



SREB

The District Leadership Challenge:

*Empowering Principals
to Improve Teaching
and Learning*

2009

Southern
Regional
Education
Board

www.sreb.org

LEARNING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP PROGRAM



This report was developed by Gene Bottoms, SREB senior vice president, and Betty Fry, director, Leadership Research and Publications.

The research and the publication are supported by the Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people. The foundation's three current objectives are to 1) strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement; 2) improve out-of-school learning opportunities; and 3) expand participation in arts and culture. In pursuit of these goals, Wallace supports the development of knowledge and analysis from multiple sources and differing perspectives. The findings and recommendations of individual reports are solely those of the authors. For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit Wallace's Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

Executive Summary

The Principal Solution

Nearly 7,000 students drop out of American high schools each day. Altogether, an estimated 1.2 million teenagers abandon the public school system each year without a diploma or an adequate education. A disproportionate number will have attended the nation's 2,000 high schools in which less than 60 percent of students graduate within four years of entering the ninth grade.

The future is not much brighter for many of those students who do persist and earn a high school diploma. An estimated 40 percent of freshmen in community colleges (and 20 percent in public four-year institutions)¹ require remedial instruction in reading, writing or mathematics before they can succeed in college-level courses.

Unless high school conditions change dramatically, these same statistics will be repeated year after year. Since 2001, billions of public and private dollars have been invested in reforms designed to solve the problems of the American high school, from small-school initiatives to high-stakes exit exams. Yet the most recent data reported by *Education Week's Diplomas Count* project reveal that nearly 30 percent of the class of 2008 failed to graduate with their peers.

What is missing from efforts to promote positive change? In SREB's view, a central reason for the unending graduation and preparation problems is the failure of many public school districts to systematically provide the working conditions that well-trained principals need to succeed.

Districts have to treat principals like they expect them to lead. Principals and teachers need control over the learning process. District leaders need to invite innovation in *every* school and assist the innovators by marshalling their *own* leadership skills to engage communities in powerful conversations about the need for change.

What Principals Are Saying

To better define what is missing from districts' support of principals' working conditions, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) surveyed principals about the conditions under which districts currently expect them to improve school and student performance. This research, which was supported by and grounded in SREB's extensive school improvement experience, was designed to answer one key question: *What perceptions do high school principals have of the conditions their districts are providing in support of school improvement?*

The initial study included confidential interviews with 22 principals implementing the SREB *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* school improvement model. These principals led schools in small, medium and large districts in 17 states. (See Appendix B for a complete description of the study.)

SREB focused the interviews on seven strategies identified by research as commonly present in school districts that effectively support school reform:

1. Establish a clear focus and a strategic plan for improving student achievement.
2. Organize and engage the district office in supporting each school to create and implement a customized school improvement agenda within a district improvement framework.
3. Provide instructional coherence by establishing a vision of effective instructional practice; aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment to the vision and to state and national standards; and creating the context for meaningful learning experiences.
4. Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals and teachers that is aligned with the district and school-specific improvement agendas.
5. Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices and assist schools to use data effectively.
6. Optimize human, financial and other resources to provide a level of support that is sufficient for schools to produce specified student performance results.
7. Use open, credible processes to involve progressive school and community leaders in school improvement.

By comparing the interview responses of principals in high-performing and low-performing schools, SREB learned more about how relationships between central office leaders and high school principals can magnify or diminish the principal's capacity to effectively lead a school to higher levels of achievement.

Principals at the most-improved high schools felt they had a collaborative working relationship with the district. They gave a much more expansive description of district staff responsibilities for improving student achievement and the support they received from the district.

In the least-improved high schools, most reform initiatives were centralized in the district office. The district was not concerned about empowering and building the capacity of school leaders to be real players in school reform.

These findings are consistent with SREB's observations made over two decades of work to improve high schools and middle grades schools.

The Principal Must Be a Player

Can high schools make significant gains in achievement, slash the dropout rate, and offer demanding and highly engaging instruction *without the principal as a key player*? A preponderance of recent research says they cannot.²

Researchers have shown that a principal who is committed to school reform is crucial in sustaining school improvement. Principals can profoundly influence student achievement by working with teachers to shape a school environment conducive to learning; aligning instruction with a standards-based curriculum; organizing resources to improve classroom instruction and student learning; and making good decisions about hiring, professional learning and other issues that influence the quality of teaching.

Without such on-the-ground leaders, high schools stand little chance of helping more students meet grade-level or higher standards, stay in school, and graduate prepared for the next steps in their education and careers. Yet having such leaders in place is not enough. *Even the most talented and best-trained principals will fail if their working conditions do not support their improvement efforts.*

Principals' working conditions are largely determined by leaders in the school district central office. And a recent National Academy of Sciences study concluded that purposeful district-level support of high school reform is even more critical than that of elementary- or middle-level school reform.³

High school principals need training, technical support, adequate resources and supportive policies to become instructional leaders who can focus more clearly on teaching, learning and the needs and interests of students. They need encouragement and political support from their local school boards in order to take risks and implement innovative organizational structures, school schedules and partnerships with employers and postsecondary institutions.

High school principals who are striving to help students meet college- and career-readiness standards need a supportive work environment. They need the authority and political cover to meet the high demands of the position, especially on curriculum, instructional methods and personnel. School districts seeking to raise student achievement and high school graduation rates among all student groups must ensure that the entire range of conditions and incentives are in place for principals to help teachers improve teaching and learning.

Depending on principals to be superheroes is not a solution to the problem of working conditions that hinder widespread high school reform. While some exceptional principals make progress despite the lack of supportive conditions, many others respond by foregoing attempts to make the complex changes in school and classroom practices that can boost student motivation and achievement.

How District Leaders Can Power Up High Schools

Find or develop the right principal for each high school. Expect principals to become instructional leaders. Give them the authority and support to assume that role. Then hold them accountable.

The most consistent research finding about school district effectiveness is this: Districts must maintain a strong focus on improving instruction and raising standards and achievement by supporting principals to become instructional leaders.

By this standard, few school systems can claim to be near peak effectiveness. The challenge for districts is two-fold: (1) Clear away regulations and conditions that hinder the ability of principals and teachers to improve curriculum, instruction and student achievement; and (2) build capacity within the district's central office to support school ownership of the learning process.

Many districts are still more focused on educational management than educational leadership. Support for improving instruction is not grounded in research on effective teaching, nor does it set forth a systemic approach to improvement that gives principals the guidance they need to bring about more effective instructional practices.

In districts with high-achieving high schools, principals have more time to concentrate on instructional improvement. They have more resources and more flexibility in how they can use them to address the needs of students who have fallen behind in school. They are more likely to have effective student counseling and instructional coaches in literacy and mathematics.

In these districts, professional learning is built on promoting research-based school and classroom practices; aligning training with district and school priorities for improvement; and evaluating its impact on improving school and classroom practices and student outcomes.

Expand the vision for teaching and learning in high schools beyond the minimums. Emphasize instruction that engages all students in authentic types of learning. Create the motivation for students to pursue a high school diploma.

In too many districts, the district strategy is to circumvent principals on curriculum and instructional matters. The districts' most common goals and expectations, as seen by principals, are related to improving the state test scores of specific student groups and having a higher percentage of students meet accountability targets as required by federal law. Too often, *the district mission is for students to meet minimum standards* — not accelerating achievement for all groups of students or producing high school graduates who are well prepared for postsecondary education and careers.

Districts failing to make major improvements in their high schools often do not have a cohesive improvement agenda — including clear goals, research-based practices, supporting strategies and improvement-focused accountability. Instead, they are characterized by many incoherent actions. Principals experience these actions as fragmented or a series of random improvement acts, rather than a well-designed system of improvement.

Successful districts have a clear vision for improvement. They convey to principals an urgent need to examine all aspects of the school — including scheduling, climate and culture, student motivation, instructional practices, use of resources, and partnerships with employers and postsecondary institutions — to identify and address the problems contributing to poor student performance. And they support principals to accomplish this task.

Give principals authority commensurate with their responsibility.

A 2007 report commissioned by the Fordham Institute, *The Autonomy Gap*, notes “how little true authority ... principals enjoy in key areas. Their budgets are essentially handed down to them, or at least strictly regulated from above. In most cases, the curriculum is determined for their school, and they have little control over who works there.”⁴

Many principals are involved neither in defining instructional issues that exist in their schools nor in developing viable solutions. Instead, these decisions are made at the district (or state) level. Principals have little ownership of problems and little support or motivation to find solutions.

Regardless of district size, the principals of the most-improved schools in this study were more likely to describe loose district control over decisions about school improvement (while principals of the least-improved schools were more likely to describe tight district control).

The principals who feel their authority is more commensurate with their responsibility reported that their superintendents and school boards support decentralized decision-making as much as possible — and especially support the principal’s ability to make personnel decisions and to recommend moving or dismissing teachers who do not meet expectations.

In districts that decentralize decision-making, leadership roles have been redefined at all levels — from the superintendent, district office staff and school board, to principals and teachers. District staff members understand that their role is to support principals, not circumvent them. They visit schools frequently to provide coaching, staff development and technical assistance. Principals in such districts have the autonomy and resources to engage teachers continually in professional learning that targets groups and individual students, and teachers take leadership in working together to improve curriculum and instructional issues.

Develop a collaborative partnership among the district, the principal and the school leadership staff.

Rather than working *with* a supportive district, many principals spend time and effort finding ways to work *around* the district office to improve student achievement. They feel forced to circumvent protocols for hiring and develop underground relationships with individuals in the district office to find the support they need.

The best districts demonstrate evidence of a collaborative “lattice” approach between the school and central office. With the right principals in place, districts are providing the necessary support for them to lead their schools to success. When districts allow principals to focus on school improvement, principals can help their teachers to do the same.

Give principals a full arsenal of strategies to meet the weighty expectations now being set for America's high schools.

SREB's research indicates that principals' capacity to instigate improvements effectively is particularly lacking in high-needs schools. Principals often pointed out the failure of school districts to provide adequate staff support, technical assistance, professional learning, data analysis or resources to help at-risk students.

Successful districts provide school leaders with proven reform strategies such as new ways of using school time and organizing staff so teachers can work together on instructional issues, additional teachers and personnel with expertise in instruction, a range of extra-help strategies for students who need more assistance and time to achieve proficiency, and an adequate supply of up-to-date instructional tools and materials.

Tailor support to the needs of individual schools.

In many districts, some schools may perform well while others flounder. Districts need to set system-wide goals and then tailor their reform and support strategies to the unique characteristics of each school.

In this study, principals in the most-improved schools were more likely to report frequent visits from district staff than were the principals in the least-improved schools. While meeting the needs of all schools, districts must provide the greatest amount of attention and assistance to schools in need of greatest improvement. The goal is not to implement top-down control, but to build the capacity of each school leadership team to adapt and implement improvement strategies effectively.

Principals of the most-improved schools were also more likely to describe visitors from the central office as being focused on instructional matters than their counterparts in the least-improved schools. Anytime district staff visit a school, they bring a message about what is important. Their message should always be about the why's and how's of accelerating student learning.

Ensure principals have the necessary data and data-analysis skills to link information about results to students' experiences in school.

District improvement initiatives are spurred by the collection and analysis of data related to student achievement. Effective districts provide and use data to guide district, school and classroom improvements in instruction and student performance.

Yet many districts hoard important performance data at the district level rather than helping principals and teachers learn to use the data in improving curriculum and instruction. Often, if schools do get data, the primary focus is on fixing the students. The data seldom are used to reveal what could be fixed in the learning system that allowed students to perform below grade level.

Principals in the least-improved schools were far more likely to report that data were presented to them primarily as evidence of their success (or, more often, failure) in reaching state-mandated performance targets. This reveals a critical flaw in some districts' understanding of how to use data to implement effective improvement strategies.

One key use of data is to align resources in ways that address deficits. Effective districts provide a wide range of data to schools to help them plan professional learning activities, to align curriculum and instruction, to assist and evaluate personnel, and to identify students needing accelerated instruction to reach grade-level standards.

Districts with effective improvement plans provide data to schools in ways that enable principals and teachers to disaggregate and analyze the data by teacher, students' gender, students' ethnicity and other groupings. These districts use data to identify specific strengths, weaknesses and achievement gaps between groups of students and help principals and teachers face challenges revealed by the data.

Send a clear message to the community about the need for change.

Districts must develop awareness among parents, business, and community leaders about how they can support high schools in creating learning experiences that foster greater motivation among all groups of students. Unfortunately, community involvement in schools often amounts to little more than information sharing.

Many districts fail to engage key stakeholders in understanding the larger vision of a modern high school in the new competitive, global economy. They do not help principals develop partners — including parent-leaders who can support the success of all students in the school — who will support change.

Districts that build such community and parent partnerships begin by demonstrating their commitment to a vision of high-performing schools and the research-based practices that will realize that vision. They identify and acknowledge poor performance. They adopt an unwavering belief in the potential of all students to meet high expectations. They take steps to help stakeholders understand that, to ensure more students finish a challenging core curriculum, schools will need to link their learning experiences to authentic activities, problems and projects that expose them to the real work of careers.

Principals as Leaders of Change

This report does not urge school districts to abandon their oversight of schools. Rather, district leaders must support a comprehensive framework for school-level improvement and implementation. Central office staff must reach agreement with principals about the improvement design and then expect schools to implement it. Districts should monitor implementation in action and define good implementation of improvement strategies.

For many of the principals interviewed for this study, the work of high school improvement takes place mainly behind the closed doors of the school building. On the one hand, this condition allows principals and teachers to take full ownership of problems and solutions. On the other hand, it deprives them of the support, technical assistance, coaching and collaboration they may need to transform that ownership into improved outcomes for all groups of students.

The district leadership challenge is to move from oversight, from holding principals accountable at arms length, to providing the capacity-building support that true district-school partnerships require. The research is clear and overwhelming: If school districts want high-achieving high schools, they must empower principals to be leaders of change.

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Why Principals' Working Conditions Matter

High schools' capacity to improve student achievement is an issue of mounting concern among federal, state and local policy-makers; educators; parents; and future employers. The problems of high dropout rates, low academic achievement, and large numbers of graduates who are under-prepared to succeed in college and careers have led many critics to question the quality of education being provided by the nation's high schools. Schools in high-poverty urban and rural areas are especially challenged by these problems.

Research shows that, to improve student motivation and achievement, schools must pursue fundamental changes in curriculum, instructional practices, organizational structures and school culture. Specifically, comprehensive reform must result in changes that engage students with relevant and intellectually challenging materials and must be based on the belief that, with support, most students can achieve at high levels.⁵ These reforms are complex, requiring dramatic changes in traditional attitudes and beliefs about students' ability to master a rigorous academic curriculum, teaching methods that foster students' motivation to learn, and support needed by students and faculty to create a personalized learning environment. Multiple approaches to reform are needed to achieve high expectations and high standards for students' learning.

Much has been written about the changes schools need to make, and numerous reform efforts have been initiated by districts and schools; but the reality is that these fundamental changes have not occurred on a broad scale. While some high schools are posting gains in achievement across all groups of students, the nation's overall record of progress leaves little doubt that most high schools have not made necessary, significant changes.



“Successful high school reforms convey high expectations and promote a sense of confidence in a student’s ability to succeed, feelings of control over academic outcomes, beliefs in the value of education, and a sense of belonging and respect. Effective schools and effective teachers provide support and help students understand what it takes to learn and succeed in school.”⁶

Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn

National Indicators Demonstrate the Need for Widespread High School Reform

- Less than one-third of rising freshmen read at grade level.⁷
- More than 1.2 million high school students drop out every year — roughly 7,000 each day.⁸
- More than 40 percent of freshmen in community colleges and 20 percent of freshmen in public four-year institutions require remedial instruction in reading, writing or mathematics to handle college-level work.⁹
- Less than 60 percent of students attending the 2,000 high-minority high schools across the nation graduate within four years of entering high school.¹⁰
- According to the National Association of Manufacturers, 60 percent of high school graduates are poorly prepared for entry-level jobs.¹¹

The strategies that states and districts have relied on to drive school reform (e.g., higher standards, high-stakes testing, principal and staff accountability for meeting annual progress goals) are not enough to get the job done. **How do states, districts and schools ensure the complex changes crucial to the future of our students take place in every high school?**

Provide Schools With Effective Principals

Principals profoundly influence student achievement by working with teachers to shape a school environment that is conducive to learning; aligning instruction with a standards-based curriculum; organizing resources to improve classroom instruction and student learning; and making decisions about hiring, professional learning and other issues that influence the quality of teaching.¹² Schools need skillful and knowledgeable leaders who work with all faculty members to create an authentic and intellectually challenging curriculum aligned with college- and career-readiness standards and support teachers to use proven instructional methods. Without such leaders, there is little chance of the school making the changes that will help more students meet at least grade-level standards, stay in school, and graduate prepared for the next steps in their education and careers.

Provide Principals With Supportive Working Conditions

Once the right principals are in place, they must be provided with the support needed to lead their schools to success. **Even the best-trained principals will fail if their working conditions do not support improvement efforts or create insurmountable barriers to change.** A recent National Academy of Sciences study concluded that district support of high school reform is even more critical than that of elementary- or middle-level school reform.¹⁴



“A recent study of teachers’ working conditions in North Carolina showed that effective leadership contributed to both teacher retention and student learning. At the high school level, high-quality leadership was the single greatest predictor of whether or not schools had high student achievement as defined by NCLB.”¹³

Teacher Working Conditions Are Student Learning Conditions

Principals' and teachers' working conditions are set in place through a host of state and district policies and administrative rules. These policies set schools' goals, strategies and program outcomes; allocate resources and funding; define professional learning and other services; and shape accountability.¹⁵ Principals have to work within conditions set by state and local governance that either support or impede them in leading successful schools — conditions that impact principals' success encompass much more than the readily obvious categories of school facilities, staffing and budgets. An article published by The Wallace Foundation described the conditions influencing principals' work as follows:

One way to think of these conditions of leadership is that they include anything affecting the success or failure of leaders that more training alone can't fix. They include, among other things: the adequacy of resources including people, money and time; whether or not there is effective use of data to drive and evaluate decision-making; the organizational culture; the panoply of incentives that either encourage or discourage the various players in school systems from working toward the goal of putting student achievement first; whether or not relations between school boards and school leaders are productive and harmonious; union contracts; and the presence or absence of adequate training and professional support from both school leaders and others in the system.¹⁶

This report has grown out of a concerted effort to learn more about the ultimate effects of district policies, practices and incentives on principal performance. **Through this report, SREB seeks to inform districts' actions to recruit, develop, support and retain quality principals who can help students achieve at higher levels and graduate college- and career-ready.**

Study Design and the Broader Context of Research Findings

The findings in this report are consistent with the conclusions drawn from SREB's extensive school improvement work in high schools and middle grades schools over the past two decades. SREB's *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* school improvement network, created in 1987, currently includes more than 1,200 schools in 31 states. The *Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW)* network assists approximately 360 middle grades schools in 19 states to improve student preparation for high school studies.

SREB's consultants draw from their expertise and training in leading schools to improve student achievement to provide ongoing coaching, staff development and technical assistance to schools in the *HSTW* and *MMGW* networks. Each year, approximately 150 schools in the network receive in-depth Technical Assistance Visits (TAVs) — three-day visits conducted by a team of experts and led by an SREB school improvement coach. Through observation, interviews and a review of data, SREB identifies the specific strengths and weaknesses in district and school practices, the challenges the district and school face in improving achievement for all groups of students, and a set of research-based actions to overcome these challenges.

SREB's on-site work with schools has been supplemented by extensive data from the *HSTW* Assessment, which includes three subject tests, a student survey and a teacher survey. These surveys measure faculty and student perceptions regarding the quality of school and classroom practices that teachers and school leaders create and students experience. SREB links students' achievement on the subject tests to student and teacher survey data, allowing schools to better understand the extent to which the school reform design has been implemented and its impact on advancing achievement.

Based on its in-school experiences and data analyses, SREB has long concluded that when districts engage school and teacher leaders in a collaborative effort to improve teaching and learning, they will achieve significant gains in achievement for all student groups. SREB's insights gained from its school improvement work greatly shaped the descriptions of effective implementation of the seven strategies described in this report.

Building on this work, SREB designed this study to learn more about principals' perceptions of their working conditions as they strive to lead school improvement. SREB staff conducted interviews with 22 *HSTW* principals in small, medium and large school districts in 17 states.¹⁷ Using the results from the 2004 and 2006 *HSTW* Assessments, SREB selected these 22 principals from two lists of schools: 12 schools showing the most improvement in student achievement between 2004 and 2006, and 10 schools showing the least improvement (hereafter referred to as the most-improved schools and the least-improved schools). The examples and feedback from these 22 principals confirm many of SREB's observations from working with schools for more than 20 years. (See Appendix B for a complete description of the sampling procedure and research methodology used in the study.)

The interviews with principals focused on their perceptions of the district office's support for school reform and, more specifically, district-level actions to implement seven strategies identified by research as important supports to school reform. The following seven questions framed the study:

- Are principals' efforts to improve their schools supported by a clear district focus and strategic plan for improving student achievement?
- How are district staffs engaging in improvement at the school level?
- Are principals guided by a coherent district framework for improving instruction and student achievement?
- Are principals and their staffs provided a variety of data, along with training and assistance in using the data to improve instruction and student achievement?
- Do principals have access to technical expertise and high-quality professional learning tailored to their schools' needs?
- Do principals have access to and control of human, financial and other resources that they need to effect school improvement?
- Do principals have help from the district in securing parent and community involvement in the school's improvement agenda?

Throughout the interviews, principals were probed about the degree of autonomy they have in making decisions for their schools. At the end of the interview, SREB asked each principal to identify additional supports for school improvement that he or she needed from the district office as a means of pinpointing conditions not addressed by the interview questions. (See Appendix C for the complete set of questions used.)

The feedback from interviews provides a broad, rich picture of the status of district conditions impacting principals' efforts to lead school reform. While the sample size did not meet the requirements of statistically significant differences, the responses indicate some differences among the most-improved and least-improved schools, regardless of district size or location. **The findings of this study, corroborated by SREB's extensive experience in providing school improvement services, identify aspects of principals' working conditions that states and districts can improve to increase principals' effectiveness and students' learning outcomes.**

Principals' Concerns About Working Conditions: A Challenge for School Districts

"It's striking how little true authority . . . principals enjoy in key areas. Their budgets are essentially handed down to them, or at least strictly regulated from above. In most cases, the curriculum is determined for their schools, and they have little control over who works there. These limitations force principals to be creative within a relatively narrow range of freedom — in other words, to become skilled at the art of middle management."¹⁸

The Autonomy Gap: Barriers to Effective School Leadership

Several national surveys reveal that many principals believe their ability to improve schools is significantly hindered by an excess of restrictive state and district policies and a lack of support and incentives. Public Agenda found that principals of high-needs schools unanimously said that the most important element needed to attract and keep top-notch leadership in high-needs schools is having the support they need to do their jobs.¹⁹

Instead of being supported by the school district, many principals spend time and effort finding ways to work around, rather than with, the district office to focus on student achievement issues. They feel compelled to give obligatory attention to required paperwork and reports, to circumvent protocols for hiring staff and to mine relationships with particular individuals in the district office to get the support they need.

A study by The Wallace Foundation found that, in certain schools and districts (typically those with large concentrations of low-income and minority students, lower per-pupil expenditures and lower staff salaries), working conditions are seen as stressful and forbidding.²⁰ Environments that stifle principals' abilities to focus on student outcomes not only heighten burnout among current school leaders, but also deter high-achieving principals from accepting such positions and discourage prospective principals from entering the field.

Troublesome Working Conditions for Principals²¹

- Inadequacy of resources (e.g., people, money, time)
- Inability to access data for decisions
- Intransigent organizational culture
- Lack of incentives for putting student achievement first
- Difficult relations between the school board and school leaders
- Limited authority over personnel matters
- Inadequate training and professional support
- Unclear or unrealistic expectations regarding principals' responsibilities
- Lack of authority to take actions that meet the high demands of the job
- Marginalization of principals in making meaningful decisions

Principals are concerned with the amount of autonomy and decision-making authority districts are willing to provide. A study by the American Institutes for Research and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute revealed that three-fifths of participating elementary school principals felt constrained in their ability to raise student achievement, although nearly all of them rated their capacity to do so as strong or moderately strong.²² Less than one-third of these principals said they have a great deal of autonomy over the leadership functions they felt contributed most to their effectiveness as a school leaders (e.g., determining the number and type of faculty and staff positions, hiring faculty and staff, assigning faculty and staff, transferring and discharging unsuitable faculty and staff, allocating resources, allocating time for instruction, setting parental involvement requirements, determining student discipline policies and procedures). Less than 20 percent reported having a great deal of autonomy to make decisions about program adoption, curriculum pacing and sequencing, and instructional methods and materials. **Many principals are not involved in defining the instructional problems that exist in their schools, or in developing viable solutions. Rather, these decisions are made at the state or district level, resulting in a lack of school-level ownership of the problems and the school improvement agenda.**

Surveys of principals in Kentucky and Tennessee revealed similar perceptions on the part of elementary, middle grades and high school principals.²³ Although the specific survey questions used in the two states varied, both studies examined six main areas of support for principals' work: adequacy of resources, level of autonomy commensurate with accountability for results, opportunities for professional learning, district-wide focus on improving student learning, district support for improving student learning, and clarity of the principal's roles and authority. A majority of principals in both states identified four areas in need of significant improvement, including the ability to move and dismiss teachers who do not meet expectations. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Principal Working Conditions Requiring Substantial Improvement

Condition	Percentage of Principals Identifying the Condition as Needing “Substantial Improvement”	
	Kentucky (N = 640)	Tennessee (N = 380)
Ability to move and dismiss teachers	84%	62%
Needs-based resource allocations	67	58
Opportunities for networking and collaboration as a means of professional development	70	52
Adequate facilities	58	58

Source: Unpublished surveys conducted by Kentucky and Tennessee state leadership redesign task forces, in collaboration with SREB, 2007

Approximately 40 percent of the principals surveyed in Kentucky and Tennessee reported a need for substantial improvement in their school board’s focus on high achievement for all students. At least 40 percent of respondents in both states said their district offices should be doing more to help them improve student learning.

In case studies of three urban districts, the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform found that districts failed to provide the kind of support, resources and capacity-building that principals and their school staffs needed to achieve the districts’ ambitious reform goals.²⁴ School leaders faced the daunting challenge of implementing large-scale reforms without the comprehensive infrastructure needed to support the development of new skills and knowledge. They had to respond to sometimes overwhelming district office requests while also creating a supportive instructional climate for teachers and crafting instructional programs that addressed students’ unique learning needs, interests and skill levels.

At the same time, other studies show that relying on school-based management alone to drive improvement, while neglecting the supporting role of central office personnel, will not result in significant school improvements.²⁵ **Thus, the challenge for districts is twofold: clear away regulations and conditions that hinder principals’ and teachers’ ability to improve curriculum, instruction and student achievement, and build capacity that supports them in these efforts.**

How Can Districts Support Principals?



“Schools are systems, and if the superintendent can create a climate where principals in the district can honestly and collaboratively grapple with problems, learn from mistakes, and gain critical, constructive, and timely feedback about their work, the probability is increased that principals, in turn, will create that same kind of culture for their teachers, who in turn, will do that in their classrooms . . .”²⁶

John D’Auria
Superintendent of Schools
Canton, Massachusetts

Teaching and learning are the core functions of every school, so nothing matters more than principals’ and teachers’ effectiveness in building a high-quality instructional program and a learning environment that motivates, engages and supports student learning. **While federal and state policies can influence schools’ choices about improving teaching and learning, in the end, it is the district office that must help each school translate policies into improved school practices.**

Districts play an essential role in bringing improvement to scale. Without effective district-wide engagement, some schools may perform well while others continue to flounder. Districts must be accountable for developing a system of goals and a broad set of reform and support strategies that build the capacity of each school leadership team to create and implement effectively a reform agenda that they own.



Springboard Schools conducted a study of the factors contributing to the success of 10 California high schools achieving remarkable results in spite of the challenges of serving high percentages of English learners, students from low-income families and minority students. The study revealed that meeting the needs of the lowest-performing students requires not just classroom-level changes, but also school-and district-level strategies, programs and interventions.²⁷

*Challenged Schools, Remarkable Results:
Three Lessons from California’s Highest Achieving High Schools*

It is incumbent on the district to build a framework of goals and strategies for providing all students in the district with a high-quality education, but that does not mean that the district should merely impose its vision from the top down. Principals and other members of the community must be actively engaged by the superintendent and the school board in developing a common improvement framework for the district. If principals are to implement the framework in their schools and effectively articulate it to teachers and parents, they must have some ownership of the framework. The district must provide leadership for the school system in the same way that principals are expected to provide leadership for their schools — by engaging faculty in taking ownership of problems and the improvement agenda. Unfortunately, many of the principals interviewed by SREB said they are excluded from meaningful discussions about the district framework of goals and strategies.

Increasingly, research is documenting the key roles that districts play in leading and supporting school reform. Recent studies show that principals and teachers demonstrate much greater commitment to implementing reforms when districts engage them in discerning the most essential standards to teach, defining proficient-level student work and identifying a range of teacher assignments that will motivate students to reach grade-level standards. Other studies reveal that each district's professional learning strategies and instructional focus shape what principals' and teachers' do in schools and ultimately, their effects on student outcomes. At least one multi-district study provides evidence that district support for reform is a strong predictor of the outcomes achieved by schools.²⁸

The most consistent finding across these studies is the importance of districts maintaining a strong focus on improving instruction and raising standards and achievement. As principals' chief partners in implementing school reform, districts must deliberately undertake a set of actions to provide technical assistance and resources for effective staff development to strengthen teaching and learning in each school.



“The essence of leading for learning in districts begins with a focused learning and teaching agenda, and is sustained by efforts to keep that focus present in negotiating the broader environment — encouraging support where possible, fending off counter pressures where they arise, and buffering schools from conditions that would impose a barrier to a learning agenda.”²⁹

Leading for Learning Sourcebook: Concepts and Examples

A synthesis of the research³⁰ on how districts effectively support the process of improving instruction and student achievement for all groups of students pinpoints seven strategies that together form a systemic, coherent approach to school reform:

1. Establish a clear focus and a strategic plan for improving student achievement.
2. Organize and engage the district office in supporting each school to create and implement a customized school improvement agenda within a district improvement framework.
3. Provide instructional coherence by establishing a vision of effective instructional practice; aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment to the vision and to state and national standards; and creating the context for meaningful learning experiences.
4. Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals and teachers that is aligned with the district and school-specific improvement agendas.
5. Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices and assist schools to use data effectively.
6. Optimize human, financial and other resources to provide a level of support that is sufficient for schools to produce specified student performance results.
7. Use open, credible processes to involve progressive school and community leaders in school improvement.

For each of the seven strategies, this report provides:

- a snapshot of effective district actions that support principals in their school improvement efforts.
- a summary of principals' perceptions of the support they received in their districts.
- recommended district actions to provide principals more supportive conditions for leading improvement in schools and student achievement.

Are District Strategies Providing Conditions That Support Reform?

Strategy 1. Establish a clear focus and a strategic plan for improving student achievement.

What Implementation of the Strategy Looks Like

The district establishes a clear focus on student achievement by developing and articulating a vision and goals for all students, including mastery of college- and career-readiness standards and preparation for a productive life in a democratic society. The district demonstrates its commitment to this vision by identifying and publicly acknowledging poor performance, adopting an unwavering belief in the potential of students to meet high expectations, and searching for research-based solutions that will improve teaching and learning.

The district's search for solutions is part of a well-articulated reform agenda that defines:

- specific goals and expectations for improvement of academic achievement and other desired outcomes for students.
- an improvement framework that includes research-based school improvement practices and an initial set of actions the district will use to help each school create and implement a plan for continuous improvement.
- an accountability system that focuses on helping schools meet and exceed state and local student performance goals by aligning student assessments with state academic standards, using a variety of data in ongoing reviews of school and student performance, and providing incentives for successfully implementing strategies and achieving district goals.

The components of the district reform agenda are aligned with each other and with the district vision and goals, creating a cohesive framework. The district expectations for improvement define specific changes to be made in school and classroom practices and in student outcomes and ensure their attainment is measurable. Once adopted, the goals and expectations become the district context for policy development, decision-making and other improvement actions by the superintendent, school board, district office and schools.

Example of District Framework for School Improvement

1. Identify and use a schoolwide instructional focus to meet students' needs and end quick-fix projects that fail to effect permanent change in the core values and practices of the school.
2. Look at student work and data in relation to the district-wide learning standards to identify student needs, improve assignments and instruction, assess student progress and inform professional development.
3. Create a targeted professional development plan that gives teachers and principals what they need to improve instruction in core subjects.
4. Learn and use best teaching practices.
5. Align resources — human, time, monetary — with the instructional focus.
6. Involve parents and the community in the district-wide learning standards and assessments and introduce ways parents and the community can support students.

Source: Boston Public Schools Plan for Whole-School Change

Districts can take several approaches when establishing an improvement agenda. Some districts choose to have schools engage in site-based planning processes that identify specific school needs and solutions. In other districts, the central office selects school improvement approaches (e.g., adopting a particular school reform model, adding a literacy coach position to a school, emphasizing career pathways, increasing Advanced Placement course offerings) based on district-wide needs identified through data analysis. Other districts develop a framework of goals, beliefs, and guiding principles and conditions to give direction to schools in customizing a school improvement plan unique to their circumstances. **Regardless, a school improvement agenda is most effective when districts involve schools and community stakeholders in its development.**

Districts provide schools the direction, support and enabling resources — technical assistance, funding, time, personnel, professional learning, technology, facilities and other resources — that principals and school leadership teams need in order to adapt and implement the improvement framework in their schools.

An Improvement Process That Works in High Schools

The district provides support to principals to develop and sustain a continuous improvement team, which is responsible for collecting and analyzing a range of data to determine what is and is not working. This team, under the leadership of the principal, engages a broader group of the faculty (a continuous improvement leadership team) in identifying a set of priority problems to address and formulating a set of solutions. The district supports the continuous improvement team with time and resources for a retreat or workshop designed to lead the entire faculty through the process for addressing priority improvement initiatives during each school year.

Source: SREB, *High Schools That Work* Reform Model

Principals' Perceptions of District Implementation

The interviewed principals perceived their districts to be highly concerned about student achievement. However, their comments reveal that school districts often do not provide a targeted, systemic strategy to change what and how students are taught. **Of the 22 principals interviewed, only one described how the superintendent takes a prominent role in creating a vision of school improvement and monitoring progress on student achievement goals; only one described the superintendent's sharp focus on improving reading and mathematics and a corresponding commitment of substantial resources; and only one credited the superintendent with introducing and pressing for the implementation of a comprehensive high school reform model.**

The interviews produced little evidence that districts are implementing all components of a cohesive improvement framework, including clear goals, research-based principles, supporting strategies and improvement-focused accountability. Instead, districts are taking numerous incoherent actions aimed at improving school and student performance, and principals often experience these as “random improvement acts” rather than a cohesive system of improvement. This lack of a cohesive system of improvement is shown in one principal's description of the district's efforts: “We have a strategic plan with a lot of year-to-year things, a technology plan, facilities plan, and now a personnel plan to provide the staffing required by the new state graduation requirements.”

Most principals indicated that school improvement is a joint effort of the district office and schools, but only a few went on to describe significant involvement of key persons — principals, teachers, parents and community members — in developing a district plan. Others described little or no input from anyone outside the district office. Many of the principals felt completely excluded from these strategic discussions.

Principals' Perceptions: Involvement in Developing a Strategic Direction

- “The strategic plan is developed by the district staff, superintendent and school board. I am not aware of principals having any involvement.”
- “I don't know of any plan that the district has for school improvement.”
- “I really don't have input into the process.”
- “I don't know if some principals are involved. I've never been part of it.”

All principals reported that their districts require them to develop a school improvement plan and to show evidence of progress in improving student achievement each year. About half of the principals reported that their districts have identified additional areas for improvement, such as reducing dropout rates, increasing graduation rates, closing the achievement gap between groups of students, increasing enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, or increasing the percentage of students enrolling in postsecondary studies or career/technical programs. However, the principals' comments reveal that **districts' most common goals and expectations are related to improving the state test scores of specific student groups and having a higher percentage of students meet minimum targets and accountability measures, rather than accelerating achievement to grade-level standards for all groups of students and graduating more students from high school.**

The principals' descriptions of district goals and strategies for improvement indicate that they often are left with vague understandings of expectations and little direction on how some of the most pressing problems, such as student motivation, can be addressed. For example, there was little talk about how student literacy can be increased by embedding high school reading standards and strategies into all courses (academic, career/technical and fine arts); how the high school failure rate can be reduced by redesigning ninth-grade courses and instructional practices and helping more students meet grade-level standards by the end of grade nine; and how graduation rates and readiness for postsecondary study and careers can be enhanced by creating multiple programs of study that blend academic and career technical studies.

This predicament is evidenced by the comments of one principal: “When I was hired for this position, I was informed by the assistant superintendent of schools that my job was to raise student achievement. When I asked how I was to do that, the answer was ‘I don't know, just do it.’ ” This same principal went on to explain that “most of the changes I thought I should make to raise student achievement were turned down by the district office.”

Principals' Perceptions: District Expectations for Improvement

- “The district sets building goals. In our building, it’s student grades, attendance, and obviously our state assessment, ACT [and other] scores.”
- “Meet AYP, and meet AYP.”
- “With *No Child Left Behind* and high-stakes testing, we’re doing like everyone else in trying to reach that 100 percent proficient on those high-stakes state tests.”
- “We are driven by state assessment scores ... we’re expected to meet state averages, especially in communication arts and math.”
- “They want to improve student achievement, improve attendance, increase retention and reduce the dropout rate, reduce discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions, increase parent involvement.”

These goals for improvement often do not convey to principals an urgent need to deeply examine all aspects of the school — including scheduling, climate and culture, student motivation, instructional practices, use of resources, and partnerships with employers and postsecondary institutions — to identify and address the problems contributing to poor student performance. The district requires principals to achieve results, but does not provide guidance on how to improve. Instead, many of the principals described the district’s involvement in their school improvement efforts as twofold: reviewing the school improvement plan to ensure it focuses on meeting AYP targets, and reviewing data from accountability tests to determine the school’s progress toward the targets.

This narrow perspective of districts’ primary role in school improvement was more prevalent among principals of least-improved schools than those of the most-improved schools. Principals from the most-improved schools gave a much more expansive description of their responsibilities for improving student achievement. For example, one principal of a most-improved school said the district supported the school’s leadership team, including teachers from all subject areas and career/technical courses, to “meet in an annual retreat to look at data and assess strategies to improve. This is an ongoing process throughout the year to see what we need to do, and also to make sure staff has adequate professional development to implement recommendations and changes in curriculum.”

Principals’ comments indicated that the district reform agenda often stops short of providing schools with a well-planned improvement framework aimed at creating a learning environment that advances the achievement of all groups of students.

Principals' Perceptions: District Improvement Agendas Often Fall Short

- “A lot of turnover in the district office results in constant change. It’s difficult to have any cohesion because they don’t even know what we are supposed to be doing.”
- “School improvement efforts lack focus and consistency — they’re more flavor-of-the-day, driven by politics, results not being shown to see if something really works before they move on to something else.”
- “Goals are given to us, but I don’t know of a lot of support to actually make sure they are implemented.”
- “The district is organizing for a planning committee, but it’s not in place.”

While some principals described a lack of a district-wide or external improvement plan, all of the interviewed principals were implementing the *HSTW* school reform model, which focuses on implementing a set of Key Practices to help all students experience relevance and high expectations. However, interviews indicated that support for the *HSTW* school improvement model was more superficial in some of these schools and districts. There was a noticeable difference in the comments made by principals of the most-improved schools and those in the least-improved schools about the support they receive from the district office for implementation of the *HSTW* framework. Principals of the most-improved schools mentioned the importance of the *HSTW* framework in providing a strategic focus for the school’s professional development and school improvement planning effort much more frequently (six of 12) than did their counterparts in the least-improved schools (two of 10). In addition, five of these six principals of the most-improved schools reported having strong support for *HSTW* implementation from their superintendents or district offices.

Principals' Perceptions: *HSTW*'s Role in Providing a Framework for Improvement

- “The district has been good about letting us implement the *HSTW* staff development we need.”
- “The superintendent is 100 percent behind *HSTW*.”
- “Before we joined *HSTW*, support was not specific, but generally focused on test scores. Since joining *HSTW*, we have more of a guided vision and focus on what we are starting and trying to achieve.”
- “It is fortunate that the superintendent is a former high school principal who led the school into *HSTW* and supports its key practices.”

Whether or not schools use the *HSTW* school improvement program, districts and schools need a directional framework upon which to build a coherent set of school improvement practices. Without such a framework, schools or districts can drift into a chain of “flavor-of-the-day” initiatives, as one principal described. Successful schools have a culture that encourages learning and academic rigor, and fostering that culture requires both focus and common vision at the district and school levels on practices that engender greater student effort to achieve.

State standards clearly contribute to a sense of vision and direction for districts and schools. Nearly one-third of the interviewed principals (seven of 22) perceive state accountability frameworks as giving them cover to get teachers and students to take the actions necessary to raise student achievement. This finding is contrary to popular expectations that principals are burdened by state accountability standards. In fact, many of the principals in this study appreciated their states’ directness in setting expectations and targets. For example, four years of high school mathematics has been identified as an important component of college and career readiness, but it is often unpopular with students and parents. A principal commented on state-led increases in mathematics requirements for graduation that “our state is out there and is progressive, and it’s filtering down through our legislature and through our superintendents and into our school district. [So we are] actually raising the bar and holding schools accountable [for raising achievement to] those levels at which students can be successful.”

Principals appreciate the cover states can offer them in raising standards for both students and teachers. Another principal said his state was “very supportive in helping us help students, as far as just making sure they’re prepared while they’re in high school and offering the individual graduation plan. ... Rather than just having kids take a class here, a class there, this helps them develop a focus with realistic goals [based on] their interests and some planning.”

While some principals welcome state efforts to raise academic rigor, others are concerned that their states do not provide the resources necessary to help students meet higher standards. Eight of the 22 principals expressed dissatisfaction with state efforts to establish higher standards and higher graduation requirements. Raising achievement requires different instructional strategies and additional support for students. States need to ensure that resources are in place for before- and after-school support for students; robust advisement programs; smaller class sizes permitting differentiated instruction and teacher-student relationship building; challenging career/technical offerings that engage students; curriculum and graduation coaches; and relevant, ongoing professional learning for teachers and administrators. Principals generally do not oppose higher standards, but raising achievement expectations in the absence of appropriate resources has the harmful effect of increasing dropout rates as students opt out when they find they cannot reach the higher bar. As one principal said: “My frustration [with the state] comes from the fact that there are a lot of mandates that are unfunded, so we are given the responsibility of taking care of these things” without the necessary resources. Without additional resources, schools cannot improve outcomes for many of the student groups that historically have been left behind.

None of the principals mentioned incentives for principals and teachers as an issue related to their district improvement initiatives, but SREB’s survey of principals in Kentucky raised this as an issue. Seventy-seven percent of Kentucky respondents reported a need for incentives for significant improvement in student achievement.

Districts can take a variety of actions to better align a framework of goals, proven practices, policies and support required for a strong and effective improvement effort.

Recommended District Actions

1. Involve progressive district, school and community leaders in establishing a clear focus and strategic plan for improving student achievement.
2. Strengthen the district improvement goals and strategies to improve student graduation rates and college and career readiness by specifying what is to be improved, the level of improvement expected and the timeline for improvement.
3. Monitor each school's progress on district improvement goals and the extent to which proven school and classroom practices have been implemented. Provide formative feedback to principals and teachers.
4. Provide meaningful incentives for principals whose schools make progress in implementing improvement strategies and achieving district goals.

Strategy 2. Organize and engage the district office in support of each school.



“Strong central office support of improvement structures fosters school-level implementation. It is imperative that central office staff voice agreement with structures, expect schools to implement them, and know what good implementation looks like. They should strive to observe implementation in action.”³¹

Central Office Inquiry: Assessing Organization, Roles and Actions to Support School Improvement

What Implementation of the Strategy Looks Like

The district office is organized to support each school in creating and implementing a customized plan for improving instruction and student achievement, and steps are taken to make this support visible and integrated into school-level improvement. Leadership roles are redefined at all levels — from the superintendent, district office staff and school board, to principals and teachers. District staff members understand that their role is to support schools and to visit the schools frequently to provide coaching, staff development and technical assistance. **Every position in the district office is evaluated for its contribution to improving school and classroom practices, graduation rates, and students' preparation for college and careers.** Researchers at WestEd found that the superintendent plays an especially important role in molding and articulating a coherent sense of the district office role in creating a shared set of beliefs (theory of action) about what the district office does to support schools in improving student achievement.³²

District office staff engage in continual efforts to help school leaders maintain focus on the district-wide goals and improvement framework by tracking schools' progress, defining specialized support needs, incorporating school and community input on reform strategies, employing resources strategically, and brokering principals' and teachers' access to resources. Furthermore, the district responds to state policy developments in ways that preserve the school improvement focus and minimize distractions for principals and teachers.

District staff members understand the components of their district's improvement plan and can recognize effective implementation in schools and classrooms so that they can help principals and teachers solve implementation issues. They develop collaborative relationships with principals and groups of teachers and spend substantial amounts of time in schools assisting with development and implementation of a school improvement plan. They observe and give feedback, provide principals and teachers with assistance in building leadership capacity, and assist with adoption and use of more effective organizational structures and instructional practices in specific curriculum areas. They listen to principals and teachers before giving advice or guidance. While meeting the needs of all schools, they provide the greatest amount of attention and assistance to those schools in need of greatest improvement.

District superintendents and school boards support decentralized decision-making as much as possible, especially with respect to principals' ability to make personnel decisions. School leaders think carefully about where decision-making authority resides and define roles and expectations so that decisions are made as close to the classroom as possible, by the people who have the most information. Communication channels are set up to support decentralized decision-making. Vertical leadership teams involve teachers and principals in making major district-wide decisions, and the district supports horizontal teams across schools and content areas.

Principals' Perceptions of District Implementation

Principals' responses indicate that their districts have not substantially redefined, realigned and engaged the district office to serve high schools in improving curriculum and instruction, raising student achievement and increasing completion rates. District offices still are more focused on management than on providing instructional leadership. They continue to operate in a "business-as-usual" mode of setting policies and regulations and preside over resource allocation, facilities, and other areas of administration and operation.

When asked about the support districts provide for school improvement, principals most often cited the provision of money, facilities and professional learning. Principals described their district as primarily a financier, setting a budget and providing funds to the school for a variety of purposes, especially professional learning. (See Strategy 4 for findings regarding professional learning.) Examples of support for specific instructional improvement programs were scant. In fact, principals mentioned that their districts provide additional resources for technology and improved facilities more often than additional staff or assistance for improving curriculum and instruction.

Most of the principals described a collaborative relationship with the district staff with whom they interact most frequently. Principals indicated that school improvement is a responsibility shared with district staff. However, when asked about the support for school improvement received from the district staff, only one-third of the interviewed principals described their district office as *very supportive*. The remaining principals described the district as providing *some support*, *no support* or *the wrong support*. Most of the urban principals (five of six) perceived their district office providing *little or no support*, while suburban principals (three of eight) and rural principals (two of eight) were less likely to hold this perception, more often seeing their district as either *very supportive* or providing *some support*.

The principals of both the most-improved and the least-improved schools were mixed in their responses about the level of district support. Overall, principals of the most-improved schools indicated having more support than principals of the least-improved schools, but several principals of the most-improved schools also decried the lack of support. Principals critical of the district office said the approach to improvement does not focus on school staffs’ critical needs, such as assistance with data and performance standards, and is not delivered in a collaborative manner. Perhaps the most telling complaint about out-of-touch, top-down support from a district came from a principal who said: “They provide what they think we need, not what we think we need.” On the other hand, many principals were highly complimentary of the support they received from their districts.

Principals’ Perceptions: Top-Down District Support Versus Needs-Based District Support

Responses Indicating Needs-Based Support	Responses Indicating Top-Down Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “The district is hands-on, on a daily basis.” ■ “You name it, they do it.” ■ “There is tremendous leadership from the central office and superintendent.” ■ “We have support in every area.” ■ “I’ve gotten everything I’ve asked for.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “They provide what they think we need, not what we think we need. The person in charge of curriculum has never been a principal or worked in a high school and does not listen. Sometimes goals change daily. They are doing nothing to build leadership capacity.” ■ “Goals are given to us, but I don’t know of a lot of support to actually make sure they are implemented.” ■ “The assistant superintendent pretty much oversees what is going on in schools — direct involvement is not his thing.” ■ “[I] don’t always think the initiatives being given to us by the district are effective and properly aligned with performance standards.”

While some principals from both the most- and least-improved schools praised the district office’s support, there was generally less substance and specificity to the positive comments of principals of the least-improved schools. Responses from the most-improved schools were specific about data support and district instructional leaders being in the schools. Responses from the least-improved schools were vague and failed to indicate any particular purpose for the district’s support, as reflected in one principal’s comment that “district staff visit once or twice a week, just stopping by, not about anything specific.”

During the interviews, principals were asked how often staff members from the district office were present in their schools and the primary reasons for these visits. Responses from principals varied widely, with some describing daily or weekly visits from their district staff and a few reporting the complete absence of district staff from their schools. **The most-improved schools were more likely to report receiving frequent visits from district staff than were the least-improved schools.**

Principals’ Perceptions: Frequency of Visits from District Office Staff

Often (daily or weekly)	Sometimes (monthly or several times a year)	Never or Not Often (only when invited or a crisis occurs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “It would vary. Usually I’d say once or twice a week.” ■ “Almost daily there is [a district staff member] here in department meetings or observing teachers or having some type of PD.” ■ “Virtually daily... let’s say three days a week.” ■ “We have an administrator from the district level on campus, I would say, once a week at least.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “[They are present] whenever we have any type of meetings.” ■ “The average would be once every two weeks, and that’s at my request this year. And to clarify, it’s just because I’m a new principal and I’ve requested that they not be in as much because I’m trying to establish myself as the leader.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “Not often.” ■ “Never. We had a shooting threat ... and of course they all showed up for that. But other than that, you don’t see them.” ■ “District staff make two academic visits per year.”

Purposes for district staff visits also varied. Such visits often lack a specific focus on instruction and school improvement. Some principals indicated that district staff came to the school to respond to a problem that had arisen or just to be visible. In other cases, principals described district staff being engaged in classroom walkthroughs, instructional meetings, curricular assistance and developing the capacity of the school leadership team to more effectively implement district initiatives. **Principals of most-improved schools were more likely to describe visitors from the central office as being focused on instructional matters than their counterparts in the least-improved schools.**

Principals' Perceptions: Reasons for District Visits

Reflecting a Strong Instructional Focus

- “Sometimes they come and observe teachers. If we call and say we need another set of eyes to see what’s going on in the classroom, they would do that.”
- “We have people who come in who provide support for our intensive reading classes, observe instruction in the classroom, [or] make suggestions as to improvements that we as a school could make or specific teachers could make within their classrooms.”
- “. . . I’ve invited them in to work with my teachers on higher-order questioning or open-response questions. . . . Sometimes they do walkthroughs of classes, just to see what’s going on with instruction.”

Reflecting a Weak Instructional Focus

- “To discuss things with me — mostly managerial.”
- “I think they just like to go out and be visible in the district. Our superintendent usually comes down around lunchtime and wanders around a few classrooms [and] talks to kids, and our assistant superintendent does the same thing.
- “[They visit] because something went wrong — because someone was angry about something and [they are] checking out the information.”

Finally, district offices providing effective support for improvement are organized so that decision-making power often is not centralized in the hands of district staff. When asked about specific decisions they can make, principals reported having the most control over schedules and teacher assignments in their schools. Principals were divided in their ability to hire instructional support staff such as literacy or numeracy coaches. Some principals have this authority, and others do not. Principals almost universally reported that they do not have authority over grading policies, but must work within policies established by their district and state. **Regardless of district size, principals of the most-improved schools were more likely to describe a loose level of district control over school-improvement decisions, while principals of the least-improved schools were more likely to describe tight district control.**

Recommended District Actions

1. Align the work of district office staff with the district goals and improvement framework by redefining their roles and responsibilities to work with principals and teachers collaboratively in implementing the framework and achieving district goals and achievement targets.
2. Review where decision-making authority lies in the district, and give principals authority commensurate with their responsibilities. It is especially critical that principals are able to make personnel decisions for their schools.
3. Provide specialized training and coaching to build district staff capacity to support schools in effectively implementing the district improvement agenda and to assist schools with creating a personalized, relevant and challenging learning environment.

4. Orient principals and teachers to the district's role in school improvement and solicit their input on the most-needed support and assistance.
5. Hold district staff accountable for work that helps schools achieve specific goals for improvement and provide incentives for performance of this work. This involves recognizing district office staff whose service to schools is valued by principals and teachers and has resulted in improved school and classroom practices and student outcomes.

Strategy 3. Provide instructional coherence and support.



“Superintendents need to have a vision of good instruction. Improving test scores is not a vision. It is a political slogan that is used to satisfy politicians and the business community. Instead, superintendents need to spend time in classrooms and have conversations with principals and teachers about how to channel district resources and energy into making that vision of good instruction a daily reality in every classroom.”³³

*A Delicate Balance: District Policies
and Classroom Practice*

What Implementation of the Strategy Looks Like

Effective districts recognize that substantial changes are necessary to provide high school students with a coherent curriculum aligned with college- and career-readiness standards. Instruction must center on the content to be learned and on engaging learning experiences that motivate students to make the effort to stay in school and achieve at high levels. To assist schools in this complex endeavor, the district develops an explicit vision of effective instruction for advancing students' proficiency in essential academic standards. Further, the district implements a systemic approach to improving instruction, which aligns professional learning, technical assistance, resources and performance evaluation with the vision for improvement. Table 3 summarizes the core elements of high school instruction that will result in high student performance.

To ensure these core elements of effective instruction are practiced in every high school classroom, districts support principals in implementing a rigorous, relevant and engaging curriculum in their schools and in coaching their teachers to use effective instructional strategies. Districts provide resources to help teachers create engaging, standards-based lessons, assignments and classroom assessments that check for mastery of a common core of high school studies. In doing these things, districts develop principals' and teachers' capacity to shape and carry out improved instructional practices.

Table 3. Core Elements of High School Instruction That Promotes High Student Performance

Nature of the Work	What Students Are Doing	What Teachers Are Doing	Classroom Norms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Work is rigorous and aligned with standards. ■ Work of teachers and students is meaningful in terms of students' future goals, aspirations, and intellectual development. ■ Assignments, activities and projects promote deeper learning, demand revision and reflection, link to the world of work and civic life and require application to meaningful contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students are the primary workers in the classroom. ■ Students work individually, with teachers and in groups with other students. ■ Students are engaged in meaningful work explicitly connected to prior work, and they understand how their work fits into the particular course, their high school education and the world. ■ Students are actively engaged — behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively. ■ The products of students' work show clear evidence of student learning. ■ Students and teachers are knowledgeable about what constitutes good work. ■ Students review their own performance data and understand how they are doing in the course. ■ Over the course of their high school careers, students take on increasing responsibility for their own learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Teachers use a variety of teaching formats to guide and support student learning, such as direct instruction; work in small, intentionally constructed groups; one-on-one work with students; and independent student work during which students have access to teachers. ■ Teaching engages students. ■ Lessons have clear introductions and closures and reflect both individual planning and collective inquiry about students' learning. ■ Teachers are comfortable with lesson design and the materials they use. ■ Teachers monitor student learning and use data to inform their instruction and to differentiate instruction so all students have the support they need to succeed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ High expectations for achievement and behavior, intellectual engagement and risk-taking, transparency and mutual respect are norms of behavior that permeate all interactions between teachers and students. ■ Students are citizens of their classroom with a corresponding voice in the affairs of the classroom and responsibility for abiding by classroom norms.

Source: Wurtzel, J. *Transforming High School Teaching and Learning: A District-wide Design*. The Aspen Institute: Program on Education & Society, 2006.

Based on their extensive review of research into the district’s role in improving instruction and student achievement, Maclver and Farley describe the district support infrastructure in this way:

“There is a critical role for the school district office in building an infrastructure that provides: 1) continual professional development; 2) in-class implementation support for reform models; 3) organizational assistance (building effective school-organizational structures, like small learning communities, providing budget information early, minimizing last-minute policy and staffing changes, and adequate time for teachers to work collaboratively); and 4) productive use of data (particularly student achievement data). Without cooperation from the school district on these issues, even assistance from external partners and model development teams may be undermined.”³⁴

*A Delicate Balance: District Policies
and Classroom Practice*

Effective districts begin by identifying essential standards that students are expected to achieve in order to be prepared for postsecondary study and careers. Instead of giving high schools an unending list of standards, the district distills the standards to a limited list of the most essential standards. These are the standards that lay out the knowledge and skills required in each discipline for a successful transition to the next level of learning and to enter into and advance in a career. The essential standards are sufficiently described so that students, parents and educators can grasp their meaning and understand what it takes to demonstrate proficiency. Further, the district aligns middle grade standards to essential high school standards in a way that provides a continuum of learning that results in fewer students entering grade nine unprepared for high school studies. After the most essential standards are defined, the district creates a framework of curriculum and sample syllabi, units, assignments and assessments for each subject.

The district provides other tools to support instructional planning in a variety of areas, including writing and assessing instructional plans, grading and analyzing student work, understanding and making use of student performance data, re-teaching for proficiency, observing other teachers and deepening teachers’ content knowledge.

The district provides sufficient resources and time to build principals’ and teachers’ capacity to use effective school practices and instructional methods, including classroom-level support such as coaches and content experts. The district also sets a priority for district staff members to spend a significant amount of time in schools, working collaboratively and purposefully with school leaders and teachers to make instruction more engaging and essential content more relevant to students. The district provides time for teachers and principals to observe their peers, deepen their professional knowledge, and expand their repertoire of proven instructional strategies.

A Coherent Instructional Framework

- **Curriculum:** The district defines a core high school curriculum that is aligned to a distilled set of essential college- and career-readiness standards. This curriculum is taught through traditional academic courses and through multidisciplinary courses that blend academic, career/technical and fine arts studies. The district provides suggested and flexible pacing guides for teaching the core curriculum.
- **Course syllabi:** The district works with teachers to prepare common course syllabi for teaching the core curriculum through different types of courses, some of which are more contextualized than others.
- **Standards-based units:** District staff, school leaders and teachers work together to develop a series of standards-based units and projects and accompanying daily lessons. These units and lessons incorporate proven instructional and assessment strategies that foster cross-discipline instructional planning to motivate and enhance students' mastery of particular standards. The units become part of a repository to be shared with other teachers.
- **Sample assignments:** The district provides examples of assignments and assessments to assist teachers in understanding the level of work students need to complete in order to become proficient in the standards.
- **Benchmark tests and formative assessments:** Ongoing formative assessments such as end-of-unit tests assess a subset of essential standards to gauge whether students are making progress and where interventions might be necessary to ensure they will meet proficiency on the end-of-course test. The district also provides protocols and training that enable teachers to incorporate classroom work, projects, quizzes, essays, homework, daily observations and teacher questions into their assessments of student learning.
- **Planning models:** The district places a high priority on providing models for effective instructional planning. The district works with schools to develop school leaders' capacity to create time and organizational structures that support effective planning, including teachers working in teams to plan lessons and units of study within and across academic and career/technical subjects. The district encourages interdepartmental collaboration to maintain a rigorous curriculum by using programs such as reading and writing across the curriculum to create a common writing, language and reading methodology for high schools.

Principals' Perceptions of District Implementation

While some districts are doing many things to help principals and teachers improve curriculum and instruction, it is not clear their strategies are grounded in a vision of effective instruction, nor do they add up to a systemic approach that provides school leaders with the necessary guidance and tools for implementing more effective instructional practices. The disjointed nature of district efforts to improve instruction was evidenced in principals' comments, which paint a picture of top-down, piecemeal efforts lacking a coherent framework, as characterized by these findings:

- Alignment of curriculum to standards figured prominently in districts' efforts, but only two of the 22 principals described the involvement of principals and teachers in district-level efforts.
- *None* of the principals spoke of involvement in setting benchmarks for achievement of standards or developing common assessments.
- A number of principals mentioned having to get district office approval for professional learning efforts to improve instruction.
- Most principals did not comment on district efforts³⁵ to:
 - hone standards into an understandable and manageable set of those most essential for students' success in postsecondary studies and careers.
 - provide principals and teachers the tools they need to create rigorous and relevant coursework that will engage students and encourage them to master the standards.
 - provide coaching and feedback for implementing and refining improved instructional practices.
 - connect district improvement goals and strategies to a set of proven instructional practices.

When describing the approach districts take to guide and support the improvement of instruction, principals most frequently identified the following strategies:

- increasing course offerings and student participation in accelerated courses (e.g., AP, International Baccalaureate, honors, dual enrollment courses).
- district staff working with teachers to implement curricula aligned to standards, especially in mathematics, language arts and career/technical courses.
- opportunities for professional learning that focuses on standards and school needs.
- support in implementing district-endorsed models and programs (e.g. *HSTW*, Depth of Knowledge, A+ Academics).
- career/technical certification programs that emphasize rigorous academic content and key practices of effective instruction.

Although most principals identified several strategies used by their district to improve instruction, a few principals were able to identify only one: an increased emphasis on providing AP courses. While this is a good practice, it does not reflect a comprehensive plan that will improve instruction and academic outcomes for all students. Some principals reported that instructional support and leadership were weak in their district, and that the majority of the work on improving instruction was isolated at individual schools. More than a dozen other district strategies for improving instruction were identified by at least one principal in the study. (See the sidebar on page 30.) It is surprising that some of the less mentioned strategies — the use of walkthroughs conducted by teams of principals from other schools, helping teachers understand state performance standards and creating Web-based resources for content areas — did not emerge in more interviews. Other district strategies, such as district-wide pacing guides, often can be prescriptive and regimented to the extent that they are a hindrance rather than a help to schools. Prescription and regimentation are not substitutes for purposeful, authentic education that engages students when schools are striving to raise both achievement and graduation rates.

Other District Instructional Improvement Strategies

In addition to the most frequently mentioned strategies for improving instruction, each of the following strategies was listed by at least one principal:

- money allocated for instructional improvement
- an enhanced core curriculum
- increased graduation requirements
- identification of power standards
- pacing guides
- monthly meetings with the superintendent, focusing on rigor and relevance
- required professional learning on literacy
- Web-based resources in each subject
- walkthroughs conducted by a team of principals from other schools
- common nine-week and end-of-course assessments aligned with standards and state assessments
- content-area and cross-content meetings for teachers
- review and approval of courses and units of study by curriculum directors and curriculum implementation teams
- contracted consultants who observe in classrooms and provide feedback
- extra school staffing, such as literacy coaches, curriculum facilitators and career/technical coordinators
- upgrades of facilities and equipment to accommodate technology-supported instruction and career/technology courses

One principal reported on the district pursuing a more collaborative district-school approach to instructional support that could be identified as a best practice: “We have an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and she has what we call our Curriculum Implementation Team. And every course area’s curriculum goes through that team [to review] — How are they making it rigorous? How are they making it relevant?” In this approach, rigor and relevance are considered hand-in-hand, and the instructors who will teach the curriculum are actively engaged with the district staff in developing the curriculum.

Principals' Perceptions: District Support for Improving Instruction

Greater Support for Academic AP Classes

- “Our district is very supportive of our AP classes, and we try to hold students accountable and make sure that they are taking rigorous course loads.”

Increasing Rigor of Career/Technical Curricula

- “Our district really wants us to increase the rigor of some of the career/technology education classes... We have upgraded our health science program to offer the certified nursing assistant testing for our students and we offer a pre-engineering curriculum, Project Lead The Way.”
- “We have articulation between our courses and our local technical college. We offer college courses here on campus. The district is very supportive of helping us do these things.”

Other Initiatives to Increase Rigor and Intellectual Challenges

- “We encourage our teachers, and the district encourages the teachers, to use teaching that will encourage students to think at a higher level. We introduced our staff this past summer to Norman Webb’s Depth of Knowledge, which ... is supposed to be a more thought-provoking strategy, and teachers are encouraged to teach at the proficient level.”
- “Our district is focused very heavily on Power Standards and implementing those Power Standards in our schools. We look very closely at the rigor and the higher learning/thinking questions that are asked and the problems that are presented.”

Responses from principals in the most-improved schools revealed a stronger district emphasis on teaching a demanding curriculum that will prepare more students for college and careers than those from the least-improved schools. For example, principals of the most-improved schools more often mentioned the district encouraging or requiring schools to offer and maintain high student enrollment in AP, International Baccalaureate, dual credit and career/technical courses leading to industry certification. Principals of the most-improved schools more often reported that district office staff worked in classrooms with teachers and provided teachers feedback on their use of effective instructional strategies. Six of 12 principals of the most-improved schools mentioned that their districts provided tools and support, including end-of-course exams, remedial strategies to increase college readiness and improved grading policies. Only one principal of the least-improved schools mentioned active and positive district involvement in providing instructional coherence and support.

Principals at the most-improved schools received greater assistance from their districts to improve curriculum and instruction than did their counterparts in the least-improved schools. Still, the principals’ responses suggest a somewhat incoherent, top-down effort to create an instructional program that inspires greater student motivation to stay in school and prepare for postsecondary studies and careers.

Recommended District Actions

1. Redefine the job of school principals to emphasize responsibilities for providing instructional leadership that improves teaching and learning and align selection, professional learning and performance evaluations with this new definition.
2. Conduct a review of teacher assignments, student work and classroom assessments to determine any gaps between students' levels of learning and the learning described by the most essential college- and career-readiness standards established by the state.
3. Engage school leaders and teachers in identifying core elements of effective instructional practices that will motivate more students to achieve rigorous standards. Provide training for them to use standards-based instructional planning and research-based instructional strategies.
4. Create an accountability system that rewards school leaders and teachers for making changes in school curriculum, classroom practices and student support systems that raise achievement and improve graduation rates.
5. Establish policies and practices that enable teams of teachers to develop multidisciplinary courses that teach essential college- and career-readiness skills.
6. Establish a repository of exemplary, engaging, standards-based units, projects and lessons that teachers can use in planning their own instruction.

Strategy 4: Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals and school leaders.

What Implementation of the Strategy Looks Like

Successful school districts provide high-quality professional learning to principals and teachers as part of their strategic plans to raise student achievement. They provide time and resources for principals and teachers to engage in high-quality individual and group learning that is aligned with the district reform agenda and builds knowledge and capacity for instructional improvement. The district's professional learning is built on promoting research-based school and classroom practices; aligning training options with district and school improvement priorities; and evaluating its impact on improving school and classroom practices and student outcomes.

Successful districts strive for a proper balance between providing responsive services and support to schools and actively pointing schools in particular staff development directions.



Research shows that district administrators help improve literacy instruction by first identifying teachers' instructional needs and providing support, such as more specification about instructional practice, time for teachers to visit other teachers' classrooms to see practice in action, probing questions after classroom observations and help with management issues.³⁶

— Report commissioned by the University of Pittsburgh
Learning Research and Development Center

Professional learning is embedded in principals' and teachers' daily work and linked directly to the school's instructional program and state and district standards. On-site coaching supports faculty and staff in implementing proven school and classroom practices. Professional learning includes training in data analysis and in the use of the district data system. Various professional learning strategies are used to help principals and teachers gain new knowledge and skills, including workshops, visits to other schools, instructional consulting, observation in model classrooms, classroom walkthroughs, peer networks, peer coaching, lesson study, action research and whole-school book studies.

A Promising District Approach to Developing Instructional Leaders

- Monthly day-long conferences for principals on instructional initiatives
- Enrollment in at least one seminar or institute (often provided externally)
- Support groups for principals to build leadership skills through sharing problems and getting feedback
- Principal study groups focusing on particular instructional practice issues or content areas
- A “buddy” system to provide peer learning and formalized mentoring for new principals
- Inter-school visitation by principals
- Individualized coaching from a central office supervisor, involving a supervisory “walkthrough” of the school

Source: New York City District #2 Professional Development for Principals, 2003

Districts ensure that principals and teacher-leaders receive training on a range of topics, including:

- designing and implementing a school improvement plan.
- aligning standards with curriculum and instruction.
- using state and district assessments to guide instruction.
- helping teachers communicate their expectations for quality work to students.
- creating programs of study that are meaningful to students' lives and their future.
- determining which features of teacher and student performance need to be improved and how.

Principals and teacher-leaders frequently participate in district-sponsored meetings and workshops where they analyze data, reflect on their practices and share experiences in implementing instructional improvement strategies.

Successful districts give principals the autonomy and resources necessary to provide teachers with continual professional learning that supports the school's adopted improvement model and targets group and individual needs, as well as opportunities to work together on issues of curriculum and instruction. The district offers district-sponsored summer workshops and other venues for professional learning, which strengthen teachers' expertise in using content-specific instructional strategies that increase student achievement.

Principals' Perceptions of District Implementation

Principals reported that their districts generally provide many opportunities for school leaders and teachers to increase their knowledge and skills in improving school and instructional practices. However, several major features of quality professional learning — identified as best practices in implementation of the *HSTW* reform model³⁷ — were missing, including:

- professional learning for teachers on how to make greater use of project- and problem-based authentic assignments to engage and motivate students in more intellectually demanding course work.
- identification of teachers who use innovative strategies successfully to help all students excel, in order to train these teachers to guide other teachers in using these strategies.
- networking opportunities that allow teachers to share classroom practices that advance student achievement.
- use of action research as a staff development tool for school leaders and teachers to take greater ownership of school and instructional problems and find solutions.
- guidance for teachers to identify true college- and career-readiness-level work and to align assignments and assessments with higher-level standards.

Throughout all interviews, the provision of professional learning was the most commonly cited form of district-level support. Principals most often described a joint responsibility for professional learning shared by the school and district. Many principals described assessing the learning needs of their faculty and then conveying those needs to the district office. By analyzing data from test results and teacher surveys, principals and their staff make suggestions about the type of professional learning opportunities they need. The district then assists by providing the professional learning or helping principals secure the needed resources and training for their schools. In some cases, school staffs receive school-level professional development unique to their needs and district-wide professional development focused on more generally applicable instructional strategies.

Principals' Perceptions: Selecting Professional Learning Priorities

- “We’ll look at our test scores and say, ‘Look at these math scores. Our math teachers need professional development.’ Or we send out surveys to our staff members and they will say, ‘We need work on classroom management’ or ‘We need help on rigorous and relevant curriculum.’”
- “The district has been very cooperative in letting us choose our professional development and make those decisions at the school level, rather than a whole district-level professional development [that is] one-size-fits-all.”
- “We have a building-level improvement team here at the high school and the [professional development] decisions are based on data and they match our site action plan. ... It’s not a one-shot effort. If we’re going to send somebody to professional development, then they’re going to come back and be the expert here at the high school.”

When asked about how their district offices build leadership capacity to ensure a supply of well-qualified principals and sustain school improvement, about half of the principals described district-level professional learning opportunities for current school leaders only, including leadership academies and book studies. A few indicated that their district does not currently have any formal program or professional learning to assist with leadership development. When the district-level professional learning approaches are compared with much-cited approaches, such as that of New York City District #2, many features are missing, including opportunities for enrollment in at least one seminar or institute, support groups for principals to share problems and get feedback, study groups focusing on particular instructional issues or content areas, a “buddy” system to provide peer learning and formalized mentoring for new principals, inter-school visitation and individualized coaching from the central office supervisor.

A few principals described district strategies (both current and for future implementation) for identifying and growing future leaders, but professional learning for developing new leaders was uneven, with some respondents citing it as a weakness. No principals mentioned a formal school leadership succession plan or new principal induction program. Only a few principals mentioned that their districts provide training for school leadership teams including teacher-leaders or special leadership initiatives for low-performing schools.

Principals' Perceptions: Professional Learning for Current Leaders

- “We [the principals] have our own in-services — not while the teachers are here because we know that we need to be there with the teachers — but part of our contract is staff development with administrators also. And those usually deal with leadership activities of some sort — personnel, leadership. [The district has] also made a real big issue about making sure the administrators are in there getting training with the teachers so that we know what’s going on.”
- “I have been attending workshops on developing data-seeking teams and developing teacher leaders. And I, in turn, am expected to come back and meet with teachers to implement those recommendations.”
- “We have a monthly meeting together, all principals. And we work on our professional development — job-embedded PD. Lately, we’ve been working on instructional strategies to help those kids in under-performing groups. ... But we meet twice a month — one meeting is for the business and one meeting is for the professional development.”

Recommended District Actions

1. Establish and support a collaborative partnership with a local university to select and prepare future leaders who can lead schools in improving curriculum and instructional practices.
2. Encourage and support school-based professional learning strategies aligned with the school’s assessed needs and improvement plans. This school-based professional learning can include model classrooms for observation, school-level book studies and peer coaching.
3. Expand opportunities for principals and teacher study teams to develop an in-depth school improvement plan addressing challenges such as lack of student motivation, high dropout rates, high failure rates in grade nine and in critical subjects, and graduates’ lack of preparedness for postsecondary studies and careers.
4. Create a system to support peer-to-peer learning opportunities among principals, especially for those serving low-performing schools.

Strategy 5: Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices and assist schools to use data effectively.



“We can be data-rich and information-poor. The key is to ask the right question, and then turn to the data for an answer. If you look first at all of the numbers and what they all mean, you would get overwhelmed.”³⁸

Molly Howard

2008 National High School Principal of the Year

What Implementation of the Strategy Looks Like

District improvement initiatives are spurred by the collection and analysis of data related to student achievement. Effective districts provide and use data to guide district, school and classroom decisions on the continuous improvement of instruction and student performance and to align resources in an effort to address deficits. They build a data infrastructure that includes elements important to school leaders, teachers, parents and other stakeholders.

The district provides school leaders and teachers with the right data — in a form that is understandable — and helps schools make responsible interpretations of these data. Districts ensure that student testing does not stand alone, but is part of a larger improvement cycle wherein performance data are continually gathered, shared, analyzed, and used to inform what is taught and how it is taught.³⁹

The district takes an active role in focusing educators’ attention on data, improving data collection and analysis, prioritizing data elements for gauging schools’ progress toward implementing the right solutions and helping schools use data in decision-making for continuous improvement. The district invests in developing principals’ and teachers’ data literacy and provides ongoing support for their use of data. Central office staff members, principals and teachers are provided time to review and analyze data.

The district uses data to identify specific strengths, weaknesses and achievement gaps between groups of students and helps principals and teachers take ownership of challenges revealed by the data. The effects of interventions to increase student achievement are systematically measured and the results are used in making decisions to continue or curtail intervention strategies. A wide range of data is used to plan professional learning activities, to align curriculum and instruction, to assign and evaluate personnel, and to identify students needing accelerated instruction to reach grade-level standards.

The district ensures that the data it provides to schools are useful, relevant, accurate and timely and can serve as the basis for making instructional decisions. The data reflect information on a wide range of indicators that can help principals and teachers identify school needs and problems within and outside the school — including school and community demographics; how well students are connected to and supported by an adult in the school; teachers’, parents’ and students’ perceptions of the quality of school experiences; and effectiveness and ineffectiveness of certain school and classroom practices.

The district-wide data system allows principals and teachers to access all of the scores and performance data for individual students as they move through school and to break the data down by specific standards, objectives and skills. It enables principals and teachers to disaggregate and analyze the data by school, teacher, gender, ethnicity and any other significant grouping in an efficient and non-burdensome manner, while providing enough information to trigger needed interventions.

The district provides principals and teachers with professional learning and ongoing technical assistance in using the data for instructional and curricular purposes, especially in developing an understanding of where intervention is needed. The training helps principals and teachers go beyond a cursory look at standardized test scores and work as a team to identify important questions, mine a variety of data sources to find answers and make decisions based on the data they find. For example, the district assists school principals and teacher leaders to examine student achievement data in the context of factors such as students' course-taking patterns and extra help provided to students. The district enables teachers to examine students' perceptions of classroom expectations, the extent to which they used reading and writing for learning, and the goal-setting and planning assistance they received from teachers and counselors. Furthermore, the district trains school leaders to use processes and tools to determine the root causes of student achievement problems so they can create and implement strategies to address them.

Principals' Perceptions of District Implementation

Data figured prominently in interviewed principals' perceptions of district support for school improvement. Their comments about how the district supports them in this area centered around districts using data to identify necessary changes, to set and review progress on goals, to identify professional learning needs and to consider strategies for closing achievement gaps.

When discussing districts' use of data, principals most frequently mentioned the use of standardized test data to provide principals and teachers with feedback on particular students' deficits. **The interviewed principals indicated that their districts could do much more to create a data system that would help them examine school and classroom practices and their linkage to student achievement.** This kind of data would inform teachers and school leaders about what is working in schools, what is not working, and what actions they can take to better emphasize the practices that offer greater returns for student achievement.

Comments from the principals of the most-improved and least-improved schools differed greatly in reference to the districts' use of data. Principals of the least-improved schools had less access to data at the building level. Instead, greater use of data was being made at the district level. In contrast, more of the most-improved schools' districts have technology that allows greater use of the data at the school and classroom level. Seven of the principals in the most-improved schools reported that their districts provide data in a format that offered teachers and school leaders immediate feedback. Only one of the principals from the least-improved schools reported having access to data in such a format. **Principals in the most-improved schools reported having online technology that enables academic teachers to view data disaggregated by objectives so they can determine instructional areas needing more attention.** Principals in the least-improved schools, in contrast, were less likely to have access to a wide range of student and classroom data. They also were less likely to be able to run their own queries on a database or to ask their own questions so that they could develop a high level of ownership of their data.

The principals of neither the most-improved nor the least-improved schools reported spending much time discussing data with district leaders to determine how to interpret the data and engage the faculty in using data more effectively. Four principals reported that data were reviewed at district meetings. One principal reported that data were reviewed at a school retreat with the entire faculty. Only one principal reported that the district provided a report card on how well the school was using data to improve instruction.

The most-improved schools' districts have given schools access to information at the school and classroom level. These districts are working to build principals' and teachers' capacity to use the data and determine which objectives students fail to master. In the least-improved schools' districts, principals face significant pressure to meet AYP goals; but beyond that, they can count on little in the way of data analysis support that might help them meet those goals. Principals in some least-improved schools also have to deal with delays in receiving data from their districts, along with an environment in which central offices grab at snapshots of data to justify "flavor-of-the-day" approaches to curriculum and instruction.

Few principals made specific references to ways in which districts were helping principals and teachers analyze and use data on school and classroom practices or to make decisions about school goals and interventions to raise student motivation and learning. Principals indicated that districts have developed some ability to use data for evaluation; but they would like greater district emphasis on and capacity for helping schools use data to support improvements in teaching and learning.

Recommended District Actions

1. Develop a robust set of indicators to track progress on district goals and the impact on student performance of specific programs, instructional improvements and interventions.
2. Drive the routine use of data for decisions about continuous improvement of instruction and student achievement to the school and classroom level, rather than concentrating such decisions at the district level.
3. Create a district data system that provides longitudinal data on a wide range of indicators impacting student achievement within and outside the school. Focus especially on instructional practices and the perceptions of principals, teachers, students and parents regarding the quality of students' experiences. Build the system for the dual purpose of addressing student deficits and addressing problems in the system that allowed the deficits to occur. The data system should provide:
 - quick and easy access to all of the scores and performance data for an individual student as he or she moves through the school system.
 - disaggregated analysis by standards, objectives and skills for individual students, classes and schools.
 - reports of value-added or school and student growth measures.
 - easy generation and creation of reports that provide on-demand information for making key decisions.
4. Assist schools in developing their own "short cycle" assessments to supplement district-developed assessments in order to foster school-level accountability for student learning.

5. Have teams of district and school leaders study annual data about the number of college freshman needing remedial courses. Encourage the team to meet with local postsecondary institutions into which the district's students enroll to develop and implement programs that will reduce the number of high school graduates who are unprepared for postsecondary studies.
6. Partner with universities and other training entities to ensure principal and teacher candidates are prepared to analyze and use an array of data.

Strategy 6: Optimize the use of resources to support learning improvement.

“... In many districts, schools have limited ability to change their use of resources to meet higher standards — making school control of resources an important ‘missing piece’ in creating meaningful accountability. Without this control, it is difficult for schools to sustain new strategies, and hard to argue that schools and teachers can ultimately be held accountable for results.”⁴⁰

*Freeing School Resources for Learning:
The “Missing Piece” in Making Accountability Meaningful*

What Implementation of the Strategy Looks Like

District leaders recognize that raising student achievement requires allocation and alignment of the necessary resources — money, people and time — to support school-level improvements. The district provides schools with equitable and adequate resources, along with the flexibility to use the resources to implement new structures, programs and instructional strategies to improve student outcomes. This particularly includes:

- new ways of using school time and organizing staff so teachers can work together on instructional issues.
- more high-quality professional learning for principals and teachers.
- additional teachers and special personnel with expertise in instruction.
- a range of extra-help strategies for students who need assistance and extra time to achieve proficiency on state standards.
- an adequate supply of up-to-date instructional tools and materials.

To make informed decisions about resource allocation, the district bases decisions on students' learning needs, the effectiveness of current programs, emerging conditions and the effects of prior investments, rather than basing decisions solely on teacher-to-student ratios and other traditional formulas that often result in glaring resource inequities for high-needs schools. The district also uses this information to make decisions about the reallocation of resources, such as teaching staff to support an improvement agenda, and engages the community to gain its support.

Financial decisions are transparent and delegated, meaning that principals and school leadership teams see, understand and control budgets for their staffs and programs, keeping within the district guidelines. Accomplishing the goals for instructional improvement and student achievement is the priority consideration in district decision-making about the allocation and reallocation of finances. A 2007 study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education included recommendations for an optimal allocation of resources to provide students an evidence-based program that can raise achievement. (See Appendix D.) Examinations of research such as this can help districts make sure they use resources adequately to support schools' needs.

Districts committed to school improvement realize that, more than anything, successful improvement efforts depend on an effective “people strategy” that recruits, develops and retains strong leaders, leadership teams and teachers. Recruitment, placement, development and retention of high-quality personnel at all levels — district, school and classroom — constitute a significant focus of district leadership and support for school improvement. The distribution and management of staff is driven by the district's vision for improvement. District leaders understand that a high turnover of superintendents, principals and teachers takes its toll on the continuity of school reform. To combat high turnover, the district implements policy changes that establish and maintain stable, effective leadership and staffing in each school. The district ensures that principals have access to a supply of high-quality teachers through policies and practices that enable them to attract, develop and sustain a talented staff.

To provide schools and principals with a high-quality teaching force, the district implements a human resource management strategy that incorporates:

- an active teacher recruitment process, including a structured program for promoting teaching as a future career for the best and brightest students.
- selection criteria aligned with state standards, the district vision for improvement and goals for increased student achievement.
- autonomy for principals and school leadership teams in hiring.
- flexibility in the placement of teachers and staff, within district guidelines.
- a competitive salary schedule and financial incentives for teachers whose performance matches the district's instructional priorities and for teachers placed in hard-to-staff schools.
- equitable distribution of teaching talent across schools.
- new teacher induction with effective mentoring and high-quality professional learning that increases teachers' knowledge and skill sets for classroom management and instruction.
- assignment of new teachers to courses they are trained to teach.
- valid and reliable evaluation tools that measure teacher performance in relation to the district's instructional vision and student learning gains.
- non-monetary incentives for principals and teachers (e.g., eliminating residency requirements, making insurance and sick leave portable, providing tenure, respecting teacher autonomy).
- meaningful partnerships with unions around important activities such as evaluation, coaching, professional learning and equitable deployment of teaching talent.
- collaboration with legislators, state agencies, universities and professional unions to develop effective policies and programs for teacher preparation, licensing, professional learning, performance evaluation and working conditions.



“Recently, a number of large-scale studies provide convincing proof that what we do in education does matter. ... what all of the studies conclude is the most significant factor in student achievement: the teacher.”⁴¹

Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap

The district values time as an important resource in building capacity for increasing student learning. For example, time is provided for principals and teachers to engage in professional learning on addressing students’ learning needs. The district understands that increased graduation requirements result in some students needing more time for learning, and it provides flexible pathways for students who require more time to meet standards. District policies on school improvement, leadership training and principal evaluation focus on principals’ roles and on the time they spend improving instruction. District calendars and meetings are sequenced to increase time for classroom learning, and district staff take steps to minimize disruptions in teaching and learning time. Schools are provided with additional administrative staff, such as a business manager, to allow principals to spend more time on improving instruction. Collaborative planning time is built into the school day to allow grade-level and subject-area teams the time to coordinate teaching and learning and to analyze achievement data for continuous improvement. District-wide meetings focus on improving teaching and learning through such strategies as peer review of each school’s improvement plan, analysis of achievement data, and sharing of successes in implementing practices and programs that increase student learning.

Principals’ Perceptions of District Implementation

Most of the principals reported that their districts provide the right resources to support school improvement, but not in adequate quantities. In a recent review of various resource allocation strategies that school districts across the country are using (Baker and Elmer, 2009), the authors concluded that “schools that spend more per pupil tend to have higher average outcomes.”⁴² In SREB’s survey, principals’ answers to questions about district support received mirrored their answers to questions about additional resources needed:

- In describing present district support, the principals most often identified money, additional staff, staff development, reform models and programs, technology and new facilities.
- In describing the most-needed resources, the principals identified money (especially for additional staff), more in-depth professional learning for teachers, instructional supplies and technology. A few principals also mentioned the need for improved facilities.

It is clear that the principals do not perceive a need for more district-mandated reform models and intervention programs beyond those already being implemented; what they need is greater support for implementing those programs that have been adopted.

Principals' requests for more staff centered on special expertise provided by counselors, instructional coaches for literacy and mathematics, assistant principals, and school- and district-level curriculum coordinators, as well as additional teachers to reduce class sizes. The need for more specialized staff was, in a few instances, attributed to principals' need for more time to concentrate on instructional improvements; in other instances, it was attributed to the need for expertise in curriculum and instruction that they perceived to be beyond their own capacities.

Principals' Perceptions: Resources Needed for School Improvement

- "Money. Money and more staff."
- "We need more psychiatrists or psychologists in each building."
- "More staff and more money for our budget to allow for greater in-depth professional development for my teachers."
- "Here's a huge need: instructional supply money. We teach science, but there's virtually no money set aside for science supplies. So you're basically teaching science out of a textbook."
- "Technology, technology, technology in the classroom."

Principals also reported the need of more resources to address the needs of students who have fallen behind in achieving grade-level standards. They described needs for resources to provide extended time and additional help for at-risk students and to help ensure they get to school and attend class. They need reading and mathematics coaches to work with teachers who are having difficulty teaching students with major academic deficiencies. They also need resources for diagnostic assessments to identify students with deficiencies earlier in high school, so they can enroll such students in accelerated extra-help programs.

Principals' Perceptions: Resources Needed to Assist High-Needs Students

- "I think we're always looking at ways to remediate our kids to try to get those who aren't proficient up to proficient or advanced. So I would think some type of support resources and personnel. Additional classes ... [to help students] get back on grade level and back up to par with the rest of the students."
- "I would like to see a [system-wide] diagnostic exam based on the state performance standards that can be administered to all the subject areas."
- "I would love to have a literacy coach and a math coach. More funding for science material, microscopes, lab setups — that sort of thing — and then a curriculum director would be wonderful at each high school."
- "I would ask for an additional counselor, probably [one to work with students who have major attendance problems.]"

Recommended District Actions

1. Review school budgeting policies and practices to streamline the process and give schools more flexibility in using resources.
2. Provide financial support to schools for targeted interventions that improve student achievement (e.g., grade- and credit-recovery programs, extended instructional time, extra-help programs). Such support includes more resources for high schools that serve mostly disadvantaged students.
3. Use a student-needs approach to make the closing of achievement gaps the basis for making decisions about resources.
4. Conduct systematic program reviews to assess outcomes, identify “best investments” for increasing student achievement and graduation rates and discontinue allocations when warranted. Focus spending on research-based instruction proven to increase student achievement.

Strategy 7: Use open, credible processes to involve progressive school and community leaders in school improvement.



“When done skillfully, the authentic involvement of critical stakeholders in planning and implementing institutional change can minimize resistance, foster a sense of shared responsibility, create a ‘distributed leadership’ that complements core team leadership, and can help maintain momentum in the face of [leadership] transitions and other challenges.”⁴³

*Involving Faculty and Students in
Creating a Culture of Student Success*

What Implementation of the Strategy Looks Like

To increase graduation rates and graduates’ competencies, high schools need support from the community and parents to implement a broad range of services and resources that will motivate and engage more students. Districts seeking to support principals in raising student achievement take aggressive steps to engage parents and civic, business and political leaders in understanding the problems of the high school and the range of solutions needed to prepare all students to succeed. These steps begin with the superintendent and school board establishing policies, formal structures, and processes for conducting dialogue with and soliciting the assistance of the broader community. Typical policy actions include establishing school councils composed of parents and community leaders who will work in collaboration with each school to form an improvement agenda, find the resources necessary for implementing the agenda, and communicate to the larger community how it can support the school’s efforts. Principals are engaged as partners in considering policies and in communicating with the public.

It is essential for various community leaders to understand that most students should be expected to finish the rigorous academic core that historically has been completed only by a portion of students.

Members of the community must understand that, to help more students to finish this core

curriculum, schools need to link learning to authentic activities, projects and problems, providing students with firsthand involvement in the real work of a career field and in citizenship. Such experiences allow students to see a reason for acquiring knowledge and skills and to understand how theory and application fit together.

The district also adopts policies and structures to help high schools implement home-to-school partnerships. Such a program allows parents and teachers to share responsibility for students' learning progress and value each partner's role in the relationship. The district urges and supports principals and teachers to make parents full partners in planning and supporting students' in their high school programs of study and educational and career goals.

The district guides schools to involve parents in annual meetings with the student and a teacher-adviser or counselor to focus on:

- analyzing each student's progress and identifying specific academic deficits and strengths.
- reviewing the student's goals beyond high school and outlining the courses the student will need to achieve those goals.
- discussing how the school and home can support the student in reaching those goals.

The district ensures high schools connect each student to an adult in the school who becomes the student's mentor/adviser for all four years of school. The mentor/adviser provides continuity of communication and a contact person whom parents know and can depend on to act as an advocate for the student. Principals are supported with the staff, time and professional development needed to make advisement programs successful.

District leaders recognize that high schools need to reach into the community for venues that will engage students in purposeful learning. The district establishes structures through which business, civic and community leaders can work with high schools to provide a range of learning experiences for students outside the school. Such experiences can include job-shadowing, internships, community service projects, formal work-study programs and apprenticeships. All experiences are built around the main goal of helping students connect their education to their goals for the future. Furthermore, the district provides incentives for principals and school leadership teams to seek learning opportunities for students in collaboration with technical and community colleges and other postsecondary entities. These opportunities may include options for students to spend some time in other high schools in the district that offer programs suited to the students' interests.

Principals' Perceptions of District Implementation

Principals' responses indicated that districts do not provide the support and direction schools need to create partnerships with parents and the community to help students set and achieve high school and post-high school goals. No principal spoke of the district requiring high schools to develop a process for involving parents in an annual conference to review students' performance and make decisions about the students' programs of study. Similarly, principals did not mention a district office requirement to assign every student an adult mentor who can communicate with parents and monitor the student's progress throughout high school. From the principals' comments, it appears that initiatives for such processes are taken at the school level.

None of the principals discussed a formal district process to encourage greater community and parent participation in school improvement efforts. Many districts seem to have an array of media through which they communicate with a range of stakeholders; however, their messages do not seem to be

sufficiently focused to result in the support principals need to make substantive changes in school and instructional practices.

Common responses emphasized the role of the district in maintaining communication with external stakeholders (usually in the form of school report cards, newsletters and Web sites) and in managing advisory committees that include community members. A few principals described unique community programs at the district level, including a community scholarship program and business partnerships. Some districts have involved the community in advisory councils, curriculum committees and school improvement teams. Such community involvement and support increases principals' abilities to support and raise student achievement.

Principals' Perceptions: District Actions to Build External Support for School Reform

- “We have a district advisory council — those are leaders from the community. [The district] highly encourages us to get involved in civic organizations. ... We work very closely with the businesses, the Chamber of Commerce [for] our placement of students in the communities and certain businesses.”
- “The superintendent has held some community meetings with parents in different schools that address school improvement issues and various other things.”
- “When our district initiates a major school improvement project, we generally have a meeting with the community ...”

The principal interviews show that many districts are not pursuing strategies that would ensure external constituencies are integrally involved in moving the school reform agenda forward. Unfortunately, what passes for community involvement often is no more than information sharing. Sending out newsletters and broadcasting on public access television channels is one-way communication. Principals are better served when their districts and schools have active, two-way communication with the community.

Recommended District Actions

1. Establish policies and structures for parents and community leaders to assist schools in planning, implementing and soliciting support for changes in school and classroom practices that foster greater student motivation and success.
2. Direct all high schools to create a structure that engages the parents of all students in planning and supporting students' education. Provide incentives to schools that are successful in this effort.
3. Create focus campaigns led by the school board, superintendent and district staff to engage and inform parents and community leaders about the type of high school reform that will be necessary and the level of effort students must make to graduate prepared postsecondary study and careers.
4. Convene a forum of parents and community leaders annually to report and discuss progress on district goals, with an opportunity for dialogue and clarification.
5. Appoint a district staff member to work with high school leaders to partner with business and community leaders, postsecondary institutions, and industry- and apprenticeship-based training programs to make high school studies more relevant for students.

In Closing: How States Can Support School Districts in Empowering Principals

States need to be central players, not spectators, in creating working conditions that empower principals to work with faculty to create powerful learning opportunities for all groups of students. Just as the district's role is evolving to serve schools as customers, states also must adapt to a new way of working with districts, especially those with many struggling schools. The traditional state functions of monitoring and compliance are at best inadequate and at worst a hindrance to learning. States need to shift to serving district leaders as partners to advance their common goal: to engage young people in learning experiences so they emerge from school able to continue their learning and find meaningful work. The state's purpose is not simply to administer tests or to fulfill legal obligations, but to cultivate the district's capacity to create high schools of excellence that engage all groups of students intellectually and emotionally in learning.

States can take a variety of actions to help school districts empower principals and school leaders to build schools of excellence.

Assist districts and school boards to work collaboratively with school, teacher and community leaders to develop a research-based comprehensive school improvement framework.

A comprehensive framework includes a focused mission, core values, measureable goals, and valid school and classroom practices based on the belief that failure is not an option for any student. States should work with districts to define a district-wide vision that focuses on keeping all students in school, engaging them in more rigorous and relevant course work and preparing them for success after graduation.

Develop clear criteria for designating schools or districts as “low-performing,” and adapt levels of state support provided to districts according to level of need. States have finite resources and must leverage the investment of training and technical assistance where they are most needed. State action is most needed in districts where persistent performance problems exist and little progress is being made.

Conduct a review of districts with low-performing schools and determine the extent to which board policies, district resources and staff responsibilities support school leaders to take ownership of their challenges and implement proven interventions with fidelity. Such a review would address a number of questions:

- Have the board of education and superintendent agreed on a broad vision of what effective high schools look like?
- Does the district plan allocate resources in ways that recognize the challenges faced by high schools in need of improvement?
- Are all district staff and department annual evaluations based on effectiveness in providing timely and quality services that enable school leadership teams to improve school and classroom practices?

Addressing these and other questions can help the districts build staff capacity to provide the technical assistance, staff development and resources leaders in low-performing schools need to take ownership of school improvement and turn schools around.

Broaden assessment of low-performing high schools to include measures of whether educational conditions promote engagement in learning for all groups of students. When states send the message that test scores are of utmost importance, districts and schools understandably respond with a focus on test preparation. Test scores are one measure of progress, but cannot be the only measure of whether students are learning. States can work with districts to measure the extent to which schools have created conditions — including resources, professional development, and collaboration for staff and faculty — that promote students’ confidence in their ability to master challenging materials and to meet their goals. States also can develop a system of school report cards that inform both the district and the school not only about gaps in student achievement, but also about the fidelity of school efforts to create conditions that engage students intellectually, emotionally and socially in learning.

Create policy that requires districts to give autonomy to school leaders to create conditions that promote intellectual engagement and lead to higher student achievement for all groups of students — then hold leaders accountable for improvements. To meet expectations, principals need the authority and support to take actions, particularly related to budget, curriculum, instruction and personnel (e.g., discharging or transferring unsuitable teachers, hiring, defining the necessary number and type of faculty and staff positions).

Assist districts to redefine the school principal’s job to focus on leading school improvement through leadership teams. Improvement cannot be placed on the principal alone, but rather must include a school-based network of teacher-leaders. Faculty must be organized into teams working in collaboration with common groups of students to put the district’s and schools’ improvement framework into practice. States can model training for district teams comprised of central office staff and school-based teams. Together, district and school leaders should learn about the structural and cultural conditions needed in schools to enhance student motivation, and how the district can support those changes. States also can work with district leaders to plan for leader succession by anticipating school leader vacancies, recruiting promising candidates, and identifying the resources needed to develop new leaders who understand how to create the conditions that promote greater student learning.

Require districts to develop and use school leader evaluations that present clear goals, objectives and a process to measure success accurately and consistently. Districts need help developing research-based measures of leadership performance that are aligned with state leadership standards and with proven conditions of effective schools. States can enlist experts and feedback from practitioners to develop such instruments. States can also provide training for school board members, superintendents, and other central office professionals in how to use the instruments to help school leaders grow professionally and improve the work of teachers and student learning.

Develop districts’ capacity to provide high-quality professional learning to school leaders and leadership teams that supports their school improvement plan and relates directly to the needs of their school populations. School leaders and teachers need opportunities to participate in high-quality professional learning. Low-performing schools sometimes refuse to release teachers from classrooms to improve their instructional methods because they believe students will fall further behind. But many teachers in low-performing schools are failing to meet their students’ needs, due to a school culture of low

expectations, doubts about students' ability to succeed, and a failure to create curriculum and instruction that enable students to find personal value in learning. States can support districts to provide school leaders and teachers with opportunities to gain a new perspective about themselves, their school and their students.

Assist school districts to align curriculum and instruction to the most essential college- and career-readiness standards. Students will not be prepared for college and careers if the high school curriculum they complete is focused on covering a mass of materials rather than engaging students in meaningful, intellectual learning organized around the most essential standards. States can provide districts with guidance, training guides, support materials and technical assistance in implementing effective standards-based instruction and assessments. This involves assisting district staff as they work with principals and teachers to create challenging, authentic learning activities and assignments. Districts need help in developing rubrics to evaluate teacher assignments, student work, and classroom assessments for the intellectual rigor and authenticity required for students to be college- and career-ready.

These actions constitute a tall order for states — one that will require them to rethink how they work with local school districts. If schools are to change and improve, states must improve their capacity to assist districts and schools in engaging students in intellectual and authentic learning.

Appendix A: The *High Schools That Work* School Reform Framework

SREB's *High Schools That Work* (*HSTW*) school improvement program is nationally recognized for its effectiveness in helping schools improve the achievement of *all* students. This effort-based school improvement initiative is founded on the conviction that most students can master rigorous academic and career/technical studies if school leaders and teachers create an environment that motivates students to make the effort to succeed.

HSTW partners with state agencies to raise achievement in more than 1,200 high schools in 31 states, striving to engage state, district and school leaders in partnerships with teachers, students, parents and the community. *HSTW* informs state and local leaders about policies and practices that improve high schools' ability to prepare students for college and careers, and works with states, districts and schools to implement such practices.

This school improvement initiative provides schools and districts with a solid framework of Goals, Conditions and Key Practices that create a culture of high expectations and improve students' achievement and preparation for both college and careers.

HSTW Goals for Continuous Improvement

The mission of *HSTW* is to create a culture of high expectations and continuous improvement in high schools. To achieve this mission, *HSTW* has several goals:

- Increase the percentage of high school students who meet the college- and career-readiness goals to at least 85 percent.
- Increase the percentage of students completing the *HSTW*-recommended curriculum to 85 percent.
- Increase the percentage of high school students who complete high school in four years to 90 percent.
- Advance state and local policies and leadership initiatives that sustain a continuous school improvement effort.
- Help all students leave high school with an employer certification, postsecondary credit, or the knowledge and skills needed to avoid remedial postsecondary studies.

HSTW Key Conditions for Continuous Improvement

High Schools That Work is grounded in the belief that everyone — school, district, local and state leaders — must work together to align policies, resources, initiatives and accountability efforts to support high schools and middle grades schools as they adopt and implement comprehensive school improvement designs. School improvement is sustainable when schools have well-prepared leaders who work with teachers to create the following school conditions:

- **A clear, functional mission statement:** The school’s mission is to prepare high school students for success in college and careers.
- **Shared leadership:** Strong school leadership teams are committed to improving the quality of instruction and raising student achievement.
- **A plan for continuous improvement:** District and school leaders create organizational structures and processes that support faculty to improve teaching and learning.
- **Qualified teachers:** Teachers have in-depth knowledge of their subject areas and are committed to continually improving teaching strategies.
- **Commitment to goals:** Districts create enabling conditions that support school leaders to achieve the *HSTW* Goals.
- **Flexible scheduling:** School superintendents and boards permit high schools to adopt flexible schedules that enable students to earn more credits.
- **Support for professional learning:** District and school leaders provide teachers with instructional materials, planning time and professional learning for implementing new curricula and effective instructional practices.

HSTW Key Practices

The following research-based Key Practices form a strategic basis for school improvement initiatives:

- **High expectations:** Motivate more students to meet high expectations by integrating high expectations into classroom practices and providing frequent feedback.
- **Program of study:** Require each student to complete an upgraded academic core and a concentration.
- **Academic studies:** Teach more students the essential concepts of the college-preparatory curriculum by encouraging them to apply academic content and skills to real-world problems and projects.
- **Career/technical studies:** Provide more students access to intellectually challenging career/technical studies in high-demand fields that emphasize the higher-level academic and problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and in further education.
- **Work-based learning:** Enable students and their parents to choose from programs that integrate challenging high school studies and work-based learning and are planned by educators, employers and students.
- **Teachers working together:** Provide cross-disciplinary teams of teachers time and support to work together to help students succeed in challenging academic and career/technical studies.

- **Students actively engaged:** Engage students in academic and career/technical classrooms in rigorous and challenging proficient-level assignments, using research-based instructional strategies and technology.
- **Guidance:** Involve students and their parents in a guidance and advisement system that develops positive relationships and ensures completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic or career/technical concentration.
- **Extra help:** Provide a structured system of extra help to assist students in completing accelerated programs of study with high-level academic and technical content.
- **Culture of continuous improvement:** Use data to continuously improve school culture, organization, management, curriculum and instruction to advance student learning.

HSTW Services

HSTW provides guidance and assistance to schools, districts and states in implementing a framework of Key Practices. Schools may participate in the *HSTW* network in three ways: through a state network, by individual site contract or through an urban school district initiative. *HSTW* provides the following services to all sites, as well as other services specified by contracts:

- Manage and lead a Site Development Workshop to give teams from new sites an introduction to the *HSTW* design.
- Lead on-site Technical Assistance Visits (TAVs) and provide reports to school leadership.
- Provide school improvement consultants to work with schools in the delivery of technical assistance and coordination of services.
- Help schools plan and implement site-specific professional learning that helps teachers change what and how they teach.
- Support the creation of site-focused professional learning plans and provide on-site professional learning.
- Provide professional learning opportunities for state, district and school teams through the annual *HSTW* Staff Development Conference.
- Evaluate sites' efforts and progress in implementing the design and raising student achievement through the biennial *HSTW* Assessment (a NAEP-referenced exam) and teacher surveys, and provide reports of findings.
- Conduct training of state personnel to assist in providing *HSTW* services.

Appendix B: About the SREB Study of High School Principals' Working Conditions

SREB designed this study to learn more about principals' perceptions of their working conditions as they strive to lead school improvement. Through an exploration of principals' perceptions regarding their district's actions to direct and support school improvement, districts and states can better understand their impact on principals' ability to carry out the core responsibilities of improving teaching and learning and identify ways to help improve principals' working conditions. This study aimed to answer this question: **What perceptions do high school principals have of the conditions their districts are providing in support of school improvement?**

These more-specific questions, drawn from a synthesis of the research on the role of the district in driving school reform, framed the study:

- *Are principals' efforts to improve their schools supported by a clear district focus and strategic plan for improving student achievement?*
- *How are district staffs engaging in improvement at the school level?*
- *Are principals guided by a coherent district framework for improving instruction and student achievement?*
- *Are principals and their staffs provided a variety of data, along with training and assistance in using the data to improve instruction and student achievement?*
- *Do principals have access to technical expertise and high-quality professional learning tailored to their schools' needs?*
- *Do principals have access to and control of human, financial and other resources that they need to effect school improvement?*
- *Do principals have help from the district in securing parent and community involvement in the school's improvement agenda?*

SREB staff interviewed 22 principals selected from SREB-compiled lists of the 100 most-improved and 100 least-improved schools, as measured by gains on the *HSTW* Assessment between 2004 and 2006. The sample encompassed a mix of schools located in urban, suburban and rural communities in 17 states.

Schools exhibited a wide range of student achievement, as measured by graduation rates and performance on the *HSTW* Assessment, as well as differing accountability ratings and levels of school improvement model implementation. The sample of schools included those that had shown improvements in test scores over recent years (2004 to 2006) as well as those whose test scores had remained steady or had decreased. The schools chosen were located in 22 districts of various sizes, as measured by the number of schools in the district: small (between one and 10 schools in the district); medium (11 to 25 schools), and large (26 or more schools).

This purposeful sampling procedure allowed SREB to include a variety of principals and a diverse cross-section of high schools engaged in the *HSTW* reform initiative. (See Tables A and B on the following page for a description of the interview sample.)

Interviews with each of the principals in the study were conducted over the telephone using a research-based protocol that had been tested and reviewed thoroughly. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analyses of the transcripts included the individual study, coding, and sorting of data by the three-member SREB research team to identify themes and prevailing conclusions common among interviews. Statistical tests of differences among interviewees were not performed, due to the small numbers of schools fitting each of the possible categories defined by the primary variables of *district size*, *level of implementation of the HSTW school improvement model*, and *progress in student achievement*. Because schools selected from both the most-improved and least-improved lists included a combination of traditionally high-performing and traditionally low-performing schools, comparisons between high-performing and low-performing schools were not intended or appropriate. However, differences between perceptions of principals of schools showing the most improvement on the *HSTW* Assessment (12 schools) and principals of schools showing the least improvement (10 schools) were examined, because the number of schools in each of these categories was similar and included a mix of rural, suburban and urban districts.

SREB's commitment to participants' anonymity in the reporting of findings prohibits the release of the names of the principals interviewed and their schools and districts.

Table A. Selected Characteristics of Interview Sample

Number of high school principals interviewed:	22
Geographic variation of sample:	17 states, 22 districts
Demographic variation of sample:	Small districts: 8 principals Medium districts: 8 principals Large districts: 6 principals
Levels of <i>HSTW</i> implementation among sample:	High: 12 schools Moderate: 3 schools Low: 7 schools
Range of 2006 graduation rates among sample:*	66.8% – 93.7%
2006 accountability status among sample:	10 schools met AYP 10 schools did not meet AYP 2 unknown AYP status (data unavailable)
Range of <i>HSTW</i> Assessment scores among sample:	
Reading	239-305 (Goal=279)
Math	278-330 (Goal=297)
Science	254-335 (Goal=299)

*Graduation rates are reported by each state; not all states use the same formula for calculating graduation rate.

Table B. Characteristics of Schools by Improvement Category

	Schools showing most improvement, 2004 – 2006	Schools showing least improvement, 2004 – 2006
Total Number Schools:	12	10
Demographic distribution of most/least-improved schools:	Small districts: 4 schools Medium districts: 4 schools Large districts: 4 schools	Small districts: 4 schools Medium districts: 4 schools Large districts: 2 schools
Level of <i>HSTW</i> Implementation:	High: 9 schools Moderate: 3 schools Low: n/a	High: 3 schools Moderate: n/a Low: 7 schools
Range of 2006 graduation rates:	66.8 %-93.7%	73.8%-95.9%
Range of 2006 <i>HSTW</i> Assessment scores:	Reading: 290-305 Math: 305-330 Science: 287-335	Reading: 236-298 Math: 263-310 Science: 235-310
Range of Principals' Years of Experience:	1 – 9 (average: 4.8)	1 – 9 (average: 3.7 years)

Appendix C: Principal Interview Protocol

The interview with each of the 22 principals was focused around the following 12 questions pertaining to district support for leading school improvement:

1. Who do high school principals perceive as responsible for school improvement?
2. How do principals receive support for their improvement efforts?
3. What do district offices expect from school principals?
4. What role does the district play in helping principals improve instruction at their schools?
5. Are principals given autonomy by their districts to make school-based instructional decisions?
6. How are principals assisted by their district offices in the planning and provision of professional learning?
7. What additional supports do principals need from their district offices?
8. How actively involved are districts with improving teaching and learning in schools?
9. What assistance do principals receive from their district offices for encouraging community involvement in their schools?
10. What supports do districts provide for helping principals implement rigorous curricula and instruction in their schools?
11. What assistance do school principals receive from their district offices for building leadership capacity?
12. How do school principals perceive the role of their state in supporting school improvement efforts?

Appendix D: Resources for an Evidence-Based Educational Approach in High Schools

Researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education estimated that the annual per-pupil cost of an instructional approach that incorporates research-proven strategies to improve learning would total \$9,391 — including general education resources for schools; resources for extra-help strategies; and district office resources for operations, maintenance and transportation.⁴⁴ The evidence-based educational approach described in the report includes the following characteristics:

- Core class sizes of 25 for mathematics, science, reading/English/writing, history and world language
- Specialist teachers to provide instruction in art, music, physical education, career/technical education, etc., and in numbers adequate to cover 90-minute block schedules in high school
- At least one period (usually an hour) of planning and preparation time each day for all teachers
- Pupil support staff including guidance counselors (one full-time-equivalent, or FTE, position for every 250 students) and nurses, as well as additional pupil support to include social workers and family liaison personnel, the latter provided on the basis of one FTE position for every 100 at-risk students
- A full-time librarian, technical media person, a principal and assistant principal and three secretaries (in prototypical school of 600 students)
- An ambitious set of professional development resources, including one instructional coach for every 200 students (three FTE positions in a 600 student high school), at least ten pupil-free days for professional development and \$100 per pupil for trainers and other expenses related to professional development
- Supervisory aides to cover lunch, hall monitoring and bus loading and unloading
- About \$180 per pupil for instructional materials, formative assessments, and supplies; \$250 per pupil for technology and equipment; and \$250 per pupil for student activities (sports, clubs, etc.)
- \$25 per pupil to provide extra strategies for gifted and talented students

- A comprehensive range of extra-help strategies for students who need additional instructional assistance and extra time to achieve to rigorous state proficiency standards, including one-on-one tutoring, extended day, summer school, instruction in English as a second language and services for students with disabilities
- Substitute teacher resources at 10 days for each teacher and instructional facilitator position
- Central office staff covering the superintendent's office, the business office, curriculum and pupil support, technology, personnel, and an operations and maintenance director (configured on a prototypical 3,500 student district and then prorated up or down depending on district pupil size)

Endnotes

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