



LEARNING **FIRST** ALLIANCE

BEYOND ISLANDS OF EXCELLENCE:

*What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction
and Achievement in All Schools—
A Leadership Brief*





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Learning First Alliance

March 2003

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Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools—A Leadership Brief presents the key findings and recommendations set forth by the members of the Learning First Alliance in *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. For additional copies of this leadership brief (Stock No. 303369) or for the full report (Stock No. 303368), contact the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) at 1-800-933-ASCD (2723), extension 2; in the Washington, DC, metro area, call 703-578-9600. You may mail your order to ASCD, P.O. Box 79760, Baltimore, MD 21279-0760 or order from the ASCD website at www.ascd.org.

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Printed in the United States of America.



Development and production of these reports were supported by grants from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and from the Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and conclusions presented in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education (grant no. R215U000007-01) or the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

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Moving Beyond Islands of Excellence

Heroic principals who turn around low-performing schools, innovative charter schools that break established molds, inspiring teachers who motivate students to excel—those are the familiar prescriptions for improving student achievement in high-poverty schools. While such efforts may mean brighter educational futures for the children involved, they produce isolated islands of excellence.

Our nation has a moral imperative to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more advantaged peers. The No Child Left Behind Act makes this a legal requirement as well. Yet improving learning opportunities for all children will require more than individual talents or school-by-school efforts. It will demand systemwide approaches that touch every child in every school in every district across the nation.

The Learning First Alliance calls for policymakers, practitioners, and the public to accept the challenge of improving student achievement across entire school systems. We believe that substantial gains will result only if we recognize that, to increase student achievement, we must improve instruction and commit the political will and resources necessary to develop districtwide solutions. As a permanent partnership of organizations representing parents, teachers, principals, administrators, local and state boards of education, and colleges of education, the Learning First Alliance recognizes that such improvements will require both individual and collective action. Without efforts to create success across school systems, far too many students will continue to languish. We find that unacceptable.

Moving beyond islands of excellent schools to systems of success will require that all those involved in education better understand what they must do to help students succeed. State leaders need greater knowledge about where to target resources and how to set policies to support entire school systems. District-level educators—board members, superintendents, union leaders, principals, and teachers—need guidance about policies and practices that will improve instruction. And community members and parents need good ideas about how most effectively to support high-quality teaching and learning.

To address the need for better information, the Alliance studied five high-poverty districts making strides in improving student achievement. Recognizing that effective instruction is crucial to improving achievement, we were interested in learning more about how such districts promoted good instruction across their systems. More specifically, we sought to address the following questions:

- How did the districts create the will to begin instructional reform?
- What strategies guided their reform efforts?
- In what ways did districts change their approaches to professional development?
- How did interactions among the stakeholders facilitate or hinder instructional reform?
- How was leadership distributed across stakeholders to facilitate improvement?

To explore these questions, we studied five school districts: the Aldine Independent School District (Texas); the Chula Vista Elementary School District (California); the Kent County Public Schools (Maryland); the Minneapolis Public Schools (Minnesota); and the Providence Public Schools (Rhode Island). We selected the districts based on their ability to exhibit at least three years of improvement in student achievement in mathematics and/or reading across multiple grades and across all races and ethnicities.



We also sought districts that represented a cross section of characteristics, including size, region, urbanicity, and union affiliation.

Taken as a whole, the districts demonstrated improvement in achievement across grades, subjects, and racial/ethnic groups. For example, over a seven-year period, both Kent County and Aldine rose from the lower to the top tier of districts in their states. In Aldine, the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students was nearly eliminated. Kent County, meanwhile, substantially increased the proportion of students scoring “satisfactory” on state tests and was the highest-scoring district in the state in 1999 and 2000. Improvements in Chula Vista, Minneapolis, and Providence were also evident in math and/or reading—particularly at the elementary grades.

While this story is largely one of improvement, a few caveats are in order. First, although the districts demonstrated improvements, not all were high achieving. Second, while not all districts exhibited each characteristic we describe, at least three districts implemented each of the strategies outlined in the coming pages. Finally, this study concentrated on district efforts to improve instruction. Many districts employed additional strategies (e.g., family support systems) that may have contributed to academic success but were beyond the scope of this study.

We do not presume that the study districts have all the answers. Stakeholders we interviewed were candid about the challenges they faced. Nonetheless, we believe this report provides valuable lessons for districts interested in improving teaching and learning across entire systems. For further information on the findings, see the complete study report, as well as individual case studies of each of the five districts. For information about ordering or downloading these documents, visit the Learning First Alliance website at www.learningfirst.org.

District Statistical Data: 2001–2002 School Year

	Aldine	Chula Vista	Kent County	Minneapolis	Providence
Per-pupil budget (\$)	6,822	5,500	8,000	10,854	9,897
Number of schools	61	39	8	128	48
Number of students	52,520	23,132	2,795	47,470	27,192
Student racial/ethnic distribution (%)					
White	9	20	70	26	16
Black	34	5	27	44	22
Hispanic	55	62	3	11	52
Asian/Pacific Islander/Filipino	3	12	0	15	9
Native American/ Alaskan Native	0	1	0	4	1
Free and reduced lunch eligibility (%)	74	44	38	67	80
English as a second language (%)	23	33	1	24	22
Number of teachers (full-time equivalent)	3,496	1,122	179	3,629	2,100

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

A Look at Principal Findings

Learning First Alliance leaders and researchers spent several days in each district and conducted more than 200 individual interviews, 15 school visits, and 60 focus groups. We found that districts implemented a strikingly similar set of strategies to improve instruction. Seven factors emerged as essential to improvement:

1. Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.
2. Districts put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction—one that articulated curricular content and provided instructional supports.
3. Districts instilled visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement.¹
4. Districts made decisions based on data, not instinct.
5. Districts adopted new approaches to professional development that involved a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction.
6. Districts redefined leadership roles.
7. Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul.

FINDING 1: Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.

The emergence of public reporting of testing results drove many districts to look at student achievement data in new ways, and they did not like what they saw: low achievement, particularly for poor and minority children. In each district, some combination of leaders—school board members, superintendents, and/or community members—acknowledged poor performance, accepted responsibility, and began seeking solutions.

That courage to acknowledge negative information was critical to building the will to change. Leaders noted that in the past they had assumed that their systems were effective and that all participants were doing the best they could. Today, the willingness of leaders to question practices in the public arena has spurred stakeholders at all levels to support and implement new strategies to improve teaching and learning.

Building Political Will

Leaders in the districts spurred reform by:

- Publicly acknowledging that student achievement was unacceptably low
- Accepting responsibility for the problem
- Clearly stating that all stakeholders in the system needed to be part of the solution
- Committing themselves to long-term efforts and supporting innovations even if they did not show immediate results

FINDING 2: Districts put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction.

To improve student achievement, leaders realized they would need to fundamentally change instructional practice. Teachers would need to be more effective in helping every child succeed, and principals, central office staff, and board members would need to become more effective at supporting teachers in their classrooms.

¹ Items 3–6 are core elements of finding 2, the systemwide approach. We have chosen to highlight these findings separately because of their importance in district efforts to improve instruction.



Before reforms began, the districts had neither clear, well-understood goals nor effective measures of progress. Supports to improve instruction were haphazard. Boards did not make instruction and achievement central to their work. Principals were more likely to focus on administrative duties than on helping teachers to improve their instruction and student outcomes. None of the districts had systemwide curricula to guide instruction. Without a common base from which to work, teachers and principals often received little guidance about instruction.

Today, much has changed. The districts have adopted systemwide approaches to improving teaching and learning. While not all components are fully designed and implemented, districts are making progress. The most common components of these new systems are:

- A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement
- Systemwide curricula that connect to state standards, are coherent across grade levels, and provide teachers with clear expectations about what to teach
- A multimeasure accountability system and systemwide use of data to inform practice, to hold schools accountable for results, and to monitor progress
- A new approach to professional development—one that involves a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction
- Instructional leadership distributed across stakeholders
- Strategic allocation of financial and human resources
- Use of high-quality research to inform decisionmaking and practice

Although the creation of an infrastructure for instructional improvement might suggest that the districts imposed top-down reforms at the expense of school-level flexibility, that does not appear to have been the case. Over time, district leaders determined that to improve instruction, schools needed to have the flexibility to hire teachers, to use funds, and to structure their staffs and time as they saw fit.

In the coming pages, we will highlight several elements of the systemwide strategy that were the most pervasive and well-developed across all districts.

FINDING 3: Districts instilled visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement.

Acknowledging poor student performance provided district leaders with the ammunition to push for change. The districts began by developing visions to guide them down this path. The visions, while differing across the districts, shared four common elements:

1. Increasing achievement for all students
2. Improving instruction
3. Creating a safe and supportive environment for students
4. Involving parents and the community

What distinguished these districts was not the existence of a vision. What was notable, however, was the extent to which and the ways in which the districts used their visions to guide instructional improvement. Visions were clearly outlined in strategic plans, board meeting agendas, school improvement plans, and newsletters. Furthermore, superintendents made it clear that the vision was to drive programmatic decisions and the allocation of human and financial resources. Most districts succeeded in embedding the vision into the actions of stakeholders, particularly at the administrative level. An Aldine board member explained the use of its vision, noting: “Everything we do is based on what’s best

Everything we do is based on what's best for the children, period.

—Aldine board member

for the children, period. Whether you are dealing with an administrative issue or a student issue, we ask, ‘What’s best for the children?’”

FINDING 4: Districts made decisions based on data, not instinct.

Leaders determined that in order to improve instruction, they would need to put in place systems to assess district strengths and weaknesses. As a result, the districts did three things:

1. They systematically gathered data on multiple issues, such as student and school performance, customer satisfaction, and demographic indicators.
2. They developed multimeasure accountability systems to gauge student and school progress.
3. They provided supports to assist teachers and administrators in using data.

The districts determined that to assess progress and plan instruction they needed to expand beyond standardized state testing data. Thus, they gathered an array of measures, including formative academic assessments, attendance rates, suspension rates, satisfaction ratings, and school climate surveys. Minneapolis provided the most sophisticated example of such an accountability system in our study. The district used more than 15 indicators to assess school progress. In addition to a wide array of testing measures, the Minneapolis system, Measuring Up, included such indicators as attendance rates, suspension rates, and student and staff perceptions of school safety. Schools were ranked according to their aggregate progress on all indicators. Minneapolis leaders asserted that the Measuring Up system provided them with a more accurate picture of school success than did the state ranking, which relied on a single test score.

The study districts understood that simply having good data and a multimeasure accountability system was not sufficient. To change practice, stakeholders needed to use data to make decisions about teaching and learning. To facilitate such efforts, the districts employed a number of strategies:

- *Making the data safe.* Districts actively embraced data as a tool to help them improve. While districts celebrated positive data, leaders did not shy away from difficult information. They modeled acceptance of difficult data by pushing stakeholders to seek solutions rather than placing blame.
- *Making the data usable.* Districts also sought to provide school leaders with data that were easy to access and understand. Some districts supplied teachers and principals with interpreted data reports. Others funded teacher leaders to help interpret school-specific data. Still others provided technology to facilitate in-school disaggregation of data. Such tools allowed teachers and principals to get answers about trends within schools and to determine gaps in learning across certain groups of students.
- *Making use of the data.* Several districts did not simply provide data but also trained principals and teachers to use them. A Kent County teacher explained the value of training, noting: “Assessment training has empowered teachers to feel that you can look at the assessments and control the results in your classroom. You are not at the mercy of a mysterious force.”

Principals, board members, teachers, and central office staff in all districts exhibited significant use of data to guide decisionmaking. The statement of a Providence administrator was reflective of stakeholders throughout the districts: “Our decisions are made based on data, qualitative and quantitative. We look at student achievement and other data on an ongoing basis.... We use data all the time.”



FINDING 5: Districts adopted new approaches to professional development.

The districts made remarkable shifts in their approaches to professional development. To varying degrees, all districts moved beyond the traditional one-time workshop approach and put in place coherent, district-organized strategies to improve instruction (see table on page 7). The strategies included the following:

- *Principles for professional development.* Districts used research-based principles of professional development to guide their work. They connected teacher and principal professional development to district goals and student needs, based the content of professional development on needs that emerged from data, and implemented multiple strategies to foster continuous learning.
- *Networks of instructional experts.* Districts sought to augment instructional leadership by building well-trained cadres of instructional experts among the teacher and principal corps. Principals were not expected to lead alone, and teachers were not expected to work in isolation. By fostering networks of instructionally proficient principals and teacher leaders (e.g., content specialists, mentor teachers), districts increased their capacity to improve instructional practice.
- *Support systems for new teachers.* Districts implemented multiple strategies, particularly mentoring programs, to assist novice teachers.
- *Strategic allocation of financial resources.* Districts invested financially in their goals of improving instruction and achievement. Before allocating their dollars, school boards, superintendents, and principals looked carefully at how to stretch and prioritize their funds to address instructional needs.
- *Encouragement and assistance in using data.* Districts provided teachers and principals with better data—and with more assistance on how to use data to guide instructional practice.

These supports resulted in new approaches to professional development. For example, districts altered the structure of district-level professional development days. Today, districts carefully design their professional development days over the course of a year to focus on the most important needs that emerge from the data. Furthermore, most districts have shifted a majority of training days away from district control and back to their schools as a way to increase in-school professional development. A Kent County administrator noted: “Professional development must be comprehensive, not just the feel-good flavor of the month. We have pushed to get away from something different every day. We look to address issues in depth.”

Changes in practice also emerged at the school level. In many schools, teachers and principals felt empowered to tackle challenges together and felt a professional responsibility to seek and share ways to improve instruction. Furthermore, each district produced examples of schools that had created staffing and scheduling structures so that teachers could work together effectively to address instructional challenges. School-level stakeholders also exhibited significant use of data to guide instructional decisionmaking. While challenges remain, the districts have made significant shifts in their approach to professional development. As a Kent County teacher explained, “We are beginning to work smarter. We are doing individual assessments and are identifying students’ needs and tailoring instruction.”

Professional development must be comprehensive, not just the feel-good flavor of the month.

—Kent County administrator

New Strategies for Improving Instruction: Professional Development Characteristics before and after Instructional Reform

Before Instructional Reform	After Instructional Reform
Districts did not provide a systemwide framework to support good instruction.	Districts implemented a framework to support instructional improvement. Common elements included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement Systemwide curricula that connected to state standards and were coherent across grade levels A multimeasure accountability system and systemwide use of data A new approach to professional development—one that involved a coherent set of strategies to improve instruction Instructional leadership distributed across stakeholders Strategic allocation of financial and human resources Use of high-quality research to inform decisionmaking and practice
Districts lacked a set of research-based principles to guide professional development efforts.	Districts and schools used research-based principles to guide professional development implementation.
Little connection existed between district goals and school-based professional development.	Significant connections existed between district visions and school strategies to improve instruction.
Instructional leadership was diffuse, and leaders were not trained in a coordinated way. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was limited support for principals to become instructional leaders. Teacher leaders existed but were not used in a coordinated, explicit manner. 	Districts created networks of instructional leaders that provided significant support to teachers. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Districts expected principals to be instructional leaders and provided significant support. Districts formed networks of teacher leaders who provided instructional assistance to teachers, principals, and central office administrators.
Data were not widely used to inform instructional and professional development decisions.	Professional development decisions at the school and district levels were based on needs that emerged from data.
Professional development at the district level was ad hoc.	Districts modeled research-based professional development. Districts incorporated the criteria of goal-focused, ongoing, data-driven professional development by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring that districtwide professional development days had a year-long focus and were connected to district goals Shifting districtwide professional development days to the school level Promoting action research among stakeholders
Resources were not used in a targeted way to leverage instructional improvement.	Districts strategically used internal and external resources to improve instruction. Districts used data and their visions strategically to target the allocation of resources to improve instruction.



FINDING 6: Districts redefined leadership roles.

District leaders determined that no single stakeholder could tackle instructional improvement alone. The expansion of instructional leadership did not occur overnight. But during the course of the reforms, the districts extended the leadership from traditional positions—the superintendent and principal—to include other actors: assistant principals, teacher leaders, central office staff, union leaders, and school board members. In addition, in most districts external actors—representatives from state offices, universities, and communities—worked in a coordinated manner with district staff. In these districts, leadership was not simply shared; most stakeholder groups sought to take on the elements of reform that they were best positioned to lead.

- *School boards shepherded instructional improvement efforts.* In many districts, the school board jump-started reform efforts. Boards did not simply galvanize change; they followed through by promulgating policies that supported instructional improvement (e.g., higher salaries for teachers and principals, mentoring programs for new teachers, and systemwide curricula). In most districts, the boards held the superintendent and staff accountable for progress but did not engage in daily administration. As a Chula Vista board member explained, “I am not an administrator; that is not my job... [The superintendent and her staff] are the professionals, and we say to them, ‘These are the results we want to see; you are in charge of how to do it.’”
- *Central offices drove systemwide change.* In each district, the superintendent transformed central office policies, structures, and human resources into forces that guided improvement. More specifically, central offices assumed roles that they were uniquely situated to fulfill—responsibilities that, if not taken up by districts, would have been left unperformed or highly fragmented. Examples of such practices included establishing systems to improve principal leadership, coordinating curriculum alignment, establishing and implementing a multimeasure accountability system, and creating systemwide supports for new teachers.
- *Principals and teacher leaders were crucial to the districts’ systems of instructional leadership.* Nowhere was the district commitment to building instructional expertise more evident than in the development of principals and teacher leaders. Districts made instructional leadership the primary element of each principal’s work and offered support in multiple ways. All districts regularly convened principals to share challenges, exchange strategies, and learn about emerging issues. Districts also provided significant training in instructional leadership techniques. Today, principals regularly engage in classroom observation, use data to analyze student performance and teaching strategies, and seek to build structures that encourage collaboration.

To expand instructional leadership, districts also relied on teacher leaders. These leaders provided additional instructional support to teachers by modeling lessons, providing one-on-one coaching, and assisting struggling teachers. Furthermore, they often relieved principals of administrative instructional duties such as professional development planning and overseeing testing administration. Teacher leaders also deepened the coherence of instructional practice across schools within the study districts. Districts frequently convened teacher leaders for professional development and information sharing. As a result, these leaders became intimately engaged in districtwide strategies and were able to share those

strategies in their work with teachers. Such actions also increased the input of teachers into designing systemwide instructional practices.

The expansion of leadership required significant collaboration among stakeholders. Simply getting along was not the goal; leaders determined that amity held little value if it did not create positive change for children. Led by the efforts of their boards and superintendents, the most collaborative districts in the study *worked on working together*. Cross-role leadership structures facilitated communication, and districts deliberately sought tools to improve collaboration.

FINDING 7: Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul.

These districts showed that making a difference takes time. They established strategies for improvement and stayed with their plans for years. One indicator of that commitment was the remarkably high level of stability among top-level leadership. In three of the five districts, the superintendents who sparked change served their districts for at least eight years. And most districts had a core number of board members who served for 10 or more years. In Chula Vista, for example, three of the five board members who hired Libby Gil as superintendent in 1993 remained on the board almost consecutively for eight years of her nine-year tenure. Similar consistency was evident in Aldine and Kent County. Such continuity of leadership allowed superintendents and boards to understand each other's work and to grow together in their approaches to change.

The districts also paid attention to leadership succession and thus to the stability of new practices—particularly at the central office level. In four of the five districts, the superintendents left their positions during the course of the study and, in each case, were replaced by their deputies. The original superintendents had served to shake up district practice. After their departure, the school boards sought to sustain the reforms through continued stability in leadership.

Challenges to Systemwide Instructional Improvement

Although the districts in the study have made significant strides toward their goals, they still face considerable challenges. We outline three key challenges below.

Old system structures do not easily support new approaches to professional development. Our interviews suggested that the study districts expected more out of their teachers and principals than they ever had before. District leaders expected school staff to take on multiple roles: to analyze data and to diagnose student needs, to determine the efficacy of their own practices, to align their instruction to standards, to research new practices, and to collaborate frequently with colleagues. Yet district leaders had not created the full complement of supports needed for teachers to meet these new expectations.

We saw clear attempts on the part of many teachers and principals to live up to these expectations. Yet the challenges were enormous. While many schools increased the amount of collaborative time available, carving out an hour or two a week for reflection, only a limited number significantly overhauled the school day. As a result, in many schools, the staffing structures and time allocations provided insufficient opportunity for daily collaboration. Teachers, while desiring to meet new expectations, felt overwhelmed by the additional demands.

High schools struggle to improve achievement. Improved student achievement was primarily confined to elementary schools in the study districts. This is perhaps not surprising, as the



districts focused heavily, and in most cases deliberately, on instructional improvement in the elementary grades (and to some degree the middle grades) almost to the exclusion of the high schools. As districts began to experience increases in achievement in the elementary grades, they turned greater attention to high schools. However, improvement at the middle and high school levels remains a challenge.

Finding funding to support new approaches to instructional improvement remains difficult.

To engage in strategies to improve instruction, the districts relied significantly on external state, federal, and private grants. Providence, for example, received multi-million-dollar grants from private foundations to help train principals and teacher leaders. In Chula Vista, a three-year grant from the state allowed the district to hire a math instructional specialist to train teachers in math content and pedagogy. While external resources provided districts with a powerful boost to their professional development efforts, these resources were a double-edged sword. On the one hand, without such resources the districts would have been unable to provide many of the professional growth opportunities that currently drive their reform efforts. On the other hand, the heavy reliance on such funds presented constraints. Obtaining such resources created a significant drain on human labor in some of the districts. And reliance on short-term grants to fuel instructional reform often created difficulties in sustaining new efforts.

Ten Lessons Learned

At a time when districts nationwide face enormous pressure to raise achievement for all students, particularly those who have traditionally lagged behind their peers, educators and policymakers are eager for ideas. The work of the five districts in this study offers 10 important lessons for those seeking to improve instruction and student achievement.

LESSON 1: *Districts can make a difference.* If as a nation we are serious about improving achievement for all students, we cannot expect the staff of each of the nation's approximately 95,000 public schools to figure out how to do this work on their own. As these five districts demonstrate, school districts play an essential role in providing a coherent instructional framework to help schools, particularly low-performing schools, succeed.

LESSON 2: *Let truth be heard.* These districts created a climate for change where it was safe to acknowledge poor performance and safe to seek solutions. Leaders neither made excuses for poor achievement nor wasted time placing blame. Rather, they accepted the challenge of educating all children and made sure that superintendents, principals, and other leaders shared this goal.

LESSON 3: *Focus on instruction to improve student achievement.* It is basic: students learn what they are taught; students will learn more if they are taught well. Yet so often reform efforts look at everything except how to help teachers help their students learn. In these districts, reforms focused on improving instruction, and this approach is paying off.

LESSON 4: *Improving instruction requires a coherent, systemwide approach.* To help all schools improve achievement, district leaders created a framework of supports. They established a clear vision, set outcome goals, created districtwide curricula, and put forward a set of strategies to support better instruction.

LESSON 5: *Make decisions based on good data.* Data were at the core of decisionmaking throughout the districts. These districts used multiple—not single—measures of student and school performance to gauge progress and inform instruction.

Our decisions are made based on data, qualitative and quantitative...We use data all the time.

—Providence administrator

LESSON 6: *Rethink professional development.* These districts abolished traditional and ineffective approaches to teacher training and replaced them with research-based strategies to improve teacher and principal skills. They used student performance data to guide what teachers needed to learn and created cadres of principals and teacher leaders to provide quality instructional guidance.

LESSON 7: *Everyone has a role to play in improving instruction.* No single stakeholder was expected to lead instructional reform. Leadership was shared across the system, and stakeholders generally took on the leadership roles for which they were best suited.

LESSON 8: *Working together takes work.* The expansion of leadership required significant collaboration among stakeholders. The most collaborative districts in the study worked on working together.

LESSON 9: *There are no quick fixes.* Leaders in these districts recognized that success would take time and that they would have to stick with their efforts for the long haul. District leaders encouraged practitioners to try new ideas and did not expect immediate results. Board leaders supported superintendents over many years and many initiatives. Leaders assessed the impact of their efforts and made adjustments along the route.

LESSON 10: *Current structures and funding limit success.* Current district and school structures do not fully provide the time and supports necessary for systemwide instructional improvement. Moreover, these districts' heavy reliance on external and short-term funding to support their efforts puts their continued success in jeopardy—and raises questions about how many other districts can follow in their path.

Although some may seem commonsensical, these lessons are important because they are not being applied systemically in our nation. As these districts illustrate, when these lessons are applied, improvement in high-poverty school systems is possible. These districts earned their good results. While the districts have not figured out all the answers, they show that when districts support schools and plan carefully and collaboratively, they can translate their visions into improvement—for their communities, their leaders, their teachers, their parents, and, most important, their students.

For the Learning First Alliance, these lessons are not academic. They lead to an action agenda for the future. On the basis of these lessons, the Learning First Alliance has adopted a set of recommendations directed to all those involved in improving our nation's public schools.



Taking Action

1. Mobilize political will to improve instruction across the district; engage everyone for the long haul.

- A. Use student achievement data to galvanize political will.
- B. Recognize that improving instruction is essential; create top-level support for instruction among board members, superintendents, and community and parent leaders.
- C. Allow for innovation that may not show immediate results.

2. Implement a systemwide approach to improving instruction that specifies the outcomes to be expected, the content to be taught, the data to inform the work, and the supports to be provided.

- A. Develop a clear and concrete vision for improving instruction districtwide, and use it to guide decisionmaking at all levels of the system.
- B. Provide curricular guidance to help teachers know what to teach.
- C. Use data to assess needs, guide decisionmaking, and measure improvement.
 - Create multimeasure accountability systems that specify desired student and school outcomes.
 - Provide usable data to stakeholders.
 - Train stakeholders to use data effectively.
- D. Make professional development relevant and useful.
- E. Align human, financial, and other resources with instructional priorities.
- F. Be a savvy and active consumer of the best available research and expertise.

3. Make professional development relevant and useful.

- A. Agree on and use research-based principles to guide professional development.
- B. Eliminate inefficient single-workshop approaches to professional development.
- C. Create a robust corps of teachers and principals who are instructional leaders.
- D. Use data and research to guide professional development content.
- E. Create support systems for new teachers.

4. Redefine school and district leadership roles.

- A. Work together to ensure that stakeholders—boards, central offices, unions, principals, teachers and teacher leaders, universities, and parent and community leaders—are engaging in the roles that they are best positioned to lead.
- B. Build a network of instructional expertise, including a strong corps of principals and teachers as instructional leaders.
- C. Focus the central office on developing a systemwide framework to support instruction.
- D. Within a clearly defined district framework, allow schools the flexibility to make decisions based on data and to allocate resources as needed to address goals and challenges.

5. Explore ways to restructure the traditional school day and year.

Provide adequate time and supports for teachers and principals to carry out the new vision for their work and instructional improvement.

6. Attend to funding.

Make funding for new approaches to professional development central to district budgets, and call for dependable state and federal funding for this essential work.

Recommendations for Individual Stakeholders

The recommendations on page 12 have important implications for everyone with a stake in improving instruction and achievement. Doing the hard work of districtwide improvement requires all stakeholders to step forward and lead where they are best positioned to lead. As a beginning step, the Alliance urges stakeholders to consider the following:



School Boards

1. Maintain the district focus on improving instruction and achievement.
 2. Work collaboratively with the central office, union, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
 3. Use data to regularly monitor the efficacy of the school system. Hold yourselves and the central office responsible for results. When results are disappointing, seek solutions rather than assigning blame.
 4. Hire top-level leaders—a superintendent and deputy superintendent—who will lead instructional improvement and will make decisions based on instructional and academic needs.
 5. Set clear, coherent policies that support better instruction. Avoid involvement in day-to-day decisionmaking that constrains the operation of the district.
 6. Recognize that improving instruction and student achievement is an ongoing process. Allow for innovation that may not show immediate results.
5. Take a systems approach to improving instruction and achievement, and align core system components to support one another.
 - Provide clear curricular guidance to help teachers know what to teach.
 - Expect principals to be instructional leaders, and provide significant training and support to help them reach that ideal.
 - Foster networks of teacher leaders at the district and school levels who provide instructional assistance to other teachers and leaders.
 - Use research-based principles to guide professional development.
 6. Assess the needs of teachers in the district using teacher survey data, attrition rates, achievement data, and other information. Propose and collaborate on strategies that address these needs, such as induction programs, provision of differentiated professional development for veteran teachers, and development of teacher leaders.



Superintendents/Central Office

1. Work collaboratively with the board, union, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
2. Help to ensure adequate resources for district needs.
3. Make improving instruction and achievement the guide for decisionmaking and budgeting.
4. Inspire and encourage leadership at all levels of the system. Collaborate with leaders



Union Leaders

1. Work collaboratively with the central office, board, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
2. Advocate for a system of teacher leaders that can provide needed supports to classroom teachers.
3. Assess the needs of teachers in the district using teacher survey data, attrition rates, achievement data, and other information. Propose and collaborate on strategies that address these needs, such as induction



programs, provision of differentiated professional development for veteran teachers, and development of teacher leaders.

4. Negotiate for contracts that support high-quality professional development, such as building career ladders for teacher leaders and creating strong induction programs.



Principals

1. Continually improve your skills in using data, observing instructional practice, providing instructional feedback, motivating teachers, and so forth. Work with colleagues to advocate for greater district-level supports and training.
2. Foster professional learning communities so that teachers work and learn together as part of their regular practice. Encourage teachers to engage in research-based professional development.
3. Use your resources to create teacher leader positions and employ teacher leaders to extend instructional support in the school. Advocate for central office support for teacher leaders through district funds and contracts.
4. Make improving instruction and achievement the guide for decisionmaking and budgeting.
5. Support new teachers and act as a champion at the school and district levels for effective induction practices.



Parent Leaders

1. Demand data regarding student performance, curriculum quality, teacher qualifications, the quality of instruction, fund allocation, and strategies to improve achievement.
2. Build parent and community support for instructional reform. Help parents understand reform in the district, the importance of instruction, and the relationship between instructional improvement and student achievement.
3. Learn about why teachers need ongoing on-the-job professional development to improve student achievement, and work with parents to support it. Support policies such as early-release time or additional funds to build the instructional skills of teachers and leaders.
4. Actively support school board candidates who will sustain the district focus on improving achievement and instruction.



Universities

1. Aggressively pursue opportunities to be an effective long-term partner in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the district's professional development plan.
2. Ensure that teacher candidates are prepared to teach in high-poverty school districts. Candidates should receive the training they need to use data effectively, to work successfully with parents and peers, to meet the learning needs of diverse students, and to teach in standards-based and assessment-driven schools.
3. Ensure that aspiring administrators are prepared to design and implement research-based, systemwide approaches to improve instruction.
4. Revise promotion and tenure policies to support effective district partnerships.



State Departments and State Boards of Education

1. Recognize and support the pivotal role that districts play in creating success across all schools. Ensure that state policies do not circumvent the district. Engage district leaders in developing and implementing state policies and programs. Deliver technical training on a districtwide scale instead of focusing on individual schools.
2. Support district efforts to align standards, assessment, curriculum, and professional development.
3. Support instructional leadership and high-quality professional development across school systems. Allocate the time, policy supports, and funding to support research-based professional development.
4. Encourage districts to use multiple data measures to gauge student success. Model the use of multiple measures for decision-making at the state level.
5. Provide student performance and other data to districts in a manner that allows districts to use them effectively for instructional improvement. Work closely with districts to determine how they use data and how better to respond to their needs.
6. Help build district capacity and expand leaders' opportunities to learn from each other. Highlight improving districts and the lessons that can be learned from them. Bring district leaders together to share ideas.

Next Steps for the Learning First Alliance

To ensure that the implications of this report and our recommendations are understood and implemented, the Learning First Alliance and its members will undertake the following actions:

1. Disseminate the findings and recommendations of this report broadly to educators, policymakers, parents, and the public.
2. Consider the implications of the report for each organization's work and policies.
3. Encourage school districts and states to use the report for learning, reflection, and action. To accomplish this, the Learning First Alliance will share the findings and recommendations with superintendents, school board members, principals, union leaders, parent leaders, university deans of education, chief state school officers, governors, and state school board members. We will develop tools to assist stakeholders in considering the implications of this report. In addition, we will collaborate with interested Learning First Alliance partner states to convene state policy roundtables for this purpose.
4. Build greater understanding of new approaches to professional development and address the ways that stakeholders will have to work differently to improve instruction. As part of this effort, we will identify the implications of this report for specific stakeholders, such as principals, board members, colleges of education, and state policymakers.
5. Address key challenges identified in the report:
 - Advocate at the federal, state, and local levels for sustainable funding to create coherent systems of instructional supports such as those identified in this study.
 - Examine in greater depth the challenges created by attempting to carry out new professional development practices within the current school structures. Acknowledge and address the fact that current practice does not provide adequate opportunity for teachers and principals to carry out the new demands of their work—to analyze data and diagnose student needs, to determine the efficacy of their own practice, to align their instruction to new curriculum standards, and to collaborate regularly with peers.
6. Synthesize existing research on districtwide reform to make such information accessible to practitioners and policymakers.
7. Call for high-quality research to answer important questions that practitioners and policymakers wrestle with as they seek districtwide success.



Acknowledgments

Space unfortunately does not permit the Alliance to thank by name the many staff members of our study districts or to outline the depth of their contributions. Many staff members in each district gave generously of their time and expertise. We offer deep appreciation to Wanda Bamberg and Nadine Kujawa of Aldine Independent School District; to Jon Baker, Lorraine Costella, and Bonnie Ward of the Kent County Public Schools; to Lowell Billings, Dennis Doyle, and Libby Gil of Chula Vista Elementary School District; to Ginny Craig, Carol Johnson, and Rick Spicuzza of the Minneapolis Public Schools; and to Melody Johnson, Diana Lam, and Mike Sorum of the Providence Public Schools.

Many people from the research and policy community generously and voluntarily gave of their time and expertise. We thank Kermit Buckner, Gordon Cawelti, Tom Corcoran, Betty Hale, Rick Hess, Stephanie Hirsh, Ellen Foley, Susan Fuhrman, Willis Hawley, Susan Moore Johnson, Dale Kalkofen, Bruce King, Michael Knapp, Diane Massell, Lauren Resnick, Linda Skrla, Sam Stringfield, Gary Sykes, and Michael Usdan. We also thank the members of the Learning First State Alliances who contributed their time and suggestions to this study.

This study would not have been possible without the guidance and hard work of the International Centre for Educational Change at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). We are deeply grateful to the OISE research team: Stephen Anderson, who helped shepherd this study from infancy to completion, and Shawn Moore and Nancy Watson, who provided extensive guidance. We also thank Nina Bascia, Amanda Datnow, and Andy Hargreaves of the University of Toronto for their important contributions to this report.

This study represents several years of work by many people affiliated with the Learning First Alliance. We thank staff members of Alliance organizations who contributed to the research design, data gathering, and drafting of this report, including Diane Airhart, Michael Allen, Agnes Crawford, Gail Dickson, Richard Flanary, Twanna Hill, Julia Lara, John Mitchell, Joyce Munro, Virginia Roach, Marilyn Schlieff, Sylvia Seidel, Joan Snowden, Irina Terehoff, Adria Thomas, and Ann R. Walker. We would also like to thank several board members from Alliance organizations, including Mary Barter, Darrell Rud, and Mossi White. We are especially grateful to Gene Carter, Tony Rollins, Judy Seltz, and Mikki Terry for their guidance and support.

We wish to thank members of the Learning First Alliance staff and the team of editors. We offer our deepest gratitude to Ann Walker, whose perseverance contributed immeasurably to the completion of this study. The careful editing of Anne Edwards, Pat George, and Bob Rothman contributed significantly to creating what we hope is a clear and engaging report. We thank Cathy Horn for her thorough review of the achievement data. We also extend appreciation to Abby Emerson, Adrienne Gault, Marissa Hopkins, Lisa Lazarus, and Jennifer Oliva for their important contributions to the project and its completion.

Finally, we are grateful to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research & Improvement and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.



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The Learning First Alliance, founded in 1997, is a permanent partnership of leading education organizations working together to improve student learning. The three major goals of the Alliance are to:

1. Ensure that high academic expectations are held for all students
2. Ensure a safe and supportive place of learning for all students
3. Engage parents and other community members in helping students achieve high academic expectations

The Learning First Alliance is composed of the following organizations:

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Council of Chief State School Officers
Education Commission of the States
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Education Association
National PTA
National School Boards Association