

Springboard Research

Minding the Gap: Executive Summary



New Roles for School Districts in the Age of Accountability

A Study of High-performing, High Poverty School Districts in California

By Springboard Schools

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Overview

For decades, school district offices were cast as villains in the drama of school reform—intractable bureaucracies that either got in the way or, at best, were irrelevant to the task of improving schools. In contrast, this study suggests that school district offices can play a key role in improving schools, especially for students on the wrong side of the achievement gap. Leaders of the most effective districts help schools most when they embrace neither centralization nor decentralization of power, but rather when they hit a balance between the two. And these districts help poor children and English Language Learners the most not by embracing mantras like “all students can learn,” but when they “mind the gap” by focusing attention on the groups of students who need the most help.

Despite the emerging consensus that districts can play a leadership role in improving teaching and learning, many do not. The goal of this study is to shed light on the specific strategies effective districts—by which we mean central office, board, and superintendent—use to lead and foster a process of improvement. To do the study, Springboard Schools conducted a comprehensive analysis of test score trends over the past three years in California school districts. We selected districts that served at least 1,500 students in total and high percentages of students in poverty and English Language Learners, and then sorted these districts into a high-performing and a lower-performing group. We surveyed principals to look for differences in the approaches taken by the two groups of districts. Finally, we conducted three in-depth case studies—Elk Grove Unified in southern Sacramento, Rowland Unified in Los Angeles, and Oak Grove Elementary in south San Jose—that gave us a more detailed look at what high-performing districts do.

Findings

This study makes a strong case that there *are* systematic differences between high-performing districts and lower-performing districts. Successful districts share the following characteristics:

- **The leaders of the most effective districts ensure that student testing does not stand alone but is part of a larger continuous improvement process.** Leaders in these districts have used scarce resources to build systems to help teachers and principals use testing data to drive a process of continuous improvement. In Oak Grove, for example, teachers form Continuous Improvement Teams that work together in a structured way to understand and respond to the gaps in their program. In this way, the leaders of the most effective districts build on and leverage state and federal accountability requirements. These requirements are an essential part of the reform strategy of these districts, but they are just the first step in a much more complex process of change.
- **The successful school districts place a premium on professional development so that administrators’ and teachers’ knowledge is continually updated and that they are provided with the tools they need to raise student achievement.** While the formula for standards-based reform may under-emphasize professional development, successful school districts don’t. Professional development in high-performing high-poverty districts goes beyond events like workshops or training sessions and even beyond new roles like teacher coaches. The most effective districts appear to use all of these strategies and more to create both school- and district-level professional learning communities that focus on improving teaching for underperforming

groups. For example, almost two-thirds of principals in the highest performing group of districts strongly agreed with the statement “my district provides teachers with professional development on differentiated instruction,” while less than one-fifth of principals in lower-performing districts agreed with this statement.

- **Leaders in the most effective districts get results by finding a clear and workable balance between centralized and decentralized strategies.** For years, those seeking to improve schools have been divided into two camps. One camp focuses on decentralization, while the other focuses on the opposite. Decentralizers talk about “site based decision-making,” charter schools and choice. On the other side, the centralizers argue for a “managed improvement” approach to reform. While the debate continues, the leaders of the high-performing high-poverty districts that we studied embraced neither extreme, but instead made strategic choices to centralize some things and decentralize others. These choices were quite different from district to district. For example, Rowland decentralizes many budget decisions, but requires that all teachers give a common set of benchmark assessments. The more typical response is to centralize budget and decentralize assessment. What seems to matter is that districts hit a workable balance between the two approaches and that school-level leaders have clear understanding of which decisions are theirs and which belong to the district office.
- **District leaders endorse the same, three-step, standards-based reform process, but they don’t follow it blindly.** Under the *No Child Left Behind* act (NCLB), federal policy assumes a consistent and coherent strategy for creating better schools: first, align the curriculum with standards; next, put in place the diagnostic assessments to monitor student progress; and finally, create the intervention programs to help struggling students. This approach makes sense. Everyone seems to agree. But, not surprisingly, reform is not as linear as policymakers sometimes seem to assume. Some district offices do in fact begin with work on curriculum alignment. But, other equally effective ones begin by investing much more heavily in assessment systems than in curriculum, in some cases even using assessment to help teachers align their own curriculum. Ultimately, all three steps seem to matter, but both order and emphasis vary widely.

Recommendations for District Leaders: New Roles for School District Central Offices

The leaders of districts that get the best results with challenging populations of students embrace new roles and new ways of thinking about the work they do. Specifically, this report suggests district leaders should:

- **Be explicit about both student learning goals and strategies for achieving those goals**
Innovative leaders in every sector often operate from intuition—they know *what* to do, but not *why*. District leaders, even in the most successful districts, rarely have a ready answer to questions about strategy. But a central recommendation that emerges from this study is that district leaders develop and implement deliberate strategies to maintain focus and build organizational capacity. The raw materials for such strategies are common enough: goal setting, data systems, professional development, community outreach. Every school district central office undertakes activities in each of these categories. What seems to set the most successful districts apart is that they weave these elements into a coherent strategy—mere activity does not constitute a strategy. Strategy requires not only a coherent and interconnected set of steps; it also requires that these be carried out over the long term. As one Superintendent put it, “it’s not a sprint, it’s a marathon.”

- **Invest in and use multiple assessments allowing for quick, accurate, and user-friendly reporting on student learning**

Education leaders are under continual pressure to invest scarce resources in providing direct services to students rather than in building infrastructure. But it is becoming more and more clear that the most successful district offices invest in the systems to provide timely feedback to teachers and school sites. Human feedback is provided by teacher-coaches and/or administrators who arrange their day to include spending time in classrooms. But feedback about professional practice from these sources is combined with feedback from multiple assessments and user-friendly data systems that together provide teachers with useful data about student performance. Three quarters of principals agreed that their high-performing district “encourages the use of multiple assessments,” while only about a third of principals in lower performers agreed with this statement. Seventy percent of principals in high-performing districts agreed that their district’s data system “allows teachers to track their students’ progress over time.” Only 40% of principals in lower-performing districts agreed with this statement.

- **Focus on building human and organizational capacity through systems, structures and processes that allow for shared learning**

Education is a human endeavor, and the leaders of the most effective districts do an effective job of recruiting, managing, and developing their people. For example, each of the effective districts we studied invested in a variety of strategies for creating school-based learning communities for teachers. But the leaders of these districts also build organizational capacity at the same time that they invest in individuals. Organizational capacity includes systems, structures, and processes, and it also includes the culture that underlies these. It is by paying attention to organizational capacity that school districts insure against the upheaval that can result from leadership turnover

- **Create a constituency for focus by reporting regularly to staff and the public on goals and progress towards goals**

It is a cliché to bemoan the many forces that tend toward fragmentation in school districts: changing policy perspectives at the federal, state, or local level; overly prescribed requirements for a blizzard of categorical programs; a plethora of interest groups and service providers; the need of new leaders to carve out new territory; a culture that translates urgency into an effort to do everything at once—the list could continue. What is new is from this report is concrete examples of the ways that leaders in several districts have created counter-balancing forces. One strategy these district leaders embrace is reporting to the public. It was striking that over 90% of principals in the most effective districts—and only 50% of those in less effective ones—strongly agreed with the statement that “my district reports to the public on the achievement of all student subgroups.”

- **“Mind the Gap” by owning the challenge of English Language Learners**

One of the most striking findings from the survey of principals was the picture it painted of a proactive role for district offices with regard to English language learners. Principals in the districts getting the best results with these students reported that their district offices were active in supporting teacher training for teachers with ELL students, in ensuring principals know which students are English learners, in developing an intake system that meets the needs of ELL students, and in using assessment data to track these students. And the proactive role of the district office with regard to English language learners does not stop at the classroom door. Sixty-four percent of principals in high-performing districts strongly agreed with the statement that “my district’s central office encourages principals to structure alternative grouping so teachers can target instruction to students’ proficiency levels,” whereas only 30% of principals in lower-performing districts strongly agreed. Leaders of the highest-performing districts clearly treat the education of English learners as a system-wide responsibility, not just a function of the categorical programs office.

What Effective Districts Do—But Don't Get Distracted By

Much of the energy of district leaders has traditionally been taken up with issues far from the improvement of teaching and learning. A striking finding in the effective districts in this study is what their leaders don't talk about: They don't talk much about labor disputes and strikes. They don't talk a lot about school construction or school safety. They don't get bogged down in problems with the school board. These issues have not disappeared in these districts; in fact, they are always present. But they are managed in an ongoing way so that they are background rather than foreground.

In our intensive case studies it was notable that all three district offices maintain good relations with unions. This is not accidental but deliberate. Work on relationship building is evident in many small things, like fewer grievances being filed, and by the involvement of union representatives in key district committees and meetings. Similarly, campus maintenance never goes away as an issue. But in these districts safety, cleanliness, and classroom supplies are taken care of.

Finally, all superintendents see their jobs as maintaining good board relations. The superintendents in these districts are able to be proactive in this role focusing on educating and involving board members rather than controlling them.

About Springboard Schools

Springboard Schools is a California-based nonprofit and non-partisan network of educators committed to raising student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. Springboard Schools was founded in 1995 as the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC). Since that time, Springboard Schools has worked with 325 schools in 74 districts in the San Francisco Bay Area, Central Valley, and Southern California.

Springboard's "research to action" approach to improving schools consists of three parts: 1) we study schools and districts getting good results with challenging populations to understand what they're doing right; 2) we provide professional development to educators and administrators; and 3) we partner with school districts to provide intensive, on-site coaching so new ideas are transformed into real improvements for students and teachers. The Springboard Schools research team has developed a national reputation as a reliable source of information that is useful to both practitioners and policy-makers.

At the center of the Springboard program is our Cycle of Inquiry process. We created this unique data-based decision-making process for improving schools because we believe the best results start with asking the right questions. We also believe that examining student achievement data alone is not enough; we must also closely examine how teachers teach and how schools and districts are organized. All of this has a huge influence on student learning. The Cycle of Inquiry process can be used at multiple levels of a school system, from the classroom to the boardroom.

Springboard's clients are school districts across California. They range from large districts to small ones and include urban, suburban and rural districts. Springboard's program for improving schools was rigorously evaluated over a five-year period by an independent research team at Stanford University's Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC).¹ CRC's intensive study documented that test scores in Springboard schools rose more rapidly than those in a carefully matched group of schools that did not take part in our program. Those schools that implemented the Springboard model most faithfully made the biggest gains.

Springboard Schools' mission is to provide education organizations and their leaders at every level of the system with the knowledge, skills and tools to create school systems in which good teaching is the norm in every classroom for every student and in which students' race, class, language, gender or culture are never barriers to high achievement.

¹ Bay Area School Reform Collaborative: Phase One (1996-2001) Evaluation; Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, Stanford University.

