu-

dents with attention deficit disorder and ESL needs were increasing. Meanwhile, the district analyzed three years of suspension data and noticed that students of color had higher rates.

"You didn't have to dig into the data to see that our Latino and African American kids were scoring lower," Adelson says. "All you had to do was walk into an honors class and see it." He decided to shake his staff out of its false sense of security. "I started the conversation by saying, 'Do you think our kids are doing well because of us or in spite of us?' My personal refrain became equity and access. My belief was that we weren't doing our job until every kid who wanted to go to college *could* go to college."

Meeting the Challenge

In 1995, the district applied for a grant from the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) to help it reduce the growing achievement gap. Annenberg was at first skeptical. The districts it had in mind were more urban and in deeper distress than South Pasadena. But the district challenged Annenberg to take a second look. Ultimately Annenberg agreed but reduced the size of the grant it was offering from \$1 million a year to a total of \$720,000 for four years.

Adelson says LAAMP became both the motivator and the vehicle for pushing equity-based reform in South Pasadena. The funds supported training in data collection and analysis, as well as the development of a shared decision-making process. It also became the catalyst for creating K-12 content standards to drive teaching and learning. "The data idea came from LAAMP because we

had to be accountable,” Adelson says. “But we also realized we needed a hard source to tell our story.”

Content Standards and Assessment

In 1996, at the beginning of the LAAMP partnership, the district had no districtwide content standards and no common assessment practices. With assistance from Annenberg, the district embarked on the development of K–12 content standards for every subject area. Two groups were important to the success of the effort: parents and teachers. Teachers, who were generally working in isolation from each other, were encouraged to focus their instruction on the standards and to drop the content that was not covered by the standards. “Some teachers’ initial response was that this is one more thing to do,” says Superintendent Michael Hendricks, who was assistant superintendent for instruction for five years before his recent promotion. “We drove home that this would be in place of what they did before. If a teacher’s favorite unit was not tied to the standards, they needed to change it or get rid of it.”

The standards the district developed were similar to those already designed by the state. Multiple measures aligned to the standards were adopted or developed, including SAT-9, end-of-year tests, teacher-developed tests, writing samples, and other measures. Benchmarks for performance and promotion criteria based on the standards were created. Students were required to achieve a 75 percent level of mastery on the standards in math and English/language arts.

Teachers were encouraged to work across grade level or subject area to develop strategies for addressing all of the required standards. Science teachers, for example, were encouraged to work with math teachers so that collectively they

could incorporate all the required material. “At the high school, the whole faculty has been working together on how to cover the language standards,” Hendricks says. “We did really well in high school exit exams. But we noticed that some districts that did not do as well as us overall did better in the writing portion of the state assessment. So now we have everyone chipping in to change that.”

To further refine teacher focus, the district began developing what it called “**power standards.**” These are the most crucial standards in each subject that are driven by statewide assessments. For example, a number of assessments in middle school math cover the concepts of mean, median, and mode. By high-

The rubrics-based report cards helped parents understand the importance the district was attaching to the standards.

lighting certain concepts as “power standards,” the district hopes to make the work of teachers and students clearer and ultimately reduce achievement gaps.

“We also created an elementary school report card that was standards-based,” Hendricks says. “We were one of the first to do that.” The **rubrics-based report cards** helped parents understand the importance the district was attaching to the standards. To enlist parent support, the district hosted many parent nights and produced a cable TV show that discussed state and local standards, how the new report card was aligned to standards, and how rubrics were used for grading. Meanwhile, LAAMP funds were used to produce brochures for each grade level to describe the standards by content area. The brochures were mailed to parents of all students.

Data Use

The district committed itself to using the data generated by assessments to address students’ academic needs. So that teachers could make sense of the data in a way that might inform their instruction, the district created **data teams** composed of teachers, principals, parents, and students at each school. Their task was to create profiles for their schools using a common language across the district on such indicators as student achievement, student characteristics, and school characteristics.

The data teams received training from the Achievement Council, a Los Angeles–based organization that works with districts to improve the performance of primarily low-performing African Americans and Latinos. Adelson recalls that when he first approached the Achievement Council for assistance, the organization demurred. “They thought we were a snobby, affluent community and had no interest in working with us.” Ruth Johnson of the Achievement Council and author of *Setting Our Sights: Measuring Equity in School Change*, happened to live in neighboring Pasadena. Adelson asked her out to lunch and tried to convince her of his sincerity. “When she heard me say that I really wanted to understand how we can do inquiry-based data—how to use it and collect it—and didn’t want someone to just leave us with a binder, she got very excited. She said most people wanted *them* to do the data work.”

The Achievement Council agreed to run training institutes and summer institutes for teachers, principals, board members, and residents of the community. The Achievement Council also worked directly with the data teams to develop a protocol for sharing and reflecting on team practices and findings.

Adelson says learning how to use the data helped teachers, par-

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ents, and residents understand that inequities existed, even in a high-performing district. “The community as a whole didn’t believe we were broken,” he says. “‘Sure, we have a few kids who are falling through the cracks,’ they thought. But I said, ‘Unless everyone performs, we have failed.’”

Adelson says data are especially critical in high-performing districts. “It’s hard to show significant improvements when you are doing well. That’s where the data play a key role. When we disaggregated the data they told the story so that teachers couldn’t sit on their laurels anymore.”

Professional Development

Teacher professional development to address issues of student equity occurs in several ways. **Peer Assistance Review (PAR)** is a state-funded program designed to support teachers in strengthening content knowledge and instructional strategies. A committee of teachers and administrators selects exemplary teachers to serve as peer coaches. PAR is available to all teachers but is required for those who receive an unsatisfactory evaluation.

Another state-funded program, **Beginning Teacher Support and Assistance (BTSA)**, provides credentialed teachers with less than five years of teaching experience with instructional coaches and monthly classes. BTSA teacher coaches receive 24 hours of state-sponsored training and an additional 16 hours of training from the district.

One of the unique opportunities for teachers in South Pasadena is a homegrown program called **Critical Friends Groups**. These are informal gatherings of teachers led by colleagues who were trained as facilitators with LAAMP funding. Cathy Nese, an 8th grade language arts teacher, is a trained facilitator who

has been attending Critical Friends gatherings since their inception about four years ago. She says the meetings generally occur twice a month for two hours at one of the teachers’ homes. “We’ve looked at standards, what do grades mean, and student work,” she says. “It’s a real constructive way to analyze things using a protocol. The process gives you enthusiasm and helps you to connect.”

Monthly all-principals meetings begin with a segment on leadership development that Hendricks leads. He says these meetings got



“The conversations change the way we think, and the way we think changes the way we behave, and the way we behave changes the organization.”

longer because they were dealing with increasingly deeper issues. In addition, the full faculty of each school meets monthly and department-wide meetings occur regularly at the middle school and high school. These meetings promote a common language about equity and have helped the district with articulation issues. “We were like five separate districts, and there was no coordination,” Adelson explains. “We wanted to provide something seamless in K–12, and we wanted standards and rigor to be consistent throughout the district.”

Community of Practice, another venue for the professional development of school-level and system-level leaders, has also served as a vehicle for reculturing the district. The group, which includes principals, assistant principals, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and central office administrators representing such areas as maintenance and operations, accounting, and food service, meets regularly for dialogue on problems, practices, and theories.

Adelson’s mantra around this piece goes like this: “The conversations change the way we think, and the way we think changes the way we behave, and the way we behave changes the organization.”

“Most of our meetings are about student achievement,” says middle school principal Richard Boccia. “What’s nice is that you actually have a voice. It’s a collaborative voice. We’ve had some heated conversations about some issues, and we’ve agreed to disagree.”

At a recent Community of Practice gathering, participants spent several hours reviewing an extensive list of student fees to determine if any were preventing lower-income students from participating in certain activities, and considering alternatives such as a superfund to pay for student activities. They agreed that the next step was to extend the conversation to the school board. Initially consultants from UCLA facilitated the Community of Practice meetings, but more recently the participants have facilitated their own meetings.

Curriculum and Instruction

The district has made a number of changes intended to reduce the achievement gap and improve the overall quality of the district’s educational program. They include the following:

- **Class size reductions.** With state funding, class sizes have been reduced in all math, English, and Global Studies courses in the 9th grade as well as in kindergarten through 3rd grade.
- **New course options.** In the middle school and high school, underachieving students receive double doses of English and mathematics. Math courses have been added with offerings in calculus, statistics, and college preparation math; English courses have been added in composition, writing, and publishing; after-school inter-

vention and a greatly expanded summer session offer additional resources for underachieving students.

- **AP courses.** The district has abandoned selective enrollment in AP courses based on test scores and teacher recommendations, because that approach contributed to the widening achievement gap. The courses are now open to anyone who applies. Students who struggle to meet the high demands in these courses are provided with assistance and counseling.
- **Block scheduling.** The district has moved from traditional six- or seven-period days to block scheduling in grades 6 through 12.

Community Engagement

South Pasadena has taken deliberate steps to involve more parents of color in school activities, including the PTA, the local education foundation that raises funds for the district, parent advisory committees, and curriculum committees. Outreach occurred through various means. ESL teachers made overtures to the local Chinese American Club to recruit more Asian parents for school committees. Parent education programs were expanded to include courses for parents with limited English proficiency and courses on technology and algebra. Alliances were struck with community businesses, and the district ran more forums to seek a diversity of opinions on curriculum and policy issues.

Shared Decision Making

The district views shared decision making as a key component in improving equity and access for all students. As part of the LAAMP process, the district hosted a three-day training session for all district staff and interested parents on shared decision making, team building, problem solving, and communication. Professional trainers from the

California Foundation for the Improvement of Employee/Employer Relations—an organization that works with California businesses, school districts, and nonprofits—facilitated the session.

The objective of sharing decision-making authority was to eliminate silo thinking and to engage as many stakeholders as possible in decisions. In practice, this meant that the school board would conduct work-study sessions during board meetings to solicit input from staff and community members before making important decisions. School site councils and building adminis-

 **The objective of sharing decision-making authority was to eliminate silo thinking and to engage as many stakeholders as possible in decisions.**

trators all were expected to use the process.

Shared decision making typically follows a certain pattern. The issue to be resolved is defined and clarified; the interests of stakeholder groups are stated and recorded; potential solutions are brainstormed and then evaluated. Finally, a consensus is reached, recorded, and communicated to all stakeholders. If a consensus cannot be reached, the parties engage in a process to agree to disagree.

Results

Even though South Pasadena is considered a high-performing district, achievement gaps persist between students of color and whites. The steps outlined above have been initiated to reduce these gaps, and in some cases the results have been good.

The district set threshold targets of 75 percent of students achieving standards, based on multiple assessments, in English/language arts and

math. In reading, 75 percent of all students met the district standards in 2001, up from 73 percent in 2000 and 66 percent in 1998. In language arts, 79 percent of all students met the standards, up from 77 percent in 2000 and 70 percent in 1998. And in math, 80 percent of all students met the standard in 2001, up from 79 percent in 2000 and 74 percent in 1998.

The disaggregated data for certain subpopulations show that some targets are far from being met. In reading, only 37 percent of students with limited English proficiency (LEP) met the district standard. In language arts, 50 percent of the district’s LEP students met the standard. In math, however, 75 percent of LEP students met the standard, and therefore met the district’s target.

“Among our biggest gaps are with the African American students, even though they represent only 7 percent of the student population,” Hendricks says. “Hispanics represent 19 percent of the students and a 15–20 percent gap, about the same as African Americans. The gaps are in each subject, but there is no consistent trend. The bottom line is that no matter what subjects, they perform below other students.”

Gaps also persist in some cases between male and female students. In middle school and high school, female students met language targets based on SAT-9 tests, but male students did not. In most grade levels and subjects, discrepancies also exist between economically disadvantaged students and those who are not disadvantaged.

Hendricks says that the district has succeeded in taking teachers out of isolation and strengthening each school, which has helped reduce gaps. The challenge, he says, will be to accelerate academic improvement for students throughout the district even as schools develop their own capacity to function independently. ◀

Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC:

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Investing in Equity

Superintendent: James L. Pughsley
District Size: 109,000 students

Abstract

For several decades, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) has been receiving national attention for its groundbreaking reform strategies. In the six years of Eric Smith's superintendency and against the backdrop of a divisive school desegregation case, the district has been using data to uncover and change educational policies, practices, and structures that have had a disproportionately negative impact on the achievement of African American students and students in poverty. In addition, the district has implemented a prekindergarten literacy program and provides extra resources for schools with high concentrations of poor and low-performing students. State assessment scores show dramatic reductions in achievement gaps. But gaps are still significant, teacher turnover is high, and some question the rigor of the state exams.

Background

CMS's focus on equity is a direct outgrowth of its long history with desegregation. In 1971, the Supreme Court upheld a lower-court ruling in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* that busing could be used to desegregate schools. The decision essentially forced the district to address the chronic disparities between white and African American students.

The district responded by developing a mandatory busing plan that was considered among the most

successful in the nation. The resulting desegregation and improved race relations became a source of civic pride and, some would say, helped spawn an economic rebirth that has made Charlotte an important banking and commercial hub in the Southeast.

In the early 1990s, under Superintendent John Murphy, the district began to replace busing with a system of magnet schools. CMS was among the first districts in the country to adopt new curriculum standards, assessments, and aggressive accountability measures linked to public reports about each school's progress. Schools were offered goal-linked bonuses and extensive professional development. And the district introduced the International Baccalaureate program and other curriculum reforms.

Many of these reforms, the commitment to extensive reliance on data, and the vision for achieving equity for all students continued to guide the district even after Murphy's departure in 1995. He was replaced by Eric Smith, who left this past summer to become superintendent of Anne Arundel County Schools in Maryland. Smith's deputy, James L. Pughsley, stepped into his predecessor's shoes on July 1.

Back in 1997, the district again found itself in the courts when a white parent sued, claiming that his child was denied enrollment in a magnet school because of race. This case challenged the use of racial guidelines to assign students to schools, reopening the desegregation issue. The district argued that it had not yet achieved "unitary status" and vigorously defended its strategy of using race as a factor in student assignments. This was

essentially the same position argued by black parents.

Although consultants hired by the district produced reports showing the persistence of significant achievement gaps between white and African American students, the judge ruled against the district, finding not enough inequities to justify race-based assignments. The decision forced the district to design a new school choice plan, implemented this year. The district and the black plaintiffs appealed the case to the Supreme Court, but the court declined to hear the case, closing the district's 33-year desegregation saga.

Although the lower court ruled against the district, the district's leaders were able to use consultants' reports and other information to develop a framework for eliminating the existing inequities. The district continues to use the framework, called "Achieving the CMS Vision: Equity and Student Success," as a roadmap for improving the performance of minority students. The major pieces of the district effort are described below.

EquityPlus II

The district believes it is inequitable to allocate identical resources to every school in a mixed urban-suburban system such as CMS. Some schools clearly have more pressing needs. To ensure that all schools and the students in those schools have the same opportunity to achieve, CMS has designed a program that commits extra resources to targeted schools. Fifty-four of the district's 141 schools are designated EquityPlus II based on a finely calibrated set of criteria and indicators that are outlined in the district's EquityPlus II Framework. These criteria are the following:

- **Student achievement.** Unacceptable percentages of students score below grade level on state and district assessments.
- **Characteristics of licensed staff.** The schools have a high percentage of teacher turnover and a low percentage of teachers with advanced degrees, experience, diversity, and licensure.
- **Student characteristics.** Students are highly transient and have low socioeconomic status and special language and/or learning needs.
- **Other factors.** Other factors might affect overall learning, such as school climate as measured in district surveys, parent involvement, access to technology, condition of the facility, and availability of teaching materials.

Once schools are designated EquityPlus II, the district provides them with extra resources. For starters, the schools get reduced teacher-student ratios. Kindergarten through grade 3 have no more than 16 students per teacher; grades 4 and 5 have no more than 19 students per teacher; grades 6 through 8 have no more than 18 students per teacher; and high schools get a minimum of 4 to 6 additional teachers.

To attract and retain highly qualified teachers for these schools, the district provides bonus pay if students meet their achievement goals. An equal amount is put in reserve and held until the teacher completes three years of service at the school.

Additionally, teachers at EquityPlus II schools can be designated master teachers and receive annual stipends if they meet certain criteria, including demonstrated success in raising student achievement, consistent above-average ratings on teacher evaluations, licensure in area hired to teach, and enrollment in or completion of a masters degree program in teaching, student support services, or curriculum and instruction.

Similarly, administrators receive stipends for licensure, staying four years in current position, improved student achievement, and high appraisal ratings. The goal is to attract and retain high-quality principals for struggling schools. Further, administrators in these schools get the first pick of district new hires or transfer teachers.

To encourage teachers in these schools to continue their education, tuition assistance is available for master’s degree candidates and for those who come to teaching with subject-area expertise from another profession. The cost to participants is free or radically reduced. Barbara Jenkins, assistant superintendent for

 **Closing the achievement gap is “a question of whether we have the will. Is the system doing everything in its power?”**

human resources, says the tuition assistance is the most popular incentive offered by the district. More than 230 teachers are enrolled in tuition-free masters programs.

Finally, a range of services is dedicated to these schools, such as consultant assistance, targeted professional development, instructional assistance, and support for strengthening parent involvement.

A Plus Program

To complement EquityPlus II, the district has instituted another targeted assistance program designed to sharpen instructional focus in high-poverty schools. To date, 42 schools are participating in A Plus, some voluntarily and others by mandate.

Modeled after a similar program in the Brazosport Independent School District in Texas, A Plus uses direct instruction, detailed 15-minute lesson plans, frequent mini-assessments, and tight curricular focus to home in on individual student needs. The mini-assessments are

given once every six or seven days. Principals monitor classroom instruction and keep logs of teacher progress. The district, in turn, monitors the schools and progress on the mini-assessments. CMS piloted A Plus in 10 elementary schools and is scaling it up based on a dramatic rise in student achievement at these schools.

The highly structured program, based on Effective Schools research, is controversial. Judy Kidd, president of the Classroom Teachers Association, says teachers dislike the focus lesson plans. “They believe the focus lessons give them a script and that it removes a teacher’s freedom to develop ways to deliver material.”

Central office administrators acknowledge that many teachers don’t like the restrictive nature of the program. But before his departure, Smith said in an interview that the program was necessary, “given instability in the work force and lack of clarity of what needs to be taught” in these schools.

Bright Beginnings

Many children come to kindergarten inadequately prepared. CMS is attacking this problem with a prekindergarten program called Bright Beginnings. The full-day, literacy-based program is in its fifth year and is successfully boosting achievement of these students.

Eligibility for Bright Beginnings is based on a formal screening of four-year-olds who have been identified as having educational needs in areas such as command of language and recall. About 3,000 are admitted each year in 40 locations, including pre-K centers, school sites, and community-based centers.

Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate

As part of its effort to close the achievement gap, CMS allows open enroll-

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Data-Based Leadership

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The district has put in place a data system, accessible by all schools, that allows for tracking of each student's performance. Susan Agruso, assistant superintendent for instructional accountability, says that principals and literacy facilitators have been trained to use the data system for decision making and that principals hold weekly meetings with their faculties, using data to identify areas requiring special attention.

Meanwhile, at the system level, the deputy superintendent, regional assistant superintendents, and assistant superintendents meet every other

week, using data to identify issues relating to curriculum and instruction. Recently the group was concerned that SAT scores were declining for African American students. The question arose, What are we doing to prepare them?

When the team met two weeks later, Agruso brought data revealing that thousands of African American students in the middle grades had been placed in regular math classes even though white students with the same scores were placed in advanced classes. Within a week, district leaders assembled all middle school principals, explained the problem, and told them to reschedule their schools. At each of the three grade levels, about 2,700 African American students moved from regular to

advanced math classes. Soon the old textbooks were collected, new ones—which had been delivered by overnight mail—were distributed, and certain teachers were given a two-day crash course in the advanced math curriculum.

That shake-up took place in September 2001. At year's end, the number of African Americans performing at grade level in math had jumped from 63 percent the year before to 76 percent in 6th grade, from 60 percent to 66 percent in 7th, and from 56 percent to 66 percent in 8th.

"This is life itself, in terms of closing the gap," says Eric Smith. "It's a question of whether we have the will. Is the system doing everything in its power?"

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ment in two programs with advanced curriculum, the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP).

The IB program is considered by many to be the most challenging curriculum offered in the United States. Students are required at a minimum to take college-level English, math, and foreign language courses. Some IB graduates enter college as sophomores.

CMS was the first district in the state to offer IB, which is now available in five high schools and four middle schools. In 2001, 158 students received the diploma. More than 80 percent of those who started IB finished the program.

The district offers 22 AP courses, which are transferable as college credits if students pass the end-of-year exam. More than 300 CMS teachers have completed training to qualify as AP instructors. African American enrollment in AP courses shot from 400 in 1996 to 2,200 last year. Since 1995–96 there has been a

153 percent increase in overall AP enrollment.

Facilities and Resources

The district recognizes that opportunities to learn cannot be equitable unless the facilities and instructional materials in every school are adequate. To that end, the district regularly conducts an inventory of facilities, instructional materials, audiovisual equipment, technology systems, textbooks, co-curricular activities, and media center resources in every school.

School board chair Arthur Griffin has been a leading proponent of the facilities and materials audit. His advocacy arises from personal experience as an African American student in the district. "When I went to high school here, I took physics and chemistry, but we couldn't do all the experiments because we didn't have all the materials. That still exists. That's why I'm so passionate about these things. It's an expression of values."

Baseline standards have been established for school facilities and

resources. The schools are then ranked against the standards using measures that indicate where expectations have been met, where there is progress toward meeting expectations, and where the situation is declining. The superintendent is required to review the situation annually and see that any shortfalls are remedied.

Accountability

The district has adopted from the corporate sector a tool called Balanced Scorecard, which establishes goals, objectives, measures, and targets for holding central office accountable for its performance. A project manager and a process manager take responsibility for each objective within five overarching goals: attaining high academic achievement for all students, creating a safe and orderly environment, ensuring community collaboration, ensuring equity in all schools, and developing efficient and effective support operations. "This was based on a strategic plan we did three or four years ago," Pughsley says. "It

also came out of the desegregation court case.”

Pughley says the scorecard is a management tool for linking goals, objectives, and targets directly to budget implications. For each objective, the scorecard provides a status report using multiple measures. The superintendent monitors it at least monthly.

The district also conducts a quarterly assessment of student achievement, using a locally prepared criterion-referenced test that is tied to the curriculum. When added to the state End-of-Course and End-of-Grade assessments, it helps paint a comprehensive picture of student progress.

Results

In general, the district made noteworthy progress during the Smith years in raising student achievement overall and in narrowing the achievement gap between African American and white students and between students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches and those who don't. According to state assessments, the average overall achievement gap between African Americans and whites has fallen from 39 points in 1995–96, when Smith took over, to 26 points now. In 4th and 5th grades, the achievement gap in math between African American and white students has narrowed to 18 points.

Third grade scores were considered critical this past year as a result of new state promotion standards. The table on this page shows progress between the 1995–96 school year and this past school year in 3rd grade reading and math, and in 5th grade reading.

Susan Agruso, assistant superintendent for instructional accountability, says CMS is ahead of the rest of North Carolina. “The state doesn't see a narrowing of the gap; we do. We are not pleased with where we are. A 30-point gap is ridiculous, and

Percent of Students at Grade Level

SUBJECT	'95-'96	'01-'02
Grade 3 Reading		
Overall	61%	78%
African American	39%	66%
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	37%	62%
Grade 3 Math		
Overall	64%	76%
African American	42%	59%
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	39%	57%
Grade 5 Reading		
Overall	59%	81%
African American	35%	70%

we know it. But all groups are making progress.”

The Bright Beginnings pre-kindergarten program has received national recognition for the gains it has made. Among 2nd graders, 71 percent of those who had participated in the program were reading at grade level, compared with 62 percent of eligible nonparticipants and 75 percent districtwide. In math, 66 percent of participants were at grade level, compared with 59 percent of eligible nonparticipants and 73 percent districtwide.

Students in A Plus schools also are doing well. “Our best indications were in the 10 elementary schools in the pilot,” Agruso says. “They had twice the gain in student growth compared with the rest of the district, and they reduced the gap by half.”

The district's decision to open up AP courses to all students, without prerequisites, is paying off. Large numbers of African American students are enrolled and taking the end-of-year tests. Ten percent of all African Americans in the state go to CMS schools, yet 25 percent of AP tests taken by African Americans in the state are in CMS schools. The percentage of students taking AP or

IB courses has substantially increased among those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, as well as for those who pay full price for lunch.

One-fifth of the district's African American students are scoring “3” or above on the test. That proportion has been falling, but the district attributes that to an increase in the numbers of African Americans taking the test. “Now we have more kids playing the game,” Smith said before leaving his post. “A coach once told me, ‘First you have to shoot.’ Now we're getting them to aim.”

The proportion of CMS students taking the SAT college entrance examination is considerably higher than that in either the state or the nation. In 2000–01, 73 percent of graduating seniors took the SAT compared with 65 percent for the state and 45 percent for the nation. The top 10 percent of last year's graduating class scored 1,215, compared with 1,175 for the top 10 percent in the state.

On the state ABC assessment, 41 percent of CMS schools, compared with 37 percent of North Carolina schools, achieved expected growth. Also, 35 percent of CMS schools, compared with 24 percent of North Carolina schools, achieved exemplary growth.

Caveats

The district has continued to measure its growth by noting impressive gains in state assessments. But when measured against the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), North Carolina's state assessment appears to be lacking in rigor. An analysis by *Education Week* showed that 84 percent of 4th graders in North Carolina scored at the proficient level on the state math tests, whereas only 28 percent scored at that level on NAEP. The 56-point gap is the largest among all the states surveyed. The gap on the 8th grade

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math test is also among the largest—51 points; on the state assessment 81 percent scored proficient, compared with 30 percent on NAEP. On the other hand, a recent report by the *Princeton Review* rated North Carolina's testing and accountability system number one in the nation.

Some observers argue that the NAEP standard for "proficient" is unusually high. Agruso agrees that the state assessment is not as rigorous as NAEP, but says they serve different purposes: the state assessment is a high-stakes test that is used in some cases to determine promotion. If the standards were as high, many students would not be moving on to the next grade. But she says that as the state raises its own standards, its assessments will align better with NAEP.

Challenges

Teacher development is critical to closing the achievement gap. In CMS, teacher turnover may be getting in the way. Jenkins, the assistant superintendent for human resources,

acknowledges significant concern over this. About one-third of new teachers leave by the end of their first year. Districtwide, turnover is about 20 percent a year. Jenkins says the most common reason given is family relocation, but many resign without giving a reason.

Kidd says that surveys conducted by the teachers association indicate that teachers are leaving because of low morale. "Teachers absolutely feel they are a disposable commodity of the school system."

According to Kidd, the administration has implemented policies without regard for teachers or principals. For example, when the district decided to implement the Open Court reading curriculum, it polled teachers and principals, and, according to Kidd, 86 percent expressed opposition. Smith did not dispute the fact that most teachers were opposed to the curriculum but said he did not look at the polling as a vote. "We asked for teacher input, but we also looked for national research. Ultimately the decision ... had to be mine. We certainly wanted to listen to teachers, but we also

wanted to reach the right conclusion. At the end of the day we decided that phonics-based was the best and should be applied systemwide."

Meanwhile, it is still unknown how the district's new student assignment plan will play out. After the 1999 court order ending desegregation, CMS had to construct a new assignment plan that eliminated race from the formula. This is the first year of the choice plan.

The district notes that 96 percent of families participated in the lottery for choosing where their children would attend school. About 93 percent received their first or second choice. Overall, the number of schools with a concentration of 50 percent or more of students living in poverty will decrease slightly. But clearly some resegregation will occur; a number of schools have very high concentrations of blacks or whites. Policymakers, educators, parents, and community residents are watching closely to see how the resegregation of some schools will affect the quality of education. ◀

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