

# Strategies

FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL CHANGE

An issues series by the  
PANASONIC FOUNDATION

in cooperation with the  
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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## Where Are We on Our Journey to High Performance?

A family driving from Philadelphia to New York can easily tell where they are at any point along the way, especially if their vehicle is equipped with a global positioning device.

Determining where a school system is on its journey toward systemwide high performance, however, is not so easily accomplished. For one thing, it's not a surface journey, but one in which the key indicators are generally hidden from view, and the journey itself is not a linear trajectory, but a multifaceted and subtly nuanced transformation.

It is nevertheless vitally important for school system leaders to have at least some notion of where they are on their journey toward high-quality teaching and learning for all. They need to be able to answer these sorts of questions: What baggage have we accumulated that inhibits improved student performance? How will we shed it? What and where are the barriers to continued improvement of instructional practice? What and where are the opportunities for building momentum? Where is the highest leverage for moving forward strategi-

cally? What tools and processes are most helpful in finding answers to these questions?

These are not questions that can be answered generically. With a slight twist on the old saw about real estate, we could say that the three most important considerations in public school system improvement are "context, context, and

✦ **It is vitally important for school system leaders to have at least some notion of where they are on their journey toward high-quality teaching and learning for all.**

context." Of course, a host of other crucial considerations comes into play as well, but all are powerfully influenced by context—by social and political dynamics; recent and sometimes not so recent history; size and rate of growth or decline; demographics; the level of trust and quality of relationships between key players throughout the system and community; federal, state, and local policies and regulations; what reforms have already been attempted; and how successful or counterproductive those efforts have been.

Several factors that are critical to answering the "Where are we on our systemic journey?" question extend beyond context. These include individual and organizational capacity, and alignment of standards, assessments, curriculum, and instructional practice, among others.

In this issue of *Strategies*, we explore this theme, as we have done in past issues, by taking a close look at a couple of school districts that have been there, done it, and continue to do it. Both Norwalk–La Mirada Unified School District, near Los Angeles, and District School Board of Pasco County, north of Tampa, have undergone significant systemic changes and have, at various points along the way, wrestled with the question "Where are we on our journey to high performance?"

But this issue of *Strategies* also departs from past issues in a couple of ways. In recent years, we've rarely featured school districts that are Panasonic Foundation partners. However, as the Foundation celebrates its 20th anniversary, we are reflecting on our experience and learning, and we're finding progress in our own partnerships that is worthy of dissemination. Norwalk–La Mirada and Pasco have both been

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in partnership with the Panasonic Foundation since 1997.

A more significant departure from past practice is that this issue includes a tool—a sort of systemic positioning device—that district leaders can use in their own context to get a clearer sense of where their systemic journey has brought them and what obstacles must be addressed to substantively continue moving forward. This tool, developed by the senior staff and senior consultants of the Panasonic Foundation, is called Essential School System Purpose and Responsibilities, or ESSPAR.

ESSPAR identifies the essential purpose of public school systems and eight responsibilities that must be met to fulfill that purpose. The purpose and each responsibility are accompanied by investigative questions that can aid district leaders in figuring out where they are and where they need to go next on

their journey to high performance. ESSPAR is presented along with a brief article about the tool in action

 **This issue includes a tool that district leaders can use to get a clearer sense of where their systemic journey has brought them.**

in Racine Unified School District in Wisconsin (also a Panasonic Foundation partner).

We always welcome your thoughts and reactions to *Strategies*. Because this issue represents a departure from previous issues, your feedback this time would be all the more valuable. I can be reached at [sthompson@foundation.panasonic.com](mailto:sthompson@foundation.panasonic.com).

—Scott Thompson, Editor

## What Is the Panasonic Partnership Program?

The Panasonic Foundation is not a grant-making organization. Our approach to philanthropy is the formation of long-term partnerships with public school districts in the United States that are serious about systemic reform aimed at closing the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their more advantaged peers. In the context of these partnerships, the Foundation provides expert advice and facilitation, not dollars.

When a partnership is established between the Foundation and a school district (the district must serve at least 7,000 students, and

at least 30 percent of the students must qualify for free or reduced-price lunch), the Foundation puts together a consulting team that will visit the district monthly. During these visits, Panasonic Foundation team members work with school system leaders, and they assume a variety of roles, including group facilitator, coach, content expert, critical friend, workshop leader, and confidant. The aim of these interactions is the development of structures, cultures, policies, and practices that will translate into improved student learning throughout the system.

## 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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# Strategies

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PANASONIC FOUNDATION  
2 Panasonic Way, 7B0, 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  
Paul Houston, Executive Director, AASA  
<http://www.aasa.org>

**Strategies** Staff  
Writer: Gerald S. Cohen  
Executive Editor: Sophie Sa  
Editor: Scott Thompson  
Consulting Editor: Kenneth Tewel  
Copy Editor: Kathleen Larson Florio  
Design: Janin/Cliff Design, Inc.  
Washington, DC

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# Norwalk–La Mirada, CA

## Making Strides on a Steep Climb

Superintendent: Ginger Shattuck  
District Size: 22,500 students

### Abstract

The Norwalk–La Mirada Unified School District is making the difficult transition from being a district that, 15 years ago, was deeply divided along management-labor lines and was doing little to improve student learning, to a district that has now healed its wounds and is clearly focused on student achievement. With outside assistance, the district has enhanced communications across departments, set ambitious literacy goals for all its students, and put in place student learning standards. It is using data to drive instruction and has invested in efforts to build teacher and school leadership capacity.

### Background

Norwalk–La Mirada was unified in the early 1960s, combining the more affluent district of La Mirada with the less affluent schools of Norwalk. In the mid-1970s, Norwalk experienced an influx of Latino residents. More recently the district has seen increases in African American and Asian populations. Today, the student population is about 71 percent Latino, 16 percent Anglo, 5 percent Asian, 4 percent African American, and 4 percent “other.” Most of the district’s Title I schools are concentrated in Norwalk.

In the mid- to late 1980s, the district’s then superintendent had tried to initiate various reforms to improve schools. Ginger Shattuck, who began teaching in the district in

the mid-1960s and became superintendent in 1994, recalls that the teachers union did not support the reforms. Rather, it was mainly focused on traditional union issues of teacher salaries, working conditions, and health insurance. Anything that took money away from those priorities was regarded with suspicion.

 **It took three years to get the board members to agree to disagree with respect.**

Gerry Gandolfo, the current union president, agrees that the 1980s was a period of strife: the union was on the verge of picketing over salary issues, and many teachers were complaining about not having enough voice in the decisions being made at their schools.

Contributing to the district’s problems were serious differences among school board members. Cindy Harrison, who began working with the district in 1989 as a consultant on school-based, shared decision making, remembers that the board was deeply divided along political lines in the early and mid-1990s. When eventually the board invited her to conduct retreats to help it be more effective, “they literally called each other names,” Harrison says. The board members agree. Gabriel Garcia and Darryl Adams note that they were barely talking to each other at their first board retreat in 1994 and that it took three years for Harrison to get the board members to agree to disagree with respect.

When Shattuck became superintendent, she saw her first job as

that of healing the divisions between the administration and the union and of getting the board focused on instruction, not politics. The work with Harrison and the board continued under Shattuck’s tenure, as did the development of shared decision making in the schools.

At the same time, Shattuck was eager for the district to engage in meaningful reforms that would improve student learning. For a number of years, she says, the district had been trying different strategies, but nothing was really taking hold. “My vision was to raise achievement for all students, knowing that current achievement levels were very uneven,” she says. “But I didn’t know how to actualize it.”

In 1996, the Panasonic Foundation was looking for new district partners and sent letters of inquiry to a large number of districts across the United States that met its criteria and seemed potentially interested. Shattuck says she responded because she felt the district had gone as far as it could without outside assistance. After a fact-finding exploratory visit, the Foundation and the district began working together in early 1997.

### Charting the Course

The first months of the partnership between the district and the Panasonic Foundation were spent identifying areas requiring attention and charting a course that could lead to a system of schools in which all students performed to high standards. It quickly became apparent that the district needed clearer and more rigorous learning standards; more effective professional development for teachers and leaders; better and

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more useful assessment tools; and a shared mission to guide strategies for long-term improvement.

Over the course of the partnership, each of these would become a major focus of the work. Between 1997 and 2001, the partnership concentrated on helping the district become standards driven. This included—to continue the journey metaphor—setting a clear destination for student performance and developing means for measuring progress toward reaching that destination, so that the system would know whether it was headed in the right direction. Structural changes to improve the relationship between schools and central office were also made, data systems were put in place to inform instructional practice, and professional development was centered on instructional improvement around high standards.

### Accomplishments in Key Areas

#### Site-Based, Shared Decision Making

Shared decision making lays a foundation for the journey to high performance—not so much because it has a direct impact on student learning, but more because it helps create an environment in which teachers, administrators, and the board can work together as partners, not adversaries.

When Cindy Harrison first began visiting Norwalk–La Mirada in the late 1980s, many districts were experimenting with site-based, shared decision making to improve school governance. The district convened a steering committee of teachers (mostly union representatives), parents, and administrators to work with Harrison. They spent a year building a model that drew on Harrison's experiences in her home district in Adams County,

Colorado, and other districts she was working with. At the end of the year, the model was piloted in several schools.

Harrison says the union initially was the most important player in the process because then union president Richard Reuther believed it had the most at stake. "I think they thought they were creating something that would get them more power. But the trust they were developing [with the district] turned into a partnership."

Gandolfo, who was then a school representative and a member of the shared-decision-making steering committee, says the work was important to the union because it gave teachers a voice in hiring and budgeting at their site. "It was exactly the kind of thing that the people at my site were clamoring for." Harrison developed train-the-trainer programs for school personnel and also trained central office staff and the school board in collaborative decision making, so that over time it has become part of the district's culture—before the state of California's mandate that all schools must have site councils.

A few years ago, the union began to complain about backsliding in the culture: shared decision making in some schools was becoming pro forma, with principals using site councils as a rubber stamp. That has led to some changes in procedures, which now rely less on formal committee structures and more on ad hoc processes, as well as a greater emphasis on the academic needs of students rather than on satisfying stakeholders' interests. Harrison says, "I work all over the country, and I think this is one of the few districts where they truly have a collaborative climate, even when the budget stuff is getting in the way."

### Focus on Standards

One of the first issues addressed in the Norwalk–La Mirada/Panasonic partnership was putting standards in place. In fall 1997, the district hired then Panasonic Foundation consultant LaVaun Dennett to be its director of curriculum and instruction. Shattuck says Dennett, a nationally prominent elementary school principal in Seattle before joining the Foundation, brought credibility to the standards effort and helped set a positive tone for the district.

Guided by Dennett and the Panasonic team, the district held a series of retreats and inservice meetings on standards and began a year of standards development. By the end of the summer of 1998, draft standards had been completed for reading, math, science, and social studies. In time, the district also developed benchmarks and curriculum frameworks.

Another step the district took was to abandon ad hoc textbook selection. Instead of teachers choosing from a long list of state-approved textbooks—with a resulting hodgepodge of educational goals and materials across the system—the district decided to use the same textbooks districtwide to ensure uniformity and alignment with the standards. Among other things, this meant that the many children who moved from school to school within a school year would not be encountering different textbooks with every move.

With standards more or less in place, the district turned to developing ways to assess student performance against the standards.

### Assessment and Data

Around the time that Dennett joined the district, Shattuck also hired Sonja Martin to be the district's first director of research and assessment.

Martin and Dennett were to work closely together to adopt assessments that would be aligned with the standards and used to support instructional improvement.

Panasonic consultant Stephen Fink, an assistant superintendent in Edmonds, Washington, at the time, arranged for leaders in Norwalk–La Mirada to learn from the reform efforts in Edmonds. These efforts included using Levels Tests, developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association, to provide a richer picture of students' academic progress. Seeing how well these assessments worked in Edmonds, Norwalk–La Mirada decided to adopt them, too, and to give them twice a year to students in various grades. The results provide a picture not only of which students are achieving at grade level, but also what kind of progress they are making within the same school year and from year to year, and where they need focused instruction.

In addition to Levels Tests, the district administers the required state standardized test as well as a literacy and math assessment by Houghton Mifflin that is given three times a year. Dennett says the combination of assessments provides a complete picture of student progress. "We can give teachers a grid for every student in their class, period by period, what their English level is, and what their growth is on the California standards or on the Levels Tests. It's a complete profile by period, by class, and by school."

Principals armed with this data have a good indication of which teachers might need extra professional development, and which might serve as exemplars. For some in the district, the level of accountability is a cause of concern. The union protests that students are being overtested, but there are also worries that the data will be used to evaluate

teachers. Gandolfo acknowledges that such concerns exist, although he affirms the union's commitment to using the data to inform instructional practice.

A process called Faces to Data is a way of reporting assessment data that helps teachers and principals to confront shortcomings in educational outcomes and then take steps to improve instruction. Four years ago, principal Marsha Guerrero's school was one of 18 in the country that was invited to partici-



### **When students' test scores improved, other principals began asking questions.**

pate in a Disney Creative Learning Grant. As part of the grant, Guerrero received coaching from an outside evaluation firm on various leadership skills and processes, including Faces to Data.

Essentially, Faces to Data involves graphing each student's assessment results. Along one axis is the pupil's name; along the other is the skill the student needs to master. After the scores for all skills are entered, they are color coded to make it easy to tell at a glance where the child, class, or school is doing well on skills and where more work is needed.

Guerrero asked her teachers to look for patterns among children who did not meet the standards. Did boys do better than girls? Were there different patterns for students living in poverty? How did results compare by grade level? Then they used the information to target instruction. Soon students' test scores improved, and the school gained 90 points on the California skills index. Other principals took notice and began asking questions. Guerrero attributed the improvements to Faces to

Data, and before long, principals in other elementary schools began using the technique as well.

"Faces to Data has helped with exploration of the changing demographic issues, which include race, language, and poverty," Shattuck says. "This was an eye-opener for some teachers. Even though the demographics have been changing for 10 years, they weren't getting it. It didn't hurt that California has forced us to report on subgroups."

Faces to Data has been so successful at the elementary level that the district plans to institute it at the middle and high school levels.

### **Changes in the Organization of the District**

In the 1997–98 school year, the district reorganized itself into three K–12 feeder pattern clusters, or "Families," as they're called in Norwalk–La Mirada. This was another idea adapted from the Edmonds schools. Previously, Norwalk–La Mirada had been organized by levels, with a different administrator responsible for elementary, middle, and high schools. This had resulted in fragmentation and poor communication between the levels. Geographic clustering, the district felt, would improve the feedback loop among teachers, principals, and central office administrators.

The reorganization has put an area administrator in charge of each Family. However, each area administrator is also responsible for a level—elementary, middle, or high school—across the Families, to promote vertical and horizontal integration.

A 2001 study of the district's reform efforts concluded that principals and staff consider the realignment of the district into Families one of the most significant achievements of the partnership with Panasonic. One district employee says, for

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example, "This was a major change for the good of the district."

Harrison says that the reorganization into Families has improved articulation among the levels. "I think they have provided a significant link of schools to each other that was never here before. I hear a lot of reference to it, and it has an impact on how people feel a connection to their district."

Of note, the reorganization is focused on instructional issues more than bureaucratic issues. The area administrators go to classrooms every morning to observe instructional practice. Area administrator Chris Forehan says the rotation puts them in every school once every nine days. In schools, they walk through classrooms with the principal and ask such questions as "What did you think of that class?" and "What would you do differently?"

"At the end of a walk-through we look for commonalities," says area administrator Chris Reasin. "Then we try to individualize what we saw... The principal will point out, 'This is something I've been working on. I want you to go in there and look for it with me.' It could be that the school is working on vocabulary at each grade level. And so we go in to verify that that was happening in all the classrooms."

### Professional Development

For several years, the district was able to provide every elementary school and most middle schools with literacy coaches who were teachers on special assignment (TOSAs). The TOSAs were supported by state funds supplemented by district money. The coaching program had the potential to be a powerful model. However, at the time, all coaches were not literacy experts, and credi-

bility suffered at some sites. When California was hit hard two years ago by budget cuts, the district was forced to eliminate the program.

The district has now recommitted to coaching, with four coaches assigned to each Family of schools. The coaches, after successfully completing a rigorous application process, will work with principals alongside the area administrators.



**A new culture has developed in the district. Teachers and the union representing them generally have come to accept that teaching should be much more of a public practice.**

At the same time, principals will receive outside coaching from the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington, another connection made through Stephen Fink, who is now director of CEL while continuing as a consultant with the Panasonic Foundation.

Principals are eager for the coaching. In fact, on their own initiative they formed discussion groups with colleagues across the district on how to become better instructional leaders. As a sign of their commitment, they have set aside a two- to three-hour block of time every morning, which they call Prime Time, to sit inside classrooms and observe their teachers.

The area administrators are beginning to realize they are not always more knowledgeable about instruction than the principals they coach. So they, too, will receive outside coaching. "We've come as far as we could, and now we need outside experts to give us expertise," says Reasin.

The walk-throughs and the classroom coaching are possible only because a new culture has developed in the district. Teachers and the union representing them generally have come to accept that teaching should be much more of a public practice than it was in the past. At the same time, the administration has tried to make clear that the coaching, at least for now, will not lead to any negative consequences. "We've kept it out of the evaluative domain," Shattuck says. "The point is to improve craft knowledge."

Shattuck herself has participated in walk-throughs and has personally coached principals. At a recent meeting of principals, she taught a demonstration lesson. And she herself has welcomed coaching. Panasonic Foundation consultants have helped her think through the district's restructuring, the institutional barriers to communication across departments, and her own role on instructional issues. "Panasonic came and pushed me and said these are the barriers we see, and that you have to be a superintendent who isn't ego involved. We'd look at best practices."

### Assessing Systemic Progress

In 2003, the Panasonic consultant team conducted extensive interviews, reviewed documents, and drafted a midcourse systems analysis to determine progress on the district's journey and to chart its next leg. Despite improvements brought about by the Family structure, the analysis noted continuing problems with "silo thinking," the lack of a districtwide coherent theory of action for improving instruction, the need for a systemwide, continuous quality improvement cycle, and the presence of a hierarchical bureaucratic culture that mitigates against better student achievement. "For the

most part, work across divisions and departments was not [sufficiently] systemic, planned, or purposeful,” according to the report. “In many cases, fiscal and personnel resources were managed in isolation rather than integrated to maximize the ability to improve instruction for all children.”

The analysis also suggested that the bureaucratic blocks in the system prevented honest and direct communication among staff. It recommended that leadership engage in dialogue with and encourage staff “to identify shared values, beliefs, and norms as the foundation on which to create a learning community and culture of shared accountability.”

One blockage point that the report brought to light was the link between schools and the district’s top leadership. When their positions were created, area administrators reported to the assistant superintendent for education services and did not sit in on meetings with the superintendent or her cabinet. This meant that all instructional issues arising from every school had to pass through one individual before reaching the superintendent, thus making the process prone to information bottlenecks.

After taking a hard look at the situation, the district realigned responsibilities so that the area administrators reported directly to the superintendent. Harrison, with her unique perspective as a long-time district consultant, says that this change has enabled the area administrators to become “active participants” in all matters affecting academic issues. The area administrators themselves also believe the change has been productive. “For the principals, we’re now a one-stop shop,” says area administrator Lonnie McConnell.

## Aiming High

In 2000, district administrators and representatives of the Norwalk Family of Schools developed an ambitious goal for the Family: 90 percent of all students who had been with the district for three years and had an attendance rate of 90 percent would be reading at grade level by 2003. Before long the entire district adopted the goal. But the target was

 **The analysis also suggested that the bureaucratic blocks in the system prevented honest and direct communication among staff.**

not met: only about 40 percent of students were reading at grade level by the end of the 2002–03 school year. Undeterred, the school board, which had not previously voted on the goal, took the bold step of making the same level of achievement the goal for 2007.

“The first goal of 90 percent by 2003—we weren’t ready for it,” explains board member Garcia. “I now think we could achieve 10 percent growth each year. We’re a lot more focused for student achievement now. We have a more focused teaching staff, we have three area administrators, and we have removed a layer of bureaucracy so our principals are aligned. This time we think our goal is realistic and we are capable of achieving it.”

## Results

Over the last seven years, the district has gone from stagnation to a state of continuous improvement. The district reorganized itself into Families to help make instruction seamless from one grade to the next; it developed standards and put assess-

ments in place; it aligned the curriculum with the standards and the assessments; it altered the central office reporting structure to improve communication and instructional focus; it set ambitious literacy goals; and it offered coaching to teachers and administrators to improve leadership and instructional practice.

Despite substantive gains in student achievement during this period, the path to systemwide high performance remains steep. Between 1996 and 2003, 4th grade reading scores have climbed from 28 percent at standard to 42 percent; 4th grade language arts scores have risen from 34 percent meeting standards to 54 percent; and 4th grade math scores have increased from 28 percent meeting standards to 52 percent.

Overall, more than 50 percent of elementary students are performing at grade level in math on the Stanford 9; in middle and high school, 40 percent or more are performing at grade level. Every grade level shows solid gains from the mid-1990s. However, only between 30 and 40 percent of students at each grade are reading at or above their grade level. And scores actually slipped between 2002 and 2003. The achievement gap between subpopulations and the general student population persists.

Shattuck says the journey continues, with coaching from Panasonic that is “rigorous, challenging, keeps us on course, and gets us to the next step.” She credits the Foundation with pointing out that although the district’s culture of avoiding personal conflict had been nurturing, it was not always productive. “Finally we have the tools not only to nurture and be kind, but to hold people accountable because we are giving them the supports to hold them accountable.”

# Pasco County, FL

## 8 Staying the Course

Superintendent: John Long  
District Size: 58,000

### Abstract

The District School Board of Pasco County in Florida has been beset by fast growth and scarcity of financial resources for some time. But over the past 30 years, the district has had only two superintendents, and it has benefited from that stability, the culture of continuous improvement that the two men fostered, and a willingness to reach out to local and national partners for guidance on its journey to high performance. As a result, the district has made investments, over a 20-year period, in professional development and programs that customize instruction to the individual learning and emotional needs of students. These programs have included multiage groupings and team teaching, use of data to follow student progress, and literacy instruction for students at risk in elementary and secondary classrooms.

### Background

Pasco County is a high-growth area just north of Tampa on Florida's west coast. Devastating frosts in the 1980s decimated the county's citrus industry, forcing many farmers to sell their land to real estate developers. The northern and eastern portions of the county remain rural, the western portion is a haven for retired people, and the southern portion has become a suburb of Tampa. Between 1990 and 2000, the population ballooned from 281,000 to nearly 345,000, putting Pasco among the top 5 percent of counties in the nation in terms of

growth. The population is expected to continue to grow at an annual rate of nearly 5,000 residents. The district's student population is expanding by about 2,400 students a year; it now serves 58,000 students. Most are white, with nearly half qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

The growth has put a tremendous burden on the school district. In 1995, struggling with overcrowded conditions, the district put on the ballot a penny increase in the sales



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tax. The measure failed, forcing the retiring superintendent, Tom Weightman, to borrow \$131 million. The money was used to retire older, more expensive debt and to support an ambitious building campaign. Again facing overcrowding and capital expansion problems, the district put a penny tax increase on the county ballot in 2004, but this time it won. The county expects to generate \$437 million over the next 10 years, and 45 percent of the proceeds will go directly to the school district.

But growth has been only one challenge for the district. In the early to mid-1970s, the district was in a state of perpetual turmoil. People who worked there at the time remember it as fragmented, severely underfinanced, and rife with labor discord. Five superintendents served between 1968 and 1974. The fifth, Tom Weightman, was elected in 1974 and remained until 1996. Since then,

the superintendent has been John Long, who came to the district in 1976 as director of personnel.

Although Weightman brought stability and important reforms to the district, his early years were difficult. "At the beginning of Tom's time, in 1974, and for the first six or seven years, we were just trying to survive," recalls Mary Giella, a retired assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Because there were too many students for the available classrooms, the district instituted triple sessions, a necessary strategy that was unpopular with teachers and parents.

Contributing to the tensions was the district's weak financial accounting, which gave Weightman no idea of how much money was available to pay teachers, leading him to cut teacher salaries. "Once he got a handle on it, he gave the dollars back," John Long says. But the damage was done.

### Mapping and Launching the Systemic Journey

Although it began unpropitiously, Weightman's tenure was a time of significant—if gradual—positive change. Assistant Superintendent Sandy Ramos says that for some time, even after Weightman arrived, "there was no well-known plan, no focused vision." But by the time of his departure, the district had both a long-range vision and plans for reaching it.

A contributing factor to the development of vision and strategic direction was the adoption and adaptation of an external school leadership program. For a number of years, two professors at the University of South Florida, Karolyn Snyder and Robert Anderson, had

been exploring ways in which systems thinking could help principals overcome traditions of worker isolation in schools and develop a culture of shared purpose, staff collaboration, and interdependent work units. Their new program, Managing Productive Schools (MPS), was designed to help principals build communication and budgeting skills, manage their staffs more effectively, and guide the instructional development of their teachers. In particular, MPS embodied a systems model of change based on four interdependent parts:

- organizational planning,
- staff development,
- program development, and
- assessment of school productivity.

Mary Giella heard about Snyder and Anderson's work and persuaded them to test and refine MPS in Pasco. As part of the program, principals in Pasco were encouraged to include teachers in decision making and to foster team collaboration. "We started talking about team goals and the problems inherent in our 6th grade or 7th grade programs," says Ann Still-Chapman, supervisor of curriculum and instructional services. These conversations spawned discussions across grades, schools, and levels, and began a journey toward collaborative problem solving and an educational philosophy centered on continuous improvement.

The MPS methods of leadership and school management were introduced first to two school leaders from each level. Later these individuals trained other personnel, who themselves became trainers.

This train-the-trainer model eventually propagated the program's methods to a broad spectrum of employees, creating what Giella says was a common language and understanding of what leadership should look like. Site-based budgeting was one outcome. Another was the inclusion of certain central office departments, which were previously considered outside the academic circle,

in discussions about supporting student learning. In addition to educational staff, personnel from transportation, food services, and business services joined the discussions. "It really helped us to manage things as a system by listening to people and making them feel like they are responding to a whole group of issues that are part of a system," says Still-Chapman.

The MPS work dovetailed nicely with the district's decision in the 1970s to achieve accreditation for its elementary and middle schools. Giella says the accreditation process forced the district to reorganize its curriculum and take a fresh look at how children learn. And as new per-



**Children will not spend time on what they have already learned, nor will they advance to the next level until they have mastered the skills required at the lower level.**

sonnel were hired, they were introduced to the MPS work and were encouraged to think about new ways of teaching.

In the late 1980s, under Weightman's direction, the district established the Graduation Enhancement Committee, with representatives of central administration, principals, teachers, and community members. According to Giella and Myndall Stanfill, a past assistant superintendent for human resource development, the committee's work centered around this key question: "What can be done to change schools at all levels—elementary, middle, and high school—to assure that everything is done to enable students to graduate successfully and become productive citizens?"

The committee investigated changes in school demographics and workplace demands and reckoned with the threat of school privatiza-

tion. Their work ended in 1992 with the publication of "Pasco 2001: A Community of Connected Schools," which established the vision and strategic direction of the system for years to come. This blueprint for whole-system redesign was centered around two "reciprocal principles": continuous progress and continuity of caring.

## Continuous Progress and Continuity of Caring

In the late 1980s and early '90s, the district began to explore some of the research on best educational practices through its connections with Snyder and Anderson. Anderson had coauthored a book with John Goodlad called *The Nongraded Elementary School*, which was regarded as one of the seminal works in education in the 1960s.

The theory behind nongraded classrooms is that every child is unique, and schools therefore should strive to explore differences, rather than stress conformity. By allowing children to progress at their own rate, schools can better foster the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and aesthetic growth of the child.

These ideas appealed to Pasco, which incorporated them into guiding principles that the district called "continuous progress" and "continuity of caring." The district defines continuous progress as a curriculum that "allows a student to progress at his or her own rate, within a framework of high expectations, without conforming to an externally imposed time limit on learning or a fixed amount of subject matter in a fixed amount of time." The key tenet is that children will not spend time on what they have already learned, nor will they advance to the next level until they have mastered the skills required at the lower level.

Through "continuity of caring" the district recognized that children have nonacademic needs both inside  
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and outside of school that affect their ability to learn. These might include health, emotional, and social needs, all of which require the attention of various individuals.

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In practice, these two principles play out in two critical ways: multi-age classrooms and the organization of students into teams or houses supported by multidisciplinary teaching teams over a number of years. The model encourages students to learn from each other in cross-age and cross-ability interactions. High standards and expectations are set for all students, and students achieve the standards by progressing at their own rate, not based on artificial stages of development tied to age.

The continuity of caring model also suggests that learning begins before kindergarten and needs to continue after school hours. Thus the district invests in comprehensive preschool services located in communities with the highest poverty rates and participates in an extensive after-school program available to students throughout the district. In some schools, health clinics treat physical and emotional needs of students.

More recently the district added a third guiding principle to the two that have guided its journey for so many years: ensuring equity and excellence. According to Pasco's vision statement, "The *excellence* standard assures that the overall level of achievement in a school is high. The *equity* standard assures that high achievement remains consistent for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, cultural heritage, cognitive level, or physical disability."

### Curriculum Assessment Project

In the mid 1990s, Florida instituted a standards-based accountability system that forced districts to publicly report student performance data. A piece of the MPS effort focused

exclusively on assessment, so Pasco was already primed to think about a systemic solution to collecting and reporting data that was broader and richer than what the state required. At the same time, the district was keen on getting a sharper picture of the impact its model of continuous progress and continuity of caring was having on students.

Ruth Reilly, director of curriculum and instructional services, says the twin influences of the state and



**"... the board gave us a challenge: We want to know how kids are doing. Are the innovations making a difference, and how do parents know?"**

the district's own curiosity spawned an internal effort, which the district called QUEST, to develop assessments of student performance. "Initially QUEST looked at progress at the elementary schools. We wanted more descriptors of what the work looked like at different levels and its impact on the overall restructuring." Later QUEST was expanded to include all grades.

Ramos cites another catalyst for making student data collection a priority—the recent defeat of the sales tax initiative, which underlined the district's failure to provide the wider community with clear evidence of how students were progressing. "We sat down with the school board and talked about student achievement. How did we know what we were doing was making a difference? We couldn't answer that aside from student test scores [which we felt offered limited information]. So the board gave us a challenge: We want to know how kids are doing. Are the innovations making a difference, and how do parents know?"

The multiple catalysts and concerns about assessing student progress resulted in the Curriculum

Assessment Project (CAP). The district entered into partnership with the Panasonic Foundation in January 1997. Since then, a consultant team from Panasonic has worked with the district as a critical friend, resource advisor, facilitator, and provider of feedback on this expanding initiative.

The district assembled the CAP task force of teachers and administrators to identify benchmarks and assessment alternatives in math, writing, and reading. Still-Chapman says the initiative began with writing because it is much easier to address than reading. They needed to grapple with questions such as "What does a B on a paper mean to parents?" So we looked at the literature, at what the best practices in writing were, what we needed to emphasize, and how writing impacted a child's career choices."

A group of teachers across all grade levels was charged with finding the answers to these questions. They visited the Northwest Regional Laboratory (NWREL) and returned to the district with a writing program called the Six Traits of Effective Writing as well as training to implement it. The program was very successful. Still-Chapman says teachers liked being able to talk across grade levels using the same vocabulary. An elementary school teacher, for example, could comfortably converse with a middle school teacher about a graduating student's writing strengths in voice and ideas and weaknesses in mechanics. The shared vocabulary benefited the students as well.

Pleased with their successes in writing, the district then focused on reading. A task force of teachers went back to NWREL to explore research-based reading programs. They agreed that the next logical step was the Six Traits of Effective Reading. So that nobody would be confused by the similar nomenclature, they renamed the program Reading Works for district purposes.

Reilly says the search for an effective math program was more difficult. “We couldn’t find much that was helpful. We looked at rubrics and decided to develop our own. It took years, and it’s still going on.”

Failing to find math performance tasks that could be imported directly into Pasco, a group of district math specialists began designing their own six-point rubric about three years ago. Sunshine State Standards data pointed up the need to focus improvement on algebra, and so this became the first strand they developed—in consultation with the University of Florida, the University of South Florida, and others. After testing and refining this strand, they tackled geometry, spatial sense, measurement, number sense, data analysis, and probability. “All five strands of the Sunshine State Standards are covered now,” says Cindie Donahue, an instructional trainer and coach who was part of the math CAP initiative.

## Helping Teachers Use Data

As work continues on CAP, the district is making the assessment data available to teachers on a timely basis. Panasonic has stressed the importance of teachers’ using the data to inform instruction. For this to occur, teachers must feel comfortable with the data and how to access it. The district has uploaded three years of state assessments and some district assessments on a point-and-click data retrieval system called Pasco STAR, developed by an outside contractor.

The system has been demonstrated to teachers in summer workshops and in recent leadership meetings with the Panasonic consulting team. These meetings have uncovered gaps and spurred changes to improve the system. The Panasonic team has also visited the data warehouse at Florida’s Broward County Public Schools, a former Panasonic Foundation partner, to explore pos-

sibilities for data storage and retrieval. In the next phase of development, Pasco expects to upload all district assessments onto the system.

## Secondary Literacy Initiative

One of the outcomes of Pasco STAR has been the unearthing of compelling evidence that the district has a literacy problem, especially at the secondary level. Still-Chapman says that on the surface, the data showed the district was performing at average levels in literacy. On closer examination, however, the data showed serious deficits. “We’ve never had an F school, but as we looked at the stats [they] told us that one-third of our students were really poor readers.” (Under Florida’s A+ Plan for Education, if a school is rated F for two out of four consecutive years based on its overall performance on the Florida Compre-



**Data retrieval has unearthed compelling evidence that the district has a literacy problem, especially at the secondary level.**

hensive Assessment Test, or FCAT, students at the school become eligible for vouchers to attend private school or to attend other higher-performing public schools.)

Adds Reilly, “The whole focus on data can be a very compelling ‘why.’ While we had good acceptance that this was an issue, a lot would say, ‘Yeah, but it’s not my problem.’” Reilly says that using Pasco STAR to highlight the literacy problem has obviated the need to counter such arguments.

Pasco has been systematically addressing its reading issues by providing teachers with the professional development necessary to help students get back on track. About 50 teachers in grades 6 through 12, including about 40 at the secondary level, are enrolled in courses on how

to teach reading. Instruction is offered through a training program called CRISS (Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies), a two-day module created by the National Diffusion Network. The district has used funds from a community foundation to set up classroom libraries in secondary schools. With state grants, reading specialists and some reading coaches have been placed in secondary schools.

Any student with an academic improvement plan—about 30 to 40 percent of the student population—is targeted for extra reading instruction. Another 10 percent of students—those who cannot pass the state reading assessment—also are targeted. These students typically spend 50 minutes a day in a year-long reading course, in addition to language arts. Most are taking the reading courses in place of electives. Extended-day options are also available.

Thus far, the reading program has shown impressive results. Middle school students gain an average of two years in their reading level after one year in the program. Still-Chapman says, however, that some students will have to take extra reading courses from 6th grade through the remainder of their schooling.

## Results and Looking Ahead

Data on state assessments show that the district is making steady gains in key subjects, although the gains are sometimes uneven by level. At all grade levels, the percentage of students reading at the proficient level has increased over the last three school years. Florida defines *proficient* as level 3 or above on a 5-point scale, or 51st percentile or above on the SAT 10. In grades 3 through 8, more than 50 percent of students are reading proficiently. But in grades 9 and 10, the highest grade levels taking the test, the percentage teeters around one-third.

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# What's Driving School Systems?

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## A Tool for Assessing Whole-System Improvement

School districts serve many purposes: they provide employment for many people with various skills; they provide child care for the young and a place for older kids to hang out while their parents work; they provide on-the-job training for adults wishing to better themselves; they serve meals; they transport children; they make sure that certain state and federal laws and regulations are not broken; they're a profit maker for businesses—textbook companies and soft drink companies, among others; and, oh yes, they run schools where children go to get educated.

Most people, when asked about the purpose of a school system, will probably respond with some version of the last item on the list. On the other hand, if one looks at how school systems *actually* work, one might be tempted to respond by saying, "A bit of all of the above with no clear priority." That is because many school systems (which the Panasonic Foundation defines to include not only the central administration, but also the teachers union, administrators association, and school board) have forgotten or never fully appreciated that their reason for being is, or should be, the following: to educate all their children so that they can use their minds well.

This is, above all else, a school system's essential purpose and should be its only goal, with the other purposes only means for

reaching that goal. Stated differently, the instructional purpose of school districts must be the "driver" of everything else. But what is "everything else," and how do districts know whether they are moving in the right direction in the most effective sequence? How do they map the journey?

The Panasonic Foundation has been grappling with these questions for the better part of 20 years, as we have worked with almost 60 school

 **The instructional purpose of school districts must be the "driver" of everything else.**

districts around the country. Our answer, the result of our experience, is captured in what we call the Essential School System Purpose and Responsibilities, or ESSPAR. It begins with a statement of the essential purpose of school systems and then identifies eight responsibilities that flow out of and must be driven by the purpose. It is a framework to guide system-level work and a tool for gauging how well district leaders are attending to the responsibilities.

Using the "investigative questions" listed under each responsibility, schools, system leaders, and external stakeholders can engage in deep introspection, dialogue, and self-assessment about the system's progress and where it needs to focus attention.

The investigative questions are designed to help participants see more of what's happening under the surface, to gain new perspectives that can create new interpretations that are essential if the system is to realize deep and lasting change.

**The essential purpose of school systems is the education of all students to high levels through high-quality instruction.**

**Based on this purpose, school systems must fulfill eight responsibilities:**

1. Clarify and promote the core value that all students can and will learn at high levels.
2. Ensure a culture and climate of care, commitment, and continuous improvement.
3. Establish high learning standards and define the instructional practices and structures that will result in all students learning at high levels.
4. Establish clear and explicit performance expectations for all system personnel to support—directly or indirectly—all students in meeting the standards.
5. Ensure that all system personnel have the capacity to meet the performance expectations.
6. Allocate fiscal and material resources to support the system's essential purpose and core value.
7. Implement a shared-accountability system that holds students, staff, and the system itself accountable for all students meeting high standards.
8. Engage in advocacy, coalitions, and other significant relationships at the local, state, and national levels so that the system can achieve its essential purpose and core value.

The eight responsibilities are sequenced according to our best understanding of the scaffolding for building a successful system. We believe, in other words, that Core

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# Essential School System Purpose & Responsibilities (ESSPAR)

## Investigative Questions For Assessing Progress

### SCHOOL SYSTEM PURPOSE:

The essential purpose of school systems is the education of all students to high levels through high-quality instruction—All Means All—so that they may use their minds well and become productive, responsible citizens.

- 0.a. Do all system employees have a shared understanding of the school system’s essential purpose? How? How well?
- 0.b. Do all system employees have a shared understanding of the district’s focus on high-quality instruction and of their role in supporting it? How? How well?
- 0.c. Do system leaders promote and demonstrate active support for high-quality instruction and learning for all students? How? How well?
- 0.d. Do system leaders maintain a single-minded focus on teaching and learning, and enable schools to do so by minimizing diversions and noninstructional burdens on schools? How? How well?
- 0.e. Has the system established and communicated a shared vision of its future that reflects its essential purpose? How? How well?
- 0.f. Does this shared vision drive the system’s strategic direction and day-to-day decisions? How? How well?
- 0.g. Do system leaders have a clear understanding of current levels of student achievement in the district by race/ethnicity, gender, and economic status? How? How well?

- 0.h. Do system leaders actively address issues of social equity and cultural diversity and their impact on instructional practice and student achievement? How? How well?
- 0.i. Do system leaders routinely probe for and expose the most difficult challenges in meeting the All Means All goal? How? How well?

### SCHOOL SYSTEM

#### RESPONSIBILITIES:

**Based on the essential purpose, the essential responsibilities of school systems are the following:**

#### Responsibility #1: Core Value

To clarify and promote the core value that all students can and will learn at high levels

- 1.a. Does the system have an explicit statement of this value? Do principals, teachers, and central office personnel articulate this value in the same way?
- 1.b. Do system employees at all levels demonstrate the belief that all students can and will learn at high levels? How? How well?
- 1.c. Do the system’s policies, structures, and practices express, reflect, and embody this value? How? How well?
- 1.d. Does this value drive decision making? How? How well?
- 1.e. Is this value sustained over time and through changes in leadership? How? How well?

#### Responsibility #2:

##### Culture and Climate

To ensure a culture and climate of care, commitment, collaboration, and continuous improvement

- 2.a. Do system leaders promote a genuine concern for and commitment to the success of all students? How? How well?
- 2.b. Do system leaders promote a climate of trust, respect, honesty, and openness at all levels and among all stakeholder groups? How? How well?

- 2.c. Do system leaders promote a culture of risk taking to find solutions and support learning from both success and failure? How? How well?
- 2.d. Do system leaders promote active, two-way communication among stakeholders? How? How well?
- 2.e. Are decision-making processes clear, transparent, adhered to, and effectively communicated? How? How well?
- 2.f. Do system leaders take special care to hear from students and those closest to the students—i.e., parents and school staff? How? How well?
- 2.g. Do system leaders create a culture of continuous improvement to ensure that the quality of learning improves for every student? How? How well?

#### Responsibility #3: Standards-Based Teaching and Learning

To establish high learning standards and define the instructional practices and structures that will result in all students learning at high levels

- 3.a. Has the system established explicit content and performance standards and curriculum frameworks that define high-quality student learning in all the content areas? Are they aligned with each other? How well?
- 3.b. Do the learning standards guide the work of students, teachers, principals, and central office personnel? How? How well?
- 3.c. Are standards regularly communicated to parents, students, and other stakeholders? How? How well?
- 3.d. Has the system clearly defined, described, and communicated—especially to instructional staff—the quality of instructional practice necessary for students to achieve standards? How? How well?

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#### **Responsibility #4: Performance Expectations for Staff**

To establish clear and explicit performance expectations for all system personnel to support—directly or indirectly—all students meeting high standards

- 4.a. Does the system have explicit performance expectations for all personnel in the district? How? How well?
- 4.b. Do the performance expectations at all levels for all personnel—instructional and noninstructional—express explicitly and clearly how each role/position/function supports student learning? How? How well?
- 4.c. Do the performance expectations include the responsibility to engage in continuous improvement by regularly examining practice in light of results? How? How well?

#### **Responsibility #5: Professional Learning and Human Resources**

To ensure that all system personnel have the capacity to meet the performance expectations

- 5.a. Are principals, teachers, instructional coaches, and noninstructional staff recruited, inducted, and assigned to meet each school's unique instructional needs? How? How well?
- 5.b. Does the system recruit, induct, and assign all other personnel so that the "right" people are in the right positions? How? How well?
- 5.c. Does the system provide high-quality instructional leaders for all classrooms in all schools? How? How well?
- 5.d. Does the system provide effective leadership at all levels in support of high-quality instruction? How? How well?
- 5.e. Does the system's professional development plan continuously build the capacity of all person-

nel to meet their performance expectations? How? How well?

- 5.f. Is professional development based on analyses of data revealing unique student needs in particular settings and at particular levels? How? How well?
- 5.g. Does the system provide professional development for its personnel at all levels to use data appropriately? How? How well?
- 5.h. Are professional development activities evaluated in terms of their impact on teaching and learning outcomes? How? How well?

#### **Responsibility #6: Fiscal and Material Resources**

To ensure that the allocation of fiscal and material resources supports the system's essential purpose, especially at the school level

- 6.a. Are the system's fiscal and material resources allocated and aligned to support the system's essential purpose? How? How well?
- 6.b. Are the system's fiscal and material resources allocated to schools equitably (not necessarily equally), on the basis of individual school needs, so that all schools can serve all students well? How? How well?

#### **Responsibility #7: Accountability**

To implement a shared accountability system that holds students, schools, central office staff, and the system itself accountable for all students meeting high standards

- 7.a. Does the system hold students, schools, central office staff, and the system itself accountable for the achievement of learning standards by all students? How? How well?
- 7.b. Does the system hold itself accountable for providing timely and effective support and assistance for all schools, but especially for schools where students are not meeting standards? How? How well?

7.c. Does the system hold all personnel and itself accountable for meeting performance expectations? How? How well?

- 7.d. Are multiple forms of assessment that are aligned with learning standards, as well as other indicators, used to measure student achievement and school progress—both in the short term and over time? How? How well?
- 7.e. Does the system provide accurate, timely, appropriately disaggregated, and user-friendly data to schools? How? How well?
- 7.f. Is instructional, organizational, and policy decision making at all levels driven by data? How? How well?
- 7.g. Is student progress in meeting standards regularly and effectively communicated to students, parents, and the community? How? How well?

#### **Responsibility #8: Advocacy and Engagement**

To engage in advocacy, coalitions, and other significant relationships at the school, local, state, and national levels so that the system can achieve its essential purpose and core value

- 8.a. Does the system give voice to and advocate for students and families, especially those who traditionally have been underserved? How? How well?
- 8.b. Does the system support schools in developing partnerships with families and the community in order to achieve the essential purpose and core value? How? How well?
- 8.c. Do system and school leaders mobilize and sustain broad internal and community support for the core value? How? How well?
- 8.d. Do system leaders advocate at the local, state, and national levels for policies, practices, and resources needed to achieve its essential purpose and core value? How? How Well? ◀

# ESSPAR in Action

ESSPAR has a wide range of potential uses. On one end of the continuum might be the use of ESSPAR as a prompt for an informal conversation among colleagues about how things are progressing. On the other end would be the use of the tool to guide an in-depth and rigorous system analysis conducted by a team of external consultants through a series of site visits involving document reviews, observations, and focus groups and interviews with a variety of stakeholders. In 2003, when the Panasonic Foundation was seeking new district partners, it used ESSPAR in a way that was closer to the rigorous end of the continuum to determine the strengths and needs of interested districts.

The Foundation has also used ESSPAR in other ways. Racine Unified School District in Wisconsin had had a long history of mistrust among the administration, school board, and teachers union. Neither was the larger community very satisfied with the school system. Shortly after the Panasonic Foundation entered into a three-way partnership with the school system and SC Johnson Corporation, the major corporate player in Racine, the Foundation team working with the district used ESSPAR to get a sense of just how far apart the different parties were and to identify what the focus of the partnership work should be.

In July 2003, at a meeting attended by the leaders of Racine’s district administration, teachers union, and school board, as well as by SC Johnson representatives, the Panasonic consultants had the attendees form three groups: (1) school board and district central administration; (2) Racine Education Association leaders; and (3) representatives of SC Johnson. Using ESSPAR, the separate groups discussed and rated the school system according to the essential purpose and the concomitant responsibilities.

What surprised everyone—the members of the three groups as well as

their partners from the Panasonic Foundation—was that there was any congruence at all in their perceptions as shown by the ESSPAR indicators. Although some perceptions were also very divergent, the realization that the participants were not at total opposites about where the district was contributed to team building across the parties.

Later, the school administrators and classroom teachers were asked to go through the same exercise without being told how the other groups scored the system—in order to know how people in the system’s front lines—where the rubber meets the road—felt.

The results of the facilitated conversations appear in the chart.

	School Board/ District Adminis- trators	SC Johnson	Racine Education Association	Building Adminis- trators & Teachers
Purpose	2.5	2.3	2	2.6
Core value	3	2.2	2.2	2.7
Culture & climate	1	2	1.4	2.5
Standards-based teaching & learning	3+	1.5	2.4	2.7
Performance expectations for staff	2	1	2	2.3
Professional learning & human resources	3.5	1	1.2	2.1
Fiscal & material resources	3.5	1.5	1	1.8
Accountability	1.5	0	2.2	2.4
Advocacy & engagement	2+	2	2	2.4

**SCALE:** 1 = Has not begun to address this; 2 = At beginning stages; 3 = Well on its way; and 4 = Exemplary

The Panasonic consultants then facilitated a dialogue with all four stakeholder groups, using the results of the assessment as a jumping-off point for deciding what the partnership work should focus on. One point of concurrence among the groups was that performance expectations for staff needed considerable strengthening. As they talked this issue through it became clear that the system needed to develop ways to provide feedback to individual staff members, separate and apart from the assessment system that is already part

of the labor contract. They saw this as a task that would not be conflict prone and that offered leverage for improving climate, another area that received a low rating from all groups. This then became one focal point for the partnership work.

On fiscal and material resources, the groups noted the considerable disconnect between the high rating of this indicator by the school board and district administrators versus the low ratings assigned by all the other groups. What they all agreed on was that the district was then facing severe budget problems and that what had been typical, in this system, was the continuation of any program that had ever been

started. They wanted to establish criteria and feedback mechanisms for starting, maintaining, and *discontinuing* programs. The development of a program evaluation process became a second focal point for the partnership work.

In the months since those preliminary partnership meetings, both goals have been actively pursued. More recently, an 18-month timeline was developed for further expanding the work that was first identified with the help of ESSPAR.

—S.T. ◀

In math, the proportion of students scoring proficient also has increased annually, with more than 50 percent scoring proficient at all grade levels. But in the middle school grades, the pattern of improvement is flatter.

The district has had its writing assessments in place the longest. Of note, students' proficiency in writing has reached the highest levels, with about 90 percent of students scoring proficient.

Ramos says the biggest challenge, as the district moves ahead, will be to stay true to its vision in the face of continuing pressure from the state to fulfill other mandates, such as retention of 3rd graders who don't meet state testing targets—a requirement that rubs directly against the district's continuous progress model. "How do we keep the vision going of where we are and want to be? We've hired 500 new teachers this year. How do we continue to keep everybody on the same page, and not just teachers?

How do we respond to pressures from the state for testing and accountability and remain as true as we can to our vision of continuous progress and individual growth? How do we move to next steps in multiage and middle school teaming and learning communities? How do we keep taking the next steps forward despite outside pressures?"

The journey goes on. It will be difficult, she concludes, but the district remains committed to staying the course.

Value (#1) drives Culture and Climate (#2); that Learning Standards (#3) drives Performance Expectations for Personnel (#4), which in turn drives Professional Development (#5); and so on. This is not to suggest that the work on one responsibility must be completed before work on the next one can begin. System reform is not a linear process, and system leaders need to work on var-

ious fronts simultaneously. However, we believe a first-things-first rationale underlies the sequencing, and that only limited progress can be made, for example, on implementing standards until significant attention has been given to the organization's culture or climate.

The sequencing can be "tested" by looking at the responsibilities in reverse order. Efforts at Advocacy (#8), for example, might well fall on deaf ears if the system is perceived

as not being Accountable (#7). The system cannot hold its personnel Accountable (#7) for results fairly and meaningfully without first providing the necessary Resources (#6) and Professional Learning (#5). And you can carry it all the way back to the beginning.

We invite you to take ESSPAR for a test drive and to let us know what you think and how it might be refined. Please send your observations or suggestions to [sthompson@foundation.panasonic.com](mailto:sthompson@foundation.panasonic.com).

Return address:  
PANASONIC FOUNDATION  
2 Panasonic Way, 7B0  
Secaucus, New Jersey 07094

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