Toward More Effective School Districts: A Review of the Knowledge Base

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Contributors

Don Dailey, Steve Fleischman, Libi Gil,
Deb Holtzman, Jennifer O'Day, and Cory Vosmer

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Background

Districts as a Key Player in Raising Student Achievement

What does it take to achieve high-performing school districts, particularly ones serving low-income children? Until recently, surprisingly few researchers or policymakers had focused on this question. In the past, district leaders such as school board members, superintendents, and central office administrators were often dismissed as barriers to sustained school improvement—not as some of its key agents. Fortunately, this negative image and lack of attention has been remedied in the past few years as researchers and national education organizations have produced new explanations and evidence regarding the components that allow school districts to play a positive role in raising student achievement on a wide scale.

Leading national organizations, research firms, individual researchers, technical assistance providers, and others have begun to identify the elements that contribute to district effectiveness. Researchers and experienced district leaders have published guidance in this area. In addition, new organizations—including major foundations—have begun or expanded efforts to support district improvement. Most encouragingly, recent evidence suggests that large urban districts can improve. How they do so is the subject of this paper.

In this paper, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) presents a review of the literature on district effectiveness, which we conducted as part of our efforts to support high-poverty, low-performing districts in significantly raising student achievement and improving other important outcomes (e.g., increased student engagement, improved attendance, and lowered dropout rates). This knowledge has been incorporated into the approach to district improvement taken by AIR's *School District Consulting Services*®—our organization's recently launched effort to apply our research, technical assistance, and communications capacity to support significant and sustained growth of achievement in high-poverty, underperforming districts.

We provide preliminary answers to the question: *What does the research and public policy literature suggest about (a) the components of high-performing, high-poverty school districts and (b) the strategies that help districts move toward effectiveness?* In the sections that follow, we summarize and synthesize more than 20 significant recent reports, studies, and policy statements regarding components of successful district reform; identify resources developed by other organizations that are intended to support district improvement; and provide suggestions regarding the application of our findings.

Although the research base on the components and processes for achieving higher performance in high-poverty districts is growing, it is still quite limited. Therefore, the following "findings" and observations should be considered tentative. Many questions remain to be answered regarding which of the components identified in the following pages are the critical ones, how to sequence the implementation of these critical elements, and how to achieve the enabling conditions (political consensus and will, organizational capacity, structural reforms, etc.) necessary for sustained district-level improvement. Nevertheless, we believe that this paper establishes the empirical basis for the development and delivery of effective, "research-based"

services by AIR's *School District Consulting Services*® and by other organizations working to support this goal.

Methodology

We began by preparing a bibliography of potential sources of guidance on district effectiveness (judged on the basis of raising student achievement for high-poverty students or closing achievement gaps), based on the input of experts internal and external to AIR. We then highlighted which of the sources seemed to be most relevant in addressing our research question and prioritized the examination of these sources. The bibliography continued to evolve throughout the entire review process.

Samples from several different bodies of published and unpublished literature are included in this review, including academic research, advocacy statements by leading national organizations, and public policy papers. Some of our sources reported results from a single study, whereas others were literature reviews or syntheses of multiple studies and "accumulated professional wisdom." We concentrated our efforts on newer studies/documents that were not included in the existing reviews. For older sources, we relied on secondary report through the existing reviews, rather than direct review of these sources ourselves.

We then distilled a list of "components of district effectiveness" as identified by each reviewed source. The common themes we identified across all sources are summarized in the next section. Our summary is largely descriptive, in the sense that we do not question the findings of individual studies or reports. However, in a later section we identify some of the limitations of the reviewed literature. A final section identifies some existing resources for helping districts move toward effectiveness.

Synthesis of Findings on Components of Successful Districts

Although the sources were not entirely congruent in their findings about the components of effective districts, a surprisingly high degree of consensus—and virtually no contradictions—were found. The significant commonalities are described below. It is important to note, however, that not every source identified each element discussed below. Moreover, some sources identified some elements not included here. Our intent was to distill common themes, not to provide an extensive list of every component mentioned by any source.

Primary Themes

This section presents the "primary" themes regarding high-performing, high-poverty districts that emerged most prominently from the literature.

1. Successful districts focus first and foremost on student achievement and learning.

a. *(Re)define the district role to focus on student achievement and student learning.* Findings from several sources indicate that in order for districts to successfully raise student achievement, they must make improving achievement their top, or even their

sole, focus. They cannot allow themselves to be distracted by the types of bureaucratic functions that have normally been the chief concern of district operations. District leaders (including the superintendent and the school board) should establish a vision of improved achievement, promulgate this vision throughout the district and among all stakeholders, and then set out to make the improvement of achievement—through the improvement of teaching and learning—their main mission (Baldrige, LFA, M&T, SDH, CDC, Elmore). Some sources observe that this focus on student achievement is grounded in high expectations and clear academic goals for all students and a genuine belief that all students can learn (AFT, Baldrige, SCTW, CDC, MIE, TW, Gates).

b. *All leadership is instructional leadership.* Just as the district itself needs to redefine its role and mission in terms of improving instruction and achievement, so do the leaders within the district—at both district and school levels—need to define their own personal roles in terms of improving instruction. Several studies indicate that, in effect, all leadership must become instructional leadership; the improvement of instruction (and thereby of learning and achievement) needs to become the defining feature of leadership roles within the district (J/P, NAS, NCEA, Elmore, O'Day & Bitter). The New American Schools (NAS) framework further refines the leadership role to include "establishing distributive leadership models; leading and sustaining organizational change; and aligning the strategy, structures, and systems of an organization around its core mission."

2. Successful districts have a theory of action for how to effect improvements, and they establish clear goals.

a. *Develop a theory of action.* According to some sources, once district leaders have set the improvement of student achievement as their top priority, they need to develop a theory of action for how to turn their vision into reality. One author, for example, describes how District 2 in New York City formulated an explicit theory of how teachers learn to teach differently (Elmore).

b. *Establish clear goals.* Once the theory of action has been developed, it needs to be translated into specific steps. Numerous studies emphasize the importance of establishing clear and specific goals with measurable indicators and possibly a timeline for implementation and success (D&S, Ed Trust, J/P, LFA, SDH, MIE).

3. Successful districts enact comprehensive, coherent reform policies.

a. *Focus on systemwide, comprehensive, coherent long-term change.* Several studies recommend that districts take a comprehensive, coherent approach to reform in which administrative structures are aligned with district goals (D&S, LFA, M&T, SDH, MIE). The system as a whole should be viewed as the unit of change (M&T), and multiple, coherent strategies should be put in place to support any given goal (CDC). Different aspects of the reform strategy should be aligned with one another and should be mutually supportive. Moreover, some studies recommend that districts commit to sustaining reform over the long haul (Baldrige, LFA, NAS).

However, this does not necessarily mean that districts must try to do everything all at once with everyone. For example, some studies encourage an initial focus on improving performance at the lowest-performing schools (O'Day & Bitter, SDH).

4. **Educators in successful districts accept personal responsibility for improving student learning and receive support to help them succeed.**

   a. *Ensure increased support in exchange for increased responsibility.* Some studies stress the importance of educators at all levels being willing to accept responsibility for the improvement of student learning. Districts should assume responsibility for the success of all district schools (O'Day & Bitter), and teachers should accept responsibility for the success of all of their students (CDC, Elmore). A precursor to the acceptance of this responsibility is a genuine belief that all students can succeed and a refusal to make excuses for low performance (CDC, Elmore). One framework reinforces that districts need to *honestly* and *accurately* acknowledge student performance through public accountability data, but also must be honest ("on the record") about systemic deficiencies (NAS).

   In exchange for this increased personal responsibility, educators must receive additional support (such as opportunities to improve their knowledge, skills, and capacity) to enable their success. (This will be discussed further below.)

   A related theme is that of accountability. Some of the studies found that an environment of strong accountability—sometimes provided by the state, sometimes provided or supplemented by the district—seemed to be associated with district success (CDC, SDH).

5. **Successful districts are committed to professional learning at all levels and provide multiple, meaningful learning opportunities.**

   a. *Provide coherent learning opportunities for educators*. Just as successful districts foster the belief that all children can learn, they also promote the belief that all adults—including everyone working in the system—can learn and provide opportunities for such learning to occur (Baldrige, M&T, Elmore, NAS, MIE). Indeed, the provision of consistent, continuing, high-quality professional development is a key task for the district, although much effective professional development may occur at school sites (in the form of coaching, teacher professional collaboration, etc.). New models of professional development and a variety of professional development approaches may be needed (LFA, DD), including the promulgation of collaborative teaching approaches (TW). One source noted that districts should invest at least 5% of their resources in "adult learning and leadership development" (Gates).

   Principals also receive meaningful learning opportunities through networks, mentorships, and professional development of their own to support their capacity as instructional leaders. In several studies, the principal was described as the "linchpin" of reform, embodying the instructional vision and focus of the district through instructional leadership for teachers (J/P, M&T, LFA).

One source notes the importance of the organization itself maintaining an inquiry approach to instructional improvement that is grounded on continuous improvement processes (NAS).

6. **Successful districts use data to guide improvement strategies.**

   a. *Emphasize data collection and data-based decisionmaking.* Nearly every study mentioned the collection and use of data as a key strategy within successful districts. In fact, this was probably the single most frequently cited element of district success, although specific approaches were seldom provided. Sources recommended the development and maintenance of systems to constructively monitor the performance of not only students, but also classrooms, schools, the district as a whole, and community partners (SCTW, M&T). The NAS framework further stresses that data should be collected from multiple sectors, both internal and external to the organization, and the term “data” should not refer solely to test data. Moreover, NAS argues that data should not be used to validate district actions, but to challenge assumptions and provide a tool for reflection.

   Data are disaggregated by student subgroup to promote equity-driven planning and decisionmaking (M&T, CDC, NCEA, Baldrige). Some sources (LFA, Baldrige, M&T) focused on how districts made data usable, useful, and/or safe (free from blame). In some districts, master teachers/coaches play a large role in analyzing data and disseminating results to teachers (J/P, LFA). One source emphasized that data are optimally used to “proactively identify and serve students” who are falling behind (MIE).

7. **Successful districts regularly monitor progress and intervene if necessary.**

   a. *Planning is not enough; progress monitoring is needed.* The best plan in the world is meaningless if it is never implemented. Some studies recommend that districts assist schools with implementation of plans and monitor their progress (O’Day & Bitter).

   b. *Where progress is evident, schools should be recognized; where progress is found to be limited, adjustments or interventions may be necessary* (J/P, Baldrige, SCTW, NCEA, Gates). In addition, districts and schools should seek continuous improvement and refinement of reform attempts. Although successes should be celebrated, complacency should never set in, as there is always room for further improvement (CDC).

Secondary Themes

The following components of effective districts were mentioned by multiple sources, but were not as prominent as those highlighted above (because they either were mentioned by fewer studies or received generally less emphasis).

8. **Partnerships/stakeholder involvement.** Some authors suggest that partnerships (for example, with organizations outside the district) and involvement of multiple stakeholders

may be components in district attempts to reform. Some studies indicate that the existence of such relationships is critical whereas others suggest that such relationships may be useful but not necessarily essential. The NAS framework describes that a school or district can help create a positive community climate by actively regarding itself as a part of the community and identifying and engaging potential stakeholders. The Gates attributes note that "parents are recognized as the first teachers."

9. **District–school collaboration/shared responsibility and autonomy.** Some authors highlight the importance of different levels of the system (especially districts and schools) working together to "co-construct" reform (D&S). Similarly, some research identifies the need for a "balance" between central authority and school autonomy (Marsh). However, other studies not only omit mention of such balance, but imply a rather stronger role for the district. For instance, one recommends districtwide adoption of a specific curriculum to promote instructional coherence (SDH). The National Center for Educational Accountability's (NCEA's) Texas Study offers a possible reconciliation of these views, advocating increased autonomy for schools displaying high performance.

10. **Resource acquisition and allocation.** A few studies cited the need for consideration of matters of resources (not only financial resources, but also resources such as time and materials). Equitable resource allocation (for example, targeting more resources to more economically disadvantaged schools) was also mentioned by some of the sources (Ed Trust, SCTW). The Mass Insight Education (MIE) benchmarks describe that a district's improvement goals should be reflected in the way that it secures and allocates money, time, and staff.

11. **Customized/tailored support for schools.** Finally, some studies suggested that districts tailor their efforts to assist schools to the particular needs and context of each school (M&T, SCTW, Elmore).

SUMMARY OF DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT THEMES

Primary Themes

Successful districts:

- Focus first and foremost on student achievement and learning
- Have a theory of action for how to effect improvements and establish clear goals
- Commit to professional learning at all levels and provide multiple, meaningful learning opportunities
- Use data to guide improvement strategies
- Enact comprehensive, coherent reform policies
- Have educators who accept personal responsibility for improving student learning and receive support to help them succeed
- Monitor progress regularly and intervene if necessary

Secondary Themes

Successful districts focus attention on:

- Partnerships/stakeholder involvement
- Resource acquisition and allocation
- District–school collaboration/shared responsibility and autonomy
- Customized/tailored support for schools

Limitations of the Literature

As noted above, the literature on effective districts displays a remarkable degree of consensus about the components of effective districts. However, several limitations of the literature that bear on both the validity and the applicability of the findings must be acknowledged. In addition, it should be noted that while these sources often employ an explicit or implicit "theory of action," they rarely test the theory empirically.

Validity

In terms of validity, it is important to note the methodology employed by many of the studies. In particular, most of them began by identifying effective districts (for example, in high-poverty districts with notably high achievement gains) and then attempted to retrospectively determine what factors had been responsible for the observed success. This approach is methodologically limited in several respects:

- First, it employs a technique known as "sampling on the dependent variable"—that is, the selection of districts to study is based on the outcome variable of interest: district success. The problem with this is the possibility that *other* districts may have been using (or attempting) the same strategies, but experiencing less success.[1] If so, then perhaps the success of identified districts was attributable to other hidden factors, such as strategies other than those identified or underlying factors that enabled the identified strategies to be more effective.

- Next, the retrospective determination of factors contributing to success—often identified through after-the-fact interviews with district personnel—may not be entirely reliable. Memory can be selective and is no substitute for direct, in-the-moment observation or a pre-established process for testing theory.

- In addition, most of the studies were qualitative case studies of small numbers of districts. The extent to which the findings can be generalized to other districts—districts that may be quite different from the studied districts with regards to key variables—may be limited.

- Finally, several of the studies defined district "success" on the sole basis of achievement data from state tests. Scores on state tests (particularly those with high stakes attached) may be subject to growth resulting from manipulation of the testing pool and other strategies that would generally not be considered as promoting genuine increases in student learning.[2] Thus, the extent to which the "successful" districts really were genuinely successful may be open to question.[3]

Applicability

The findings from the literature may also be somewhat limited in their applicability. As can be seen from the synthesis above, the literature is long on broad principles and themes and short on concrete practices. There is certainly no step-by-step "road map" to success, since districts must view the broad principles and then figure out how to put them into practice in ways that make sense in their own contexts. Needless to say, there is no guarantee of success.

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[1] To their credit, a couple of the studies (e.g., SDH) did include comparison districts and attempted to determine what factors separated the successful districts from the comparison districts.
[2] To their credit, some studies (e.g., CDC) used multiple indicators in identifying "successful" districts.
[3] At the state level, a case in point is Texas, which many have touted as showing tremendous gains in achievement over the past decade. However, some researchers have called into question the genuineness of Texas' apparent success.

The process of translating principles to a successful strategy that sequences and prioritizes actions is difficult. Although some of the studies noted that effective districts tailor their efforts to assist schools to the particular needs of each *school* (M&T, SCTW, Elmore), the literature does not explicitly consider the differing conditions and contexts across *districts* that need to be addressed in the district improvement process. Perhaps a next step is to move beyond the identification of broad, common principles and to begin to look at how districts *adapt* the principles to their own unique circumstances.

In addition, some of the effectiveness components identified in the literature might be considered to be *preconditions* or *underlying supports* for success. Missing is guidance on how to put these preconditions or supports in place or what to do if they are absent. For example, if they do not already exist, superintendents and school boards need to know *how* to put in place reputed elements of effective performance such as "high expectations for all students," "a commitment to professional learning," and/or "acceptance of personal responsibility for student success."

Certainly the literature's identification of common themes of district effectiveness is an important first step, and the high degree of consensus across multiple studies warrants at least preliminary consideration of these themes. However, much work remains to be done in determining how, specifically, to support any given district in its attempt to become more effective.

Helping Districts Move Toward Greater Effectiveness

Although some of the studies indicated that the presence of external strategic partnerships may help districts to be more effective, we were not able to identify any research literature studying *how* external organizations can best support districts in their attempts to increase effectiveness. However, we did identify sample resources and tools that various organizations have developed to help districts, such as:

- *School Communities that Work for Results and Equity: A Portfolio for District Redesign*. This portfolio, developed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts, offers "concrete and innovative recommendations for improving urban education systems, especially school districts." (See http://www.annenberginstitute.org/publications/sctw_portfolio.html.)

- The National Center for Educational Accountability's (NCEA) Web site (http://www.nc4ea.org) has a "self-audit tool" that uses the NCEA's *Best Practice Framework* "to help educators compare their practices to higher-performing districts, schools, and classrooms." (This tool professes to be useful to both districts and schools, but it appears to be somewhat more geared toward schools.)

- "Pathways to School Improvement." This Web site (http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs), developed by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL), "synthesizes research, policy, and best practices on issues critical to educators engaged in school improvement." A Trip Planner Survey Tool (http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/trip/welcome.htm) on the site helps visitors prioritize their use

of the available resources; individuals or groups take one or more surveys and then receive a customized profile suggesting the issues most relevant for their needs.

- Mass Insight Education, a Massachusetts-based not-for-profit organization, provides guidance to the state's districts through a Web site called "Building Blocks" (http://www.buildingblocks.org) that supports the implementation of standard-based school reform and conducts district performance audits to improve the performance of a small network of districts.

- Several states also have technical assistance systems designed to support districts and schools (e.g., Alaska, California, Kentucky, and North Carolina).

We have not been able to closely examine—much less critically evaluate—these resources and do not endorse them. However, in addition to tools developed by AIR's *School District Consulting Services®* and its other technical assistance projects, they form the starting point to identify resources that can help guide district improvement efforts.

Conclusion

This summary is intended as a working document, subject to ongoing discussion and revision. It brings together the thinking of AIR and external experts on this question. However, the guidance provided is preliminary given the nature of the methodology employed and the evolving knowledge base in the field of district improvement. Nevertheless, AIR's *School District Consulting Services®* hopes that this summary will provide AIR's clients with a solid knowledge base to guide the planning and implementation of successful district improvement efforts.

Reference Key

Abbreviation	Reference
AFT	American Federation of Teachers. (2000). *Doing what works: Improving big city school districts.* Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.aft.org/edissues/downloads/dwwfinal.pdf.
Baldrige	Baldrige National Quality Program. (2004). *Education criteria for performance excellence*. Gaithersburg, MD: Baldrige National Quality Program. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.quality.nist.gov/PDF_files/2004_Education_Criteria.pdf.
CDC	The Charles A. Dana Center. (2000). *Equity-driven achievement-focused school districts.* Austin, TX: The Charles A. Dana Center. Available at: http://www.utdanacenter.org/research/reports/equitydistricts.pdf.
DD	Dailey, D. (n.d.). *Districts influencing schools: Rethinking the district role in supporting instructional improvement.* Working paper. Dailey, D. (n.d.). *District capacity to support reform.* Working paper Papers are available from author.
D&S	Datnow, A., & Stringfield, S. (2000). Working together for reliable school reform. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk, 5*(1&2). Available at: http://www.aft.org/edissues/downloads/working.pdf.
Ed Trust	Haycock, K., Jerald, C., & Huang, S. (2001). Closing the gap: Done in a decade. *Thinking K–16: New frontiers for a new century, 5(2),* 3–22. A publication of The Education Trust.
Elmore	Elmore, R. F. (1997). Accountability in local school districts: Learning to do the right things. *Advances in Educational Administration, 5,* 59–82.
Gates	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (n.d.). *Helping all students achieve.* Handout.
J/P	J/P Associates. *The J/P implementation: A comprehensive framework for improving educational outcomes*. New York: J/P Associates. Available at: http://www.jponline.com/implementation.html.
NAS	New American Schools. (2003). *Framework for high-performing school districts.* Internal Draft. Available from authors.
NCEA	Just for the Kids and The National Center for Educational Accountability. *2003 Broad prize for urban education best practice framework.* Austin, TX: Just for the Kids and The National Center for Educational Accountability. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.just4kids.org/bestpractice/study_framework.cfm?sub=National&study=Broad.
LFA	Learning First Alliance. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools.* Washington, DC: Learning First Alliance. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.learningfirst.org/lfa-web/rp?pa=doc&docId=62.
Marsh	Marsh, J. (2000). *Connecting districts to the policy dialogue: A review of literature on the relationship of districts with states, schools, and communities.* Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/District_Lit.pdf.
M&T	McLaughlin, M., & Talbert, J. (2003*). Reforming districts: How districts support school reform.* Seattle, WA: Center for Teaching Policy. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/ReformingDistricts-09-2003.pdf.
MIE	Mass Insight Education. (2004). *An academic benchmarking audit of the Lynn public schools: 2003–2004 school year executive summary and the full report*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education. (Confidential draft provided to authors.)

Abbreviation	Reference
O'Day & Bitter	O'Day, J., & Bitter, C. (2003). *Evaluation study of the immediate intervention/underperforming schools program and the high achieving/improving schools program of the public schools accountability act of 1999.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.air.org/publications/documents/PSAA_Evalaution_Final_Report.pdf.
SCTW	Annenberg Institute for School Reform. (2002). *School communities that work for results and equity.* Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Available at: http://www.annenbergeinstitute.org/publications/sctw_portfolio.html.
SDH	Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement.* New York: MDRC. Prepared for the Council of the Great City Schools. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.mdrc.org/publications/47/full.pdf.
TW	Wagner, T. (2000). *How schools change: Lessons from three communities.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Annotated Bibliography

Note: This bibliography will be updated regularly as other relevant studies and reports are identified.

American Federation of Teachers. (2000). *Doing what works: Improving big city school districts.* Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers. Available at: http://www.aft.org/edissues/downloads/dwwfinal.pdf.

> *Doing What Works: Improving Big City School Districts* provides an overview of proven, common-sense strategies urban school districts are using to raise student achievement, and further highlights the trend of districtwide improvement. This policy brief articulates how the following reform approaches are used in improving urban districts: setting high standards, implementing research-based instructional programs, offering high-quality professional development, reducing class size, providing additional student supports, ensuring safe and orderly schools, and working together to form partnerships.

American Productivity and Quality Center. (2000). *Benchmarking best practices in accountability systems in education.* Houston, TX: American Productivity and Quality Center. (Note: In mid-2004 APQC created Edvance, a spin-off organization headquartered in Austin, TX, to provide district and school improvement services; http://www.edvance.com.) Executive Summary retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.cgcs.org/management/Reports/AccountExecSummary.pdf.

> The American Productivity and Quality Center, the Council of the Great City Schools, the National Alliance for Business, along with 14 urban school districts conducted a study to identify best practices in accountability systems. *Benchmarking Best Practices in Accountability Systems* articulates best practices for seven component areas: leadership, climate/context, operations, human resources, data measurement/management, communications, and standards for teaching and learning. (Information in Executive Summary was too general to accurately enter in chart. Full version of report is available for $45 through the APQC online bookstore.)

Annenberg Institute for School Reform. (2002). *School communities that work for results and equity.* Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Available at: http://www.annenbergeinstitute.org/publications/sctw_portfolio.html.

> School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts was established in 2000 "to help create, support, and sustain entire urban communities of high-achieving schools and to stimulate a national conversation to promote the development and implementation of school communities that do, in fact, work for all children." This introductory piece discusses "the problem with districts" and suggests that the solution is "a local education support system" centered on supporting results at scale, ensuring equity, and community responsibility. Essential functions of such a system are (1) to provide schools, students, and teachers with needed support and timely interventions; (2) to ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions; and (3) to

make decisions and hold people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practices.

Baldrige National Quality Program. (2004). *Education criteria for performance excellence*. Gaithersburg, MD: Baldrige National Quality Program. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.quality.nist.gov/PDF_files/2004_Education_Criteria.pdf.

The Baldrige National Quality Program developed education criteria for performance excellence to serve three purposes: to help advance organizational performance practices, to aid the communication and sharing of best practices approached among organizations of all types, and to provide a framework for understanding and managing performance. Eleven core values guide the criteria for performance excellence; they are: visionary leadership, learning-centered education, organizational and personal learning, valuing staff, agility, focusing on the future, managing for innovation, management by fact, social responsibility, focusing on results and creating value, and having a systems perspective.

BASRC/JFTK-CA *Best Practice Study* (Forthcoming). San Francisco, CA: Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) and Just For the Kids California (JFTK-CA). Available at: http://www.basrc.org/research/best_practices_study.html.

This ongoing study unites BASRC's work on school reform with the school and district improvement framework developed by Just for the Kids (aka, National Center for Educational Accountability, NCEA). For more information on the JFTK approach see the entry cited below.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (n.d.). *Helping all students achieve.* Handout.

The schools, districts, and networks that are invested in by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aim to reflect a common set of attributes that the Foundation claims research and best practices show are necessary conditions to improve performance and enhance the learning environment for all students. This document lists the attributes of high achievement schools, the attributes of high achievement school districts, and essential components of teaching and learning. The seven attributes of high achievement school districts that the Foundation lists are: distributed leadership, performance accountability, effective governance, shared values, learning partnerships, staff development, and technology infrastructure.

The Charles A. Dana Center. (2000). *Equity-driven achievement-focused school districts*. Austin, TX: The Charles A. Dana Center. Available at: http://www.utdanacenter.org/research/reports/equitydistricts.pdf.

This study examined four Texas school districts in which many schools (including high-poverty schools) displayed substantial improvements on a variety of achievement indicators. The researchers used largely qualitative methods to determine the reasons behind these districts' success. The overarching finding was that all four districts featured a widespread and unwavering focus on student achievement; a deeply ingrained belief that all students can achieve to high expectations; educators' willingness to accept responsibility for student learning; and the implementation of practices to support (and further promulgate) the achievement focus, high expectations, and personal responsibility. Although the

specific practices implemented varied, they generally fell under the headings of aligning curriculum/instruction, building/supporting people's capacity to lead and contribute, acquiring and aligning resources, using data to guide improvement, holding people accountable for results while providing them with positive support, working to continually improve, and having multiple strategies in place to support any given goal. Local catalysts and the statewide context of strong accountability (sometimes supplemented even further at the district level) also were found to be important.

Dailey, D. (n.d.). *Districts influencing schools: Rethinking the district role in supporting instructional improvement.* Working paper.

This paper, quite similar in certain sections to the review by Marsh, identifies from the research literature the following themes related to "how districts influence schools and instructional improvement": (1) balance between central district authority and school autonomy, (2) district provision of a variety of professional development opportunities, (3) district culture and social capacity, (4) district theory of action, (5) comprehensive change, (6) district–state relations, and (7) district response to accountability.

Dailey, D. (n.d.). *District capacity to support reform.* Working paper.

This paper is quite similar to the other Dailey paper, but is organized and phrased slightly differently. Major additions include sections on district–community relations, districts as learning organizations, and capacity to effectively use data.

Datnow, A., & Stringfield, S. (2000). Working together for reliable school reform. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk, 5*(1&2). Available at: http://www.aft.org/edissues/downloads/working.pdf.

In Working Together for Reliable School Reform, Datnow and Stringfield identify common characteristics of unusually effective schools and reforms within and among diverse, low-income contexts and pinpoint linkages among classrooms, schools, and systems that enhance the chance of "successful reform selection, implementation, and institutionalization." The frameworks of High Reliability Organizations and co-construction of school reform are brought together to examine the effectiveness of school reform. Common characteristics of high-performing schools described are: different system levels (school, district, etc.) working together to co-construct reform; clear goals shared by the school and district that are tied to measures of improvement; districts having a coordinated and broad-based plan for disseminating information about reform options to schools; the use of critical inquiry to choose a reform that fits the school's culture and needs; collaborative decisionmaking and buy-in amongst teachers; whole school rather than "pocket" reform; multidimensional, ongoing support and leadership from design teams, district, and school-level educators; and policy systems designed to support reform.

Elmore, R. F. (1997). Accountability in local school districts: Learning to do the right things. *Advances in Educational Administration, 5,* 59–82.

In this essay, Elmore reflects on how the school district role can be reconstructed "around the central principle of adding value to student performance in schools."

He focuses on the importance of changing teaching practice and student learning; educators' acceptance of responsibility for improving teaching and learning; alignment between individual responsibility, collective expectations, and the requirements of formal accountability systems; increased capacity-building support in exchange for increased accountability for performance; and the need for attention to school context.

Elmore, R.F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.shankerinstitute.org/Downloads/building.pdf.

In this publication, Elmore synthesizes and expands on his prior writings on district reform and suggests considerations that should be kept in mind by leaders who wish to engage in effective, standards-based school and district improvement efforts.

Haycock, K., Jerald, C., & Huang, S. (2001). Closing the gap: Done in a decade. *Thinking K-16: New frontiers for a new century, 5(2),* 3–22. A publication of The Education Trust. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/85EB1387-A6B7-4AF4-BEB7-DF389772ECD2/0/k16_spring01.pdf.

The first part of this Education Trust publication breaks down the myths about student achievement by examining cross-state data which show that differences in average state test scores for the same demographic categories are often staggering, indicating that poverty and poor communities are not insurmountable obstacles to raising student achievement. The second part of this article establishes six common strategies of successful schools, districts, and states. Haycock, Jerald, and Huang describe the following reform elements: clear goals, assessments that provide honest information and signal needed improvement, challenging curriculum for all students, good teaching for every student, provision of additional student supports, and "upping the ante" by lobbying for more money in poor schools and districts.

J/P Associates. *The J/P implementation: A comprehensive framework for improving educational outcomes*. New York: J/P Associates. Available at: http://www.jponline.com/implementation.html.

J/P Associates are a design-based assistance provider for Direct Instruction. A five-stage framework is outlined that provides the steps necessary to improve and maintain increases in student learning. In this piece, effective schools are characterized as having a clear academic focus and mission, providing consistent and continuing structured staff development, providing frequent progress monitoring, and having strong instructional leadership. Each of the five stages of the J/P Implementation is geared to enable schools to achieve these characteristics of effective schools. The first stage of implementation is focused on creating a strong instructional leadership team with the school principal at the helm. This begins with professional development centered on direct instruction and the coaching of teachers. During the second stage of implementation, elements leading to the school establishing clear, rigorous standards for students and teachers are modeled and administrators begin to work with the coaches in monitoring and providing feedback to teachers. Staff development and monthly

coaching continue. In the third stage of implementation, J/P begins data collection relating to placement testing, grouping, pacing guide analysis, backtesting, and testing for acceleration. These efforts are added to continual teacher training and coaching, and monitoring of instruction by the principal. In the fourth stage of implementation, previous efforts continue and the Leadership Team has developed a common vision of instructional excellence and a clear set of corresponding goals. During the final stage of implementation, J/P tests all areas of the implementation and previous staff development, coaching, and instructional leadership activities continue, even as its district services come to an end. The coaching process is the backbone of the J/P implementation. Coaches work with teachers in their classrooms to guarantee that Direct Instruction is put into practice accurately and that teachers continue to learn. Principals also receive coaching and training to prepare them for instructional leadership.

Just for the Kids and The National Center for Educational Accountability. *2003 Broad prize for urban education best practice framework.* Austin, TX: Just for the Kids and The National Center for Educational Accountability. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.just4kids.org/bestpractice/study_framework.cfm?sub=National&study=Broad.

The National Center for Educational Accountability, in collaboration with Just for the Kids, has developed a graphical framework of "best practices of high-performing school systems" for use as "an organizational schema to examine the practices of consistently high-performing school systems." (Few details are provided on how this framework and its elements were actually developed.) The framework is based around five organizing themes representing "the major content areas in which practices of high-performing schools systems differ from their average-performing counterparts." The themes are (1) curriculum and academic goals; (2) staff selection, leadership, and capacity building; (3) instructional programs, practices, and arrangements; (4) monitoring, compilation, analysis, and use of data; and (5) recognition, intervention, and adjustments. Specific "best practices" for each theme are provided for district, school, and classroom practices. At the district level, the practices (by theme, respectively) are as follows: (1) define clear and specific academic objectives by grade and subject; (2) provide strong instructional leaders, highly qualified teachers, and aligned professional development; (3) provide evidence-based instructional programs; (4) develop student assessment and data monitoring systems to monitor school performance; and (5) recognize, intervene, or adjust based on school performance. The framework also incorporates "underlying supports representing critical organizational behaviors or influences that may impact exactly how any given practice is enacted in a district," but which "have not been found to be defining factors in increased student achievement." These supports are (1) core beliefs about teaching and learning; (2) organizational knowledge; (3) resource allocation; and (4) local influences, relationships, and communication.

Learning First Alliance. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools.* Washington, DC: Learning First Alliance. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.learningfirst.org/lfa-web/rp?pa=doc&docId=62.

To create this report that highlights policies and practices to improve teaching and learning across entire systems, the Learning First Alliance identified and studied

five high-poverty districts making strides in student achievement through individual interviews, school visits, and focus groups. In examining these high-achieving districts, the authors found the following seven common strategies to improve instruction and student performance: key leaders accepting ownership of challenges that are identified through public accountability data; establishing a systemwide approach to improving instruction; instilling a vision focused on student learning that guides instructional improvement; making decisions based on data, not instinct; adopting new approaches to professional development; redefining leadership roles; and committing to sustaining reform over the long haul.

Lewis, A., & Paik, S. (2001). *Add it up: Using research to improve education for low-income and minority students.* Washington, DC: Poverty and Race Research Action Council. (Linked from Public Schools of North Carolina site). Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.prrac.org/pubs_aiu.pdf.

Although district-level improvement is not the main focus of this report, it nevertheless contains some district level "success stories" (El Paso, TX; Community District 2, NY; Brazosport, TX) and makes some recommendations, perhaps most appropriately targeted at the district level (e.g., on p. 19, "make sure each school has an equitable distribution of competent teachers"; "select and support principals who know how to establish a collaborate, instructionally focused school environment"; and "provide schools with high-quality expertise as part of consistent, intensive professional development"). Overall, however, it does not systematically identify strategies to be used at the district level.

Marsh, J. (2000). *Connecting districts to the policy dialogue: A review of literature on the relationship of districts with states, schools, and communities.* Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/District_Lit.pdf.

This paper reviews the existing research literature (as of 2000) on how districts implement and adapt state policies, the role districts play in the improvement of teaching and learning, and district–community relationships. Marsh identifies two sets of "explanatory and enabling factors," one regarding districts' responses to state policies and the other regarding districts' ability to enact improvements in teaching and learning. The first set includes capacity (human capital, social capital, and physical capital), size, understanding, leadership, organization and governance, political culture and reform history, and nature of the state policy. The second set again includes capacity (human, social, and physical capital*), understanding (e.g., of reform strategies), and leadership, and adds "balance between central authority and school autonomy."

**Here, human capital includes practitioner knowledge and skills. Social capital includes district "normative culture," practitioner involvement and collaboration, and relationships with external organizations/agencies. Physical capital includes resources such as time and materials.*

Mass Insight Education. (2004). *An academic benchmarking audit of the Lynn public schools: 2003–2004 school year executive summary and the full report*. Boston, MA: Mass Insight Education. (Confidential report provided to authors.)

Mass Insight Education (MIE) is a not-for-profit organization that consults with school districts to generate improved student achievement. Their consulting process involves applying benchmarks to the analysis of demonstrably effective school districts and then reapplying these benchmarks through an audit of districts seeking to improve. This audit is organized by three broad areas: expectations for achievement, delivery of services to students, and organization for support. These broad areas drive MIE's benchmarks: higher-standards curriculum, performance-driven systems and culture, effective teaching, targeted intervention, organization of leadership, and allocation of resources (money, time, and staff). For each benchmark, a set of leading indicators and evidence are provided to assess the extent to which these behaviors and systems are at work in the district. These benchmarks or building blocks (www.buildingblocks.org) come together to create a pathway for standards-based reform. Higher standards curriculum and data and performance systems interplay to create effective teaching, which then circles back to higher standards curriculum and data systems for a continuous improvement cycle. Effective teaching leads to the targeted intervention and proactive identification of students falling behind. Allocation of resources and organization of leadership provide the infrastructure for the building blocks to develop.

McLaughlin, M., & Talbert, J. (2003*). Reforming districts: How districts support school reform.* Seattle, WA: Center for Teaching Policy. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/ReformingDistricts-09-2003.pdf.

This study uses multilevel survey data and 4-year case studies to examine the impact of district effects on school reform progress and extract the strategies of "reforming districts." The data indicate that "the extent of district support for school reform made a significant difference in schools' reform progress" and that "productive district–school relationships led to mutual gain" because as central staff learned from the experiences of the reforming schools, they improved their capacity to support school reform. Using case studies and survey data, McLaughlin and Talbert identify five key conditions that characterize reforming districts: focus on the system as the unit of change, a learning community at the district level, a coherent focus on teaching and learning, provision of instructional support that is responsive to school needs, and creation of data-based inquiry and accountability. Additionally, the authors use their data to dispel the following three myths about district reform: that teachers and schools resist a strong central office role, that turnover and change will sink reform efforts, and that local politics will defeat a serious reform agenda.

New American Schools. (2003). *Framework for high-performing school districts.* Internal Draft. (Available from authors.)

The New American Schools' (NAS') framework, derived through a process that included a review of school and district improvement literature, presents seven indicators of high-performing school districts. Each indicator is briefly described and accompanied by a list of questions to assess the extent of this practice occurring in a district. The seven success

indicators included in this framework are as follows: (1) accurate and public acknowledgment of student performance for which leaders take responsibility, (2) a systemwide inquiry approach to instructional improvement founded on processes of continuous improvement, (3) a comprehensive data collection and analysis system that is able to operationalize stated beliefs and missions, (4) contextual and coherent professional development strategies, (5) redefined leadership roles, (6) commitment to sustained improvement over time, and (7) promotion and participation in a positive community climate.

NAS relied on the following sources to produce their list of success indicators:

- *Thinking K–16, 5(2).* A Publication of the Education Trust. New Frontiers for a New Century: A National Overview. Spring 2001.
- *High Schools of the Millennium.* Report of the Workgroup. American Youth Policy Forum. August 2000.
- *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution.* National Association of Secondary School Principals. 1996.
- *Redesigning American High Schools.* Harvard Graduate School of Education. Professional Development Institute.
- Creating a High-Performance School System. Scott Thompson. *Phi Delta Kappan.* March 2003.
- *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do To Improve Instruction and Achievement In All Schools.* Learning First Alliance. March 2003.
- Effective Middle Schools. *FoCAL Points, 3.* a publication of the Public Education Network.
- *National Middle School Association Research Summary #4: Exemplary Middle Schools.*

O'Day, J., & Bitter, C. (2003). *Evaluation study of the immediate intervention/underperforming schools program and the high achieving/improving schools program of the public schools accountability act of 1999.* Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.air.org/publications/documents/PSAA_Evalaution_Final_Report.pdf. Also see the Evaluation Brief, retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.air.org/publications/documents/PSAA%20Eval%20Brief.pdf.

This evaluation of California's Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program—a major component of the statewide accountability policy—found that districts played an important role in school improvement efforts, even though the state did not specify much of a role for districts. In particular, the study found districts significantly influenced instructional practice and achievement trends in low-performing schools. Among the study's general recommendations for districts are that they should: (1) assume responsibility for the success of all district schools, (2) examine and alter district policies that may be hindering progress at low-performing schools, (3) place priority on improving performance at the lowest performing schools, (4) build capacity for effective planning, (5) promote strategic and coherent planning, (6) support and monitor implementation of plans, (7) recruit and retain high-quality teachers, (8) encourage and support instructional collaboration and professional community among teachers, (9) develop and deploy instructionally strong school site leaders, and (10) promote data-based decisionmaking at school sites.

Reynolds, D., Stringfield, S., & Schaffer, E. C. (in press). *The high reliability schools project: Some preliminary results and analyses*. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.highreliabilityschools.co.uk/Downloads/Files/DRSSES2003.pdf.

This document summarizes some of the long-term findings and implications of the application of the "high reliability organizations" that postulates to promote sustainable school and district improvement.

Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement.* New York: MDRC. Prepared for the Council of the Great City Schools. Retrieved June 8, 2005, from http://www.mdrc.org/publications/47/full.pdf.

This study, conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) for the Council of the Great City Schools, identified three urban school districts—Houston, Sacramento, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg—that displayed impressive gains in student achievement and reductions in achievement gaps. The researchers then conducted retrospective case studies of these districts to try to determine the reasons for the apparent success; two comparison districts were also studied. The study found that the following elements were common to the successful districts and lacking in the comparison districts: a focus by all stakeholders (including the school board) on improving student achievement, with establishment of specific goals, timelines, and consequences; consensus/shared vision among stakeholders (especially school board and superintendent) on reform goals and strategies; strong district-level accountability policies; focus on lowest-performing schools and on elementary grade levels; adoption or development of districtwide curricula and instructional approaches and provision of professional development for their implementation; role for central office in guiding/supporting instruction; and use of data-driven decisionmaking. The authors distill from these elements three broad headings: building the foundations for reform (e.g., reaching stakeholder consensus/shared vision for improving student achievement as top priority), developing instructional coherence (e.g., systematic, uniform approach to instruction), and using data-driven decisionmaking. The authors also suggest that "doing all of these things together can have a much larger impact than doing any one of them alone" (p. 7), so it would appear that comprehensiveness of reform strategy was found to be another important element.

Wagner, T. (2000). *How schools change: Lessons from three communities.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

In the "Lessons Learned" chapter of his book, Wagner describes three necessary components for school change and improvement. He argues that if one of these three components is missing, the change process is thwarted. The three conditions he specifies are establishing clear academic goals, providing the foundation for a caring community by establishing a set of core values, and creating a culture of collaboration. The component of establishing clear academic goals is rooted in the notion of developing students' competencies rather than "covering subjects" and requires defined outcomes and goals that are communicated to students and encourages student involvement in the selection of materials and projects. The

core values that create a foundation for a caring community are rooted in teachers establishing personal relationships with their students that nurture individual growth and development and encourage students to discover their unique talents. Finally, collaboration among teachers and with students and the community encourages greater professional responsibility, accountability among staff, and greater returns to training.