LEARNING **FIRST** ALLIANCE

IT TAKES A SYSTEM:

A DISTRICTWIDE APPROACH TO IMPROVING TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE KENT COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Project of the Learning First Alliance

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The Learning First Alliance

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Prologue

The Kent County Public Schools case study is one of five case studies that stem from a two-year study of improving high poverty districts conducted by the Learning First Alliance. The five case studies culminated in an analytical report entitled *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. The report looks at how districtwide strategies to improve instruction have helped the five study districts raise student achievement across races and ethnicities.

More specifically, the study sought to address the following questions:
- How did the districts create the will to begin instructional reform?
- What strategies guided these 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 the 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.

While this case study is largely a story of improvement, a few caveats are in order. First, although the district demonstrated improvements, all students had not achieved high levels of proficiency; instead, the district was on an upward trajectory toward improving student achievement. Second, this study concentrated on district efforts to improve instruction. The district employed additional strategies that may have contributed to academic success but were beyond the scope of this study. Finally, this case study represents a snapshot of the district in 2001–2002 and not a longitudinal study of district progress.

We do not presume that Kent County or any of the districts in this study has all the answers. Stakeholders we interviewed were candid about the challenges they faced. Nonetheless, we believe this case study and the report of which it is a part provide valuable lessons for districts interested in improving teaching and learning across entire systems.

The individual case studies of the five districts we studied, as well as the analytical report (*Beyond Islands of Excellence*) and a Leadership Brief summarizing its findings, can be downloaded or ordered at http://www.learningfirst.org/bie/bie.html.

Introduction

The story of Kent County carries interesting lessons about the roles that multiple stakeholders play in improving teaching and learning in a small school district. Kent County is the smallest district in the state of Maryland. Situated on the Eastern Shore of Maryland's Chesapeake Bay, the district encompasses the entire county of Kent, population 19,000. Of Kent's 2,795 students, 38 percent receive free or reduced lunch. Kent has a 70 percent white population and 30 percent African American population (See Table 1, page 3). The enrollment is relatively stable, with little movement into or out of the district.

Kent's tale of reform began with state policy pushing schools and districts to increase student achievement. In 1990, in response to state standards and accountability legislation, the Maryland Department of Education instated the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). MSPAP consisted of criterion-referenced performance tests in reading, mathematics, writing, language usage, science, and social studies for students in grades 3, 5, and 8. As judged by outside observers, the MSPAP has proven to be a rigorous exam, requiring students to show mastery of higher order skills.

When initial MSPAP results were unveiled in 1993, Kent County was disappointed by the results; only 32 percent of students scored at the "satisfactory" level. Dissatisfied with the results and feeling pressure from the community to improve student achievement, the school board sought solutions. Board members determined they needed to hire a strong instructional leader who would implement the mandate for improvement. They voted unanimously to appoint Dr. Lorraine Costella as the new superintendent.[1] Dr. Costella had previously served as the assistant state superintendent for curriculum and instruction and had a reputation for innovation. Noted one administrator, "When the board hired Lorraine a few years ago. . .they were looking for some changes…. They had very good managers prior to that. Now they were ready for instructional focus."

In the summer of 1994, Dr. Costella arrived in Kent with a mandate to increase student achievement and set the district on a course to increase the rigor of its curriculum and instruction. As a first step, the superintendent sought to build a cohesive and clear vision for teaching and learning. When Dr. Costella joined the district, the board had 35 goals under which it operated; the goals were diffuse and not well known throughout the system. To focus the district and to create cohesion among stakeholders, the superintendent held an all-day strategic planning forum. Teachers, principals, community leaders, and board members came together to share their goals for the district's children. What emerged was a honed vision statement with five core goals focused around learning. Table 1 (page 2) relates the five goals of Kent County.

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[1] Lorraine Costella served as superintendent for eight years before retiring in 2002. She was replaced by her assistant superintendent for instruction, Bonnie Ward.

Table 1
Kent County's Five Goals

1. <u>Achievement</u>. Kent County Public School students will demonstrate knowledge of basic skills and higher order thinking skills to solve problems and communicate results.
2. <u>Technology</u>. Technology will be integrated into all aspects of instruction and for administration to assess, gather, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information.
3. <u>Safe and Orderly Environment</u>. The Kent County Public Schools will be a safe and orderly environment for successful learning to take place.
4. <u>Parent and Community Involvement</u>. The Kent County Public School system will seek to enhance positive, active parent and community involvement in the education of all students.
5. <u>Lifelong Learning and Personal Responsibility</u>. Kent County Public School students and staff will demonstrate personal responsibility and lifelong learning.

While the vision set the tone and direction, the key to implementing this vision was a theory of change that combined a strong district support framework with school-level flexibility to address needs specific to children in different buildings. The Kent County theory of change included the following components:

- Sustaining focus around a few clear goals related to achievement and instruction
- Implementing districtwide curriculum aligned to state standards and across grade levels
- Distributing leadership across all stakeholders—board members, central office, principals, and teachers
- Building networks of instructional experts
  - ✓ Creating a corps of instruction-focused principals
  - ✓ Creating a network of teacher leaders to extend instructional capacity
- Using data to make decisions at all levels of the system—from the student to the board
- Creating a system of professional development that responds to data-revealed needs
- Continually learning, assessing, and readjusting practice.

The new strategic plan provided the springboard for improving instruction throughout the district. As reforms were implemented, student achievement progressed. Within a few years of Dr. Costella's arrival, Kent County achieved what perhaps others had not imagined possible: Kent rose to the top of the state in MSPAP scores and remained the number one ranked district across the state for three years. As the data reveal, improvement has not been a straight line, but over time the district has succeeded in increasing student achievement (See Appendix I).

Table 2
Kent County Statistical Data
2001–2002 School Year

Total Budget ($)	21,828,714
Per Pupil Budget ($)	8,000
Number of students	2,795
Number of schools	8
Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility (%)	38
ESL (%)	1
Number of Full Time Equivalent Teachers	179
Average Salary ($)	50,240
Average Years of Teaching Experience	17
Superintendent – Current and Previous (Tenure in Years)	Bonnie Ward (2002–Present) Lorraine Costella (1994–2002)
School Board	5-member board elected at-large

Improving Instruction Across the District

As noted earlier, in its efforts to increase student achievement, Kent County instituted a theory of change that relied on a district-directed framework of instructional support. In addition to creating a clear and cohesive vision, this framework included the multiple items outlined in the district's theory of change. These items are discussed here in detail.

Aligning Curriculum and State Standards

With the strategic plan in hand, Kent leaders had the broad mandate they needed to implement strategies to raise student achievement. As a first step, the central office determined that in order for the district to improve student learning, teachers and principals needed deeper guidance on what to teach.

The state's standards and accountability system served as a significant lever to guide the curriculum. Yet district leaders were also clear that the curriculum needed to stem from stakeholder goals for Kent County students and to be well aligned across grade levels. To accomplish these goals, central office leaders instituted a comprehensive process that engaged teachers and leaders in writing and revising a district-specific curriculum aligned to the state standards. The process helped create greater vertical and horizontal alignment within the district.

What emerged from the collaborative process became known as the Essential Curriculum. This new curriculum included content-specific learning standards for each core content area, as well as ideas for classroom lessons. Of the importance of the Essential Curriculum, one board member noted,

> Our key strategy is the movement away from publisher-directed curriculum to personally constructed curriculum—from language arts, to math, to science, to gym. It took me awhile to get on board with that. . . .It's anything but a futile exercise….It gives teachers foreknowledge of what they are teaching. The Essential Curriculum…means the development of curriculum by teams of teachers over three weeks in the summer. The "essential" part of the curriculum is to get a sense of the state rubric and line it up with an outline of the state curriculum as a fundamental base.

Teachers reported considerable enthusiasm for the curriculum alignment process and its outcome. A teacher commented that the curriculum development process

> …. has been one of the best professional development opportunities. It has proven worthwhile to the point that the board has gone to the State Department of Education and said…"We have teachers coming back willing to work in the summer. Will you then consider giving them graduate credit course for that time that they've put in?" And [the State has] gone along with it.

Overall both teachers and principals expressed considerable support for MSPAP and the curriculum it generated in Kent County. One principal noted,

> MSPAP and performance-based instruction have radically changed classroom instruction in Kent County. I never in 20 some years of being in education have seen anything that impacted teacher instruction of children like that. But more than that…it dramatically changed how we taught teachers new concepts.

Aligning Ongoing Professional Development

After ratifying the strategic plan and aligning the curriculum, the district looked for mechanisms to shape its new focus. Kent turned to professional development as a primary strategy. In keeping with its theory of change, the district sought to better align district-led professional development with the strategic goals. As an example, during Dr. Costella's tenure, Kent focused its nine districtwide professional development days on issues that connected both to the strategic plan and data-revealed needs.

Kent leaders also established principles for professional development that were to be used at both the school and district levels. District leaders promoted research-based principles, outlining that professional development should be data-driven, ongoing, and connected to district goals. The superintendent explained further,

> One thing we are doing is looking at data...what data tell us...what to do instructionally to be more effective...what to do as a system to give the skills, resources, and time to teachers. Professional development must be comprehensive, not just the feel-good flavor of the month. We've tried to get away from something different every day. We look to get into things in depth.

To enhance the effectiveness of professional development, Kent leaders also introduced a series of structures and practices to support principals and teachers in their learning efforts. As we will discuss in greater depth in the coming sections, Kent cultivated several cadres of school-based and district-based teacher leaders. Teacher leaders were charged with conducting workshops, modeling lessons at the school level, and running district-led professional development seminars.

Sharing Leadership

As noted, Kent is a small district with a lean central office. Prior to Dr. Costella's arrival, a few members of the central office staff handled curriculum development, professional development, and instructional issues. The new Kent leaders understood that district administrators alone could not engineer and construct reform. If changes were to come about, the district would need to rely heavily on a core of principals and teachers to carry out the work.

The notion of shared leadership evolved over time. At the beginning of Dr. Costella's tenure, greater control existed at the central office level. Yet an evolution to greater involvement of principals and teachers became the hallmark of Kent County's reform efforts. An example of this shift is the significant role principals played in the design and implementation of reform. Early in the Kent County reform, the central office turned to its principals to implement their newly established districtwide vision. Principals led many districtwide task forces such as the Underachieving Pupils Team and the Reading Task Force. Dr. Costella noted, "Principals are very involved in Kent. Because we are a small system, to create the kind of reform you might see in a [larger district], the principals have to be involved."

In addition, driven in part by demands from teachers, district leaders began to employ teachers as key leaders in the instructional reform effort. Teachers became heavily involved in the design and implementation of district- and school-based professional development and took on multiple roles as instructional leaders throughout the system. As an example, the district created a core of content leaders in math and science. These content leaders are classroom teachers from each school that meet together to address weaknesses in student achievement and to devise content and instructional strategies to assist their school-level colleagues.

The leadership roles of principals and teachers will be discussed throughout the case study and at length in the final section.

Fostering a Learning Community—Instituting the Baldrige Framework

In examining Kent's success in increasing student achievement, it is important to address the district's ethos of a learning community. From the beginning of her tenure, Dr. Costella worked to bring a sense of continuous learning into the district. She was guided by the notion that the district as a system, schools as entities, and stakeholders as individuals needed to experiment and constantly reevaluate progress.

To illustrate this ethos in action, we return to our story of Kent's efforts to raise achievement. Within three years of implementing several strategies—tightening the strategic goals, realigning the curriculum, and focusing professional development—Kent County began to see results. In fact, by 1998, the district had risen to the top in the state MSPAP scores. While they were pleased with the scores, the board and superintendent knew that they had more work to do.

Recognizing that the district needed a uniform process for setting goals and monitoring progress, Dr. Costella turned to a board of education member who was also a business professor at nearby Washington College. The board member outlined several management processes, including the Baldrige in Education initiative (BIE), a business strategy adapted for education. The Baldrige approach encompassed a series of processes and tools designed to create greater alignment in an organization. Using this approach, districts established a vision, developed strategies to meet the vision, created performance targets, used data to monitor progress toward reaching the targets, and made adjustments

according to the data. Another important tenet of Baldrige was to celebrate successes and to embrace challenges as "opportunities" to improve.

At that time, Maryland was engaged in an initiative to implement the Baldrige process in various districts. Dr. Costella requested that Kent become part of this state cohort.

The district took considerable care in rolling out the BIE initiative. It first convened the Baldrige Leadership Team (BLT) to begin the planning. The BLT included leaders from all sectors: the board, union, principals, teachers, parents, and the community. BLT members received intensive training during the initial year, including a visit to Pinellas County, Florida—a district considered a leader in Baldrige application. The BLT reconfigured the district's strategic plan, refining the vision and creating more specified goals, strategies, and performance targets. Once the plan was in place, the district formed teams around each of the five goals in its strategic plan. The teams oversaw the strategies and monitored progress.

Put simply, Baldrige pushed the central office, the board, the principals, and the teachers to reexamine their vision, to develop strategies to reach that vision, and to use data to monitor their progress toward reaching their goals. It also provided a common language and a common set of norms around which to do this. A district staff member appreciated that Baldrige was "a way to develop a framework where everyone is speaking the same language to allow system goals to be met."

The presence of Baldrige in Kent was evident at many levels: principal leadership meetings, the Baldrige Leadership Team, and grade level teams' use of the approach to set goals and monitor progress. A district staff member noted that "A key BIE idea is to 'harness human capital'… get input from all." Baldrige gave teachers and principals permission and confidence to try new things. Because the increased emphasis on formative assessment encouraged experimentation and evaluation, teachers and principals expressed a strong willingness to try new approaches and see if they worked. Noted one principal,

> The idea of risk taking, [of] schools being allowed to try things. . . has been a part of our way of work for at least 10 years. But in the last 2 years since [Baldrige implementation] . . . we've really been looking at continuous improvement. . . .And we are all allowed as leaders of individual schools through this process to make risky decisions. Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't. . . .We are using the PSDA model—Plan, Study, Do, Act. We try something. We check it out. If it doesn't work, we change it.

In addition to investing in the overarching Baldrige planning approach, the district allocated significant resources to a parallel initiative called Baldrige in the Classroom (BIC). BIC provided teachers with a set of tools to engage students more deeply in establishing visions for their learning, setting performance targets, and charting their progress toward the targets. The district never mandated participation, but worked to build collective excitement around the process. It trained cohorts of volunteers in the

process and over a period of three years created a critical mass of BIC-trained teachers. Teachers in Kent were at various stages in implementing the process. A union leader commented,

> The board this last summer paid for a team [of teachers and administrators] to come up from Pinellas County, Florida….We had at least 40 teachers getting a week's training…and they just took the program and went with it.

Why was Baldrige so readily accepted in Kent? The district did several powerful things in rolling out Baldrige. First, it included key stakeholders early in the process. Parents, union leaders, principals, and teachers participated in the ground floor design. Second, it followed up with hands-on observation by sending a team to Florida to hear personally from colleagues about the successes and challenges. Next, it slowly and systematically increased the number of teachers and principals engaged in the process.

School site teams were a critical mass of "doers" in each school. They supported each other and helped engage new teachers in the process. A member from the central office commented, "It's a continuous improvement model… .Continuous improvement gets at the heart of our vision…success for all students…[empowering] teachers to make adjustments in the classroom." She described the schools as becoming "true learning communities."

Building a Strong Base of Resources and Relationships

Kent County leaders understood that innovation and improvement required careful allocation and alignment of resources. While Kent leaders sought to allocate their resources toward instructional goals, basic state and local allotments were insufficient. As a result, leaders actively sought external state, federal, and private grants to fuel their innovations.

Stakeholders throughout the district noted that external funding had been crucial to the district's success and credited Dr. Costella with using her knowledge of grant writing to bring these resources into the district. The superintendent also trained staff at all levels to write grants. Under her guidance, grant writing became a group effort. An assistant superintendent explained,

> We would bring a team of people in the room for a day, look at the grant application and say, "Okay, this is what we need to do. This is what we want. This is what the grant application calls for." We divvy up the jobs. We were up one night until 12:00 or 1:00 working on the grant. But because we all felt it was something we needed to do, it just happened. So without those opportunities out there, I don't think—well I know we wouldn't be where we are today….We've done it all with grant money.

In addition to external resources, Kent's innovations were fueled by internal relationships. Strong relations among board, central office, and union leadership were not accidental; rather, these relationships were deliberate and practiced.

The superintendent acted as the central point of communication and built strong ties to her board and to union leaders. She cultivated the board by being highly accessible and responsive. Relationships, respect, and accord among key stakeholders were furthered as well. As a member of the central office staff explained,

> …the fact that Dr. Costella has assigned even those of us who may not be directly instructionally related in chairmanships or in leadership roles of the goals committees, it allowed us to have interaction with the community we would not normally have.

Dr. Costella met monthly with the union president to share ideas and work through differences, and she visited schools to observe classrooms and meet with principals to discuss progress and challenges.

A New Approach to Professional Development

Leaders understood that if the district was going to succeed in implementing more rigorous curriculum, improving instruction, and ultimately increasing student achievement, teachers and principals would need significant and structured support.

As an important strategy, Kent leaders focused on expanding and improving professional development. Under their new theory of change, professional development was not to be a set of disconnected workshops or a menu of unfocused opportunities from which teachers could choose. Rather, professional development was to be a much broader effort to connect teachers and principals to good practice in an ongoing and data-driven manner. To improve its supports for teachers and principals, Kent instituted a variety of programmatic and structural supports, which are outlined here. They included:

- Implementing new approaches to professional development at the district level
- Using data to guide professional development
- Building networks of teacher leaders
- Supporting new teachers
- Brokering external expertise
- Providing incentives for professional growth

Additionally, the district focused intensely on broadening and deepening the leadership skills of multiple stakeholders in the system. We will discuss this strategy at length in the final section of the study.

New Approaches to Professional Development at the District Level

At the beginning of the reform effort, much of the creation and implementation of professional development occurred at the district level. While district leaders called upon teachers and principals for input, contributions came primarily from a small group of school-based leaders within the district. The district determined how all districtwide professional development days would be used. All inservice activities took place at the district office, and all teachers were expected to attend. Yet as time passed, district leaders began to notice that many teachers were using sick days and personal days to avoid attending district professional development activities. The union president shared with the superintendent that many teachers felt that professional development was not well-delivered and at times lacked relevance. Union pressure and district willingness to address these issues lead to many changes over several years.

As the district reform evolved over time, leaders loosened their reigns around and engaged teachers more deeply in the design and implementation of district professional development. As part of its effort for greater teacher involvement, the district created the Professional Development (PD) Council—comprised of multiple stakeholders including teachers and administrators—to assess needs and advise on professional development throughout the district. The district also significantly increased its reliance on teachers to

plan and administer professional development workshops during the year. As an example, Kent began every school year with a daylong districtwide professional development workshop. Traditionally, this workshop had been planned and implemented largely by district administrators and a few teachers. Yet in August 2001, district leaders turned the first day workshop over to teachers, who fully planned and delivered the training. This singular outreach effort went a long way in cultivating teacher trust.

In addition to teacher involvement in district-level planning, the district reconfigured its nine professional development days, turning four of them over to schools to carry out more targeted professional development. Schools were required to align their professional development with district goals and to base it on data-documented needs. (This was possible in part because the Baldrige process and the school improvement planning process had brought unity of purpose between the district and school goals). For its part, the union agreed to encourage teachers to attend all district professional development days. Furthermore, a clause was added to the union contract stipulating that a teacher could not use a personal day on a professional development day.

This shift in professional development leadership culminated in what many saw as a major change in district practice. District leaders described difficulty in relinquishing control, but acknowledged the positive results. Noted one teacher leader, "It took a lot for them to just say, 'Okay, it's yours. You guys plan it.' I think it showed that they had some faith and confidence in us, too. And I think they were pleased with what we did, and that furthered confidence. It really helped both sides."

> **Our goal is to set teachers on fire with new ideas, to meet their needs, and to provide support for reflection.**
> **– Kent administrator**

The district also recognized that while workshops were important, district professional development days were insufficient to carry the district goals into the schools. As a result, the district leaders explored additional approaches, such as multi-week summer training and school-based activities. In the early years of the reform efforts, the district raised funds to pay teachers to dedicate three to four weeks in the summer to curriculum writing. These summer curriculum-writing efforts continued each summer as the teaching staff revised the curricula. Today, a majority of Kent teachers have participated in the curriculum writing effort and have received stipends and graduate credit for their effort. The district also used the summer to add an extra layer of training around the Baldrige initiative. Teams of teachers have participated in training both in Kent and with a team of experts from Pinellas County, Florida.

Using Data to Guide Professional Development

Initially, district leaders were pleased with the creation, training, and implementation around the new curriculum. Yet they realized that while they were implementing new reforms, they were not assessing the impact of their work in a systematic way. Student scores were better, but not as high as they wished. Some children were still failing, and

the district needed to know why. The Baldrige work helped train a cadre of leaders in the district about the possibilities of data use, but teachers had little knowledge or training in that area. Noted one administrator, "We realized we had all this information. . . .The question was how do we get teachers to use this information? How do we help teachers to understand it?"

To address this issue, the district instituted a multi-layered approach to training the school-based staff in data use. Beginning in 1999, several district professional development days were dedicated to a series of workshops called the Assessment Symposium. All teachers and school and district leaders convened once or twice a year to dissect data and talk about the implications of the findings. In addition, the assistant superintendent and superintendent visited with school principals and leadership teams to discuss implications of student achievement data specific to their school.

While the main push for data use in the system came from the central office, the state accountability expectations and the Baldrige approach provided both a motivation and a framework for giving purpose to data analysis and data-driven decisionmaking. The Baldrige system stressed that data should be used in a formative rather than punitive way. Data were used to point out "opportunities to improve." Since the Kent staff embraced this notion in many ways, the district enjoyed some measure of success with its data efforts. Teachers throughout the system were clearly conversant about data and understood at a basic level how to interpret data. Some schools and teachers took data use to the next level and began to use many sources of data in sophisticated ways to assess learning needs. Noted one teacher, "Assessment training has empowered the teachers to feel that you can look at the assessments and control the results in your room. You are not at the mercy of a mysterious force."

Building Networks of Teacher Leaders to Support Professional Growth

The Kent central office determined early in its reform efforts that it could not implement its vision simply by being a service provider. From that realization came many district structures that together built a system of distributed leadership and, as a result, professional growth.

The district relied heavily on teacher leaders to implement both district-based and school-based professional development. Three groups of teacher leaders were created at the district level.

- *Helping Teachers*. These were the most formalized of the teacher leaders. They were teachers on assignment to the district for approximately three years. Because Kent was a small district, Helping Teachers acted as quasi curriculum specialists or program specialists. They carried out a variety of functions, including writing grants and directing grant programs such as mentor teachers and algebra leaders. In addition, Helping Teachers ran the curriculum writing workshops in the summer and acted as special project managers in developing districtwide curriculum.

- *Content Leaders*. In response to data-driven concerns about student achievement in specific subjects, the district asked schools to identify content leaders in key curriculum areas, including math, science, and reading. With the help of federal grant dollars, this cadre of content leaders was expected to work with teachers within their own schools to conduct professional development and to model lessons. They met with lead Helping Teachers a few times each semester to develop model lessons and address student needs.[2]

- *Mentors*. The district mentor program emerged as Kent leaders took advantage of a state initiative to fund district-based mentor programs. At the height of the program in the late 1990s, all new teachers were linked with veteran teachers. These teacher pairs met regularly in units and in larger groups to build the capacity of teachers new to the Kent system. A more complete discussion of the Kent mentor initiative is provided in the following section.

The district also required or recommended that schools convene teacher leaders at the site level.

- *School Improvement Teams (SIT)*. Volunteer teacher leaders representing each grade level formed these school-based teams. They were charged with reviewing school data and aligning the school plan to district priorities and data-based needs.

- *Baldrige Cadres*. The district requested—but did not require—that all schools establish Baldrige cadres. These cadres originally were envisioned as teams of teacher leaders who would support and spread the implementation of Baldrige in the Classroom. In some schools, the cadres were not operational; in other schools the cadres became high-functioning groups that devised strategies to meet the goals established by the SITs.

Professional Support for New Teachers

As part of its efforts to improve teaching, the central office identified the need to provide greater support to new teachers. At the time of our study, most teachers had longevity with the system and the overall turnover was small. However, leaders were aware that within 10 years, close to half of the district's teaching force would retire. The new teachers would need much support to learn and internalize Kent's goals, philosophies, processes, and expectations.

The district movement to create a support system for new teachers coincided with a state-led grant program to increase the level of mentoring of new teachers. A Kent Helping Teacher wrote for a state grant, and the district was awarded a three-year $250,000 grant to provide programming and mentors to all new teachers in the system. The program was rolled out in the summer of 1999. All new teachers met for a week before school started

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[2] Helping Teachers and content leaders are discussed in greater detail in the Distributing Leadership section.

and were assigned veteran mentor teachers who received a small stipend for their extra work. Additional programs for new teachers were provided throughout the year. The program ran for three years, formally ending in 2001.

> **Half our teachers will be gone within five years. And so every young teacher that we can get, that we can nurture, we do. It's a lot of work on our part, but we will do what we have to do.**
> **—Kent district staff member**

When the grant funding ended, the district did not or could not find the funds to continue the program at the previous capacity. Stipends decreased over the life of the grant, and the district did not put funds into the system to pay for mentors once the grant expired. Applying for a new grant was out of the question, because the state changed its requirements and would no longer allow the district to fund classroom teachers as part of mentor grants. The state required mentors to be full-time—a notion that did not mesh with Kent's philosophy or structures. New teachers continued to be paired with volunteer mentors, but the program was on shaky ground. According to one administrator, because of the lack of grant money, the program might have to be shifted from district-based to more school-based.

Providing Incentives for Professional Growth

In addition to direct service, Kent provided teachers with a variety of incentives to grow and learn. For example, Kent encouraged its teachers to become nationally board certified. In 2000, the board voted to pay half the fee teachers incurred to gain national board certification and to provide a salary incentive of $2,000 annually after receipt of the certification. Furthermore, the district began a mentoring program that matched board certified teachers with candidates undergoing the certification process. Among the more innovative incentives offered through the district was relicensure certification credit for participation in summer curriculum writing. The district also funded teacher attendance at a variety of meetings and conferences.

While stipends and credits were clearly important, teachers noted that the sense of feeling valued was a crucial incentive to engage in reform efforts. Many expressed the notion that the district was increasingly including teacher voices in decisions and in showing appreciation for their work. One teacher observed, "One of the things that [we] have started doing in the last few years that we haven't done in most of my 27 years here is that we are truly talking to each other."

Brokering External Expertise

As noted earlier, reform in Kent would not have been possible without external resources. Federal, state, and private monies all contributed to the professional development work. Grant monies paid for much of the support for the district's mentoring program and for the salaries of three of the five Helping Teachers. The district also leveraged federal grant

monies to fund the algebra, math, and science leaders; state and federal monies provided stipends for teacher participation in summer curriculum writing.

Since grant monies were paramount to successful reforms, district leaders spread grant writing responsibility across the district. While Dr. Costella brought the original expertise to the district, she worked closely with her district staff, with Helping Teachers, and with principals to increase the pool of expertise in the system.

However, the central office leaders made it clear that they did not seek help from external sources that were not aligned with district goals. Noted one board member, "We have people come in and they want to implement this program and that program and another program. And unless it fits into goals, it doesn't get put in." Rather, Kent leaders used data to carefully assess needs and to determine how to find the expertise to meet their needs. For example, when the district determined it needed greater support for first-year teachers, it sought a state-offered grant for teacher mentoring. When Dr. Costella needed additional guidance in bringing the strategic plan to life, she consulted with the business professor from Washington College, which led to involvement in the Baldrige process.

While much expertise existed inside the district, Kent leaders knew that they had neither the human nor the financial capacity to implement, on their own, the large volume of professional development that their reforms required. Noted one leader, "We are very small. There is not enough personnel or expertise locally. We've become good at looking around the state and the country and seeing who does a great job at something we are interested in."

The district not only sought additional grant resources, but also maximized external non-competitive funding by using data and the strategic vision to guide the direction of these funds. In the case of Eisenhower funding, for example, the district recognized through review of its data that the transition from middle school to high school algebra was a problem for students. In response, the district convened its first group of content leaders, the "algebra leaders." Algebra leaders from the middle schools and the high school began to meet regularly after school to address the transition difficulty, assess curriculum alignment, and develop lessons. The success of algebra leaders spawned the creation of science leaders and math leaders, supported by various state and federal funding resources.

The district also sought external expertise in the form of research and peer guidance. Teachers and administrators stayed current on recent research and were keen observers of outside practice. For example, after they read about the use of student portfolios as an assessment tool, a team of high school teachers proposed that the district introduce portfolios as part of the graduation requirement for seniors. The teachers sought advice from other districts that had been using portfolios. A small team of Kent teachers visited several districts in the area and decided to model their portfolios program on the work of a small district in Delaware.

From a positive perspective, Kent's broad strategy of seeking experts, sending staff to other districts, and the like, ensured that Kent staff were well connected to current research and proven strategies. They were not isolated in their rural community, but rather used many resources to bring strong practices to their district. In addition, by training a broad range of staff to seek external support, they increased ownership of the reform across the many stakeholders in the system.

However, relying on external resources created challenges with sustainability. While external funds helped the district start programs, the finite nature of grants meant that when the grant period ended, the programs could cease or become a skeleton of the fully funded effort. As noted, without state funding, the district was not able to fully maintain the district mentor program. Yet the bottom line remains that without such resources, some programs simply would not happen at all.

Professional Development and the District–School Connection

We have shared the district's strong role in creating a web of structures and strategies to support instructional improvement. Equally important in the Kent system was the degree to which schools used the district structures as a launching pad for their own professional development work.

Many teachers and principals noted that the clarity of the district vision provided strong guidance at the school level. Noted one principal, "I don't think there is any question in a teacher's mind… that the true vision is every child succeeding."

While clarity of goals helped sustain focus in the district, schools used various structures to build their capacity to meet those goals. Most notable, perhaps, were the formalized systems to build consensus-driven decisionmaking. As Kent began its efforts to ensure the alignment of its goals and strategies across the system, the district recognized the potential of the state-mandated school improvement plans to build consensus. The Kent leaders saw great potential in maximizing these already-required plans.

School improvement teams met throughout the year to develop and monitor school improvement plans, which use data to outline the key needs in the school. Each SIT had to respond to the five goals in the strategic plan (see pages 1-2 for an outline of the goals). The school improvement plans then formed the basis for school action. Schools looked to the improvement plans to determine their professional development needs and to create their professional development plans. When the superintendent and/or assistant superintendent visited the school, the district leaders, school leaders, and SIT team reviewed the data and discussed implications and strategies. One administrator explained, "[Schools] have to respond to each objective in the strategic plan, though they don't have to necessarily act every year on each. If they aren't going to address an issue directly one year, they have to give a reason why not."

In addition to the SIT teams, several schools used another district-suggested approach: Baldrige cadre teams. Like SIT teams, Baldrige cadres are teams of lead teachers. Formed in 2001, the Baldrige cadres initially were seen as a means of creating a support group for teachers trained in the Baldrige in the Classroom initiative. The district leaders envisioned that the teachers would use these cadre teams to support each other in their schools and to provide professional development to the remainder of the staff not yet formally trained. However, in a few of Kent's schools, these cadres took on larger roles. Noted one teacher, "In our school the SIT acts more or less as the policy and goal setting body, and the cadre team is in charge of coming up with strategies to implement goals."

Although this was an emerging strategy in most schools, the district leadership was encouraged by the evolution of the cadre teams. For many years, teachers had felt left out of the decisionmaking process. Formal school-based structures such as SIT teams and Baldrige cadres appeared to have initiated a sense of teacher inclusion and respect in the decisionmaking process.

While the district was somewhat prescriptive in its vision and overarching structures, teachers and administrators expressed considerable freedom in the manner in which they used these structures. One expression of this freedom was teachers' flexibility in how they taught and the materials they used. Noted one teacher,

> Even though the district has the Essential Curriculum, we are not expected to be on the same page at the same time. And we're not expected [to] have every child in that basal reader. . . .We assess each child and we write our own prescription. We are responsible for such prescriptions and then [for both] monitoring results and being able to prove that the children have actually made progress.

The encouragement from the district to innovate and take risks was evident in the many ways that school staffs engaged in professional development. One teacher noted, "We looked at our CTBS scores and our MSPAP scores, and our reading scores were flat. We needed a way to raise them. So the majority of everything that we focused on this year was reading." In explaining how the school sought solutions, the teacher continued, "We looked into research. We just last week went to a school in Delaware. They had a reading incentive program that was very successful for them. We went over and took a look at their practices and decided we should spend money on that approach."

At some schools, teams of teachers met regularly—before and after school—to address student needs, share lessons, and exchange ideas. Teachers worked across grade levels to help each other develop curriculum to meet standards. One principal shared:

> [One] of the best professional development things that we do is a week-long curriculum development every year. It's a time when people get together and work on curriculum; but it's the discussions that take place and the interaction that takes place that are most valuable. Another thing that has been successful is…grade-level meetings across grades. There's

sometimes a formal piece to it, but [also there is] the…informal discussion that takes place when people are sharing ideas or they're saying "Can I get a copy of that?" or "This has worked in my class."…The professional development role is the center of everything we do. I can't think of a day when there isn't some type of professional development going on.

While the structures were important, principals were most excited about the change they perceived in the way teachers were beginning to use data and to change instruction. Many administrators and teachers said that this deeper, more reflective use of data was beginning to affect the ways teachers were working in the classroom. One teacher elaborated:

> I think we are beginning to work smarter. As a school we analyze data and look at areas where we are clearly deficient. . . . Like right now, we are working on a writing prompt, first through fourth. And we are trying to say, "okay this is exactly where we want you to be for writing at the end of first grade, second grade, etc." We make it really concrete.

In some schools, teachers identified expert teachers whom they observed. Many teachers wanted to have an on-site Helping Teacher who could assist with lesson development, model lessons, provide information, and the like. Many teachers also expressed a sense of being part of a larger team of decisionmakers. Noted one teacher, "We are experimenting and meeting together to do a variety of activities across grade levels that we think will complement each other." Another elementary school teacher shared, "Teachers in Kent are empowered and, I think, most often [are] part of the decisionmaking."

> **There's a lot of collaboration. Since we are so small we're able to identify a need and work together to bring people in who will serve and help us identify it and correct our deficiencies as a total county instead of piece by piece… so that we're all aligned.—Kent principal**

Despite the strong desire of Kent teachers to collaborate and improve practice, school structures did not fully support such work. Both teachers and administrators expressed frustration with school structures that required teachers, SIT teams, Baldrige cadre teams, and grade-level teams to meet before or after school to collaborate. They also found time to share ideas and work together informally in the hallways, during a short lunch break, and between classes. One teacher explained,

> You drop a note in the mailbox or send an e-mail to collaborate about lessons. The music teacher might ask me "[Which] years are you studying now, so that we can kind of match up with music?" Or the art teacher sends an e-mail to me, "What are you studying?" so that she can coordinate it. But it's done that way—drop a note in the mailbox, do it through e-mail.

Part of the problem stemmed from the combination of the district's requirement that substitutes cover classes in order for teachers to collaborate, and a lack of an adequate number of substitutes. Another problem arose when trainings or meetings were held after school—a time that some teachers felt should be their own to share with their families. One teacher explained, "The crucial element is time, and there is definitely a tremendous lack of time. We've tried all kinds of creative solutions. You have to have substitutes, and that has not worked well. It is still the traditional after school, before school, or during the planning time if you can coordinate it." As a response, many teachers covered each other's classes during their free periods to allow their colleagues to participate in team meetings and conferences.

While a lack of time and structures to support collaboration were clearly a problem in many schools, Kent provided a useful reminder that the creation of time alone is not sufficient. A culture of collaboration must also be created. For example, one school had recently shifted to block scheduling, creating more time in the school week for collaborative work. However, as teachers were not accustomed to this new structure, they did not immediately utilize the time efficiently to work together. The principal acknowledged that it would take time to incorporate the norms of collective work into the school's ethos.

Stakeholder Interaction—Building Strong Relationships and Distributing Leadership

To understand Kent's growth, it is important to discuss relationships among stakeholders and the evolution of the productive interactions. The strong connections among stakeholders in Kent can be traced back to a deliberate strategy to build dynamic relationships.

During her first year as superintendent, Dr. Costella recognized that while the school board had nominated her unanimously, she would need to cultivate relationships and build trust in order to gain the respect and cooperation of her colleagues. Therefore, Dr. Costella and her staff worked diligently to enact various strategies to ensure strong communication among stakeholders.

As an example, the superintendent met regularly with the board chair and distributed a weekly newsletter to all board members. Noted one administrator, "We take great care to inform the board about changes in our district, changes in the state, and the reasons why things are happening. . . .What we are trying to do is build their understanding and support."

In addition to working closely with the board, the superintendent created a strong connection with the teachers union and its leadership. One administrator noted,

> In this county, we view the teachers union as an important stakeholder, an important partner. We try to involve them in every important task force and committee work that we do. At one time I think there was more of an inclination to view them as [over there] and to not include them. But we understand that you gain more by engaging them in everything you do.

An example of this connection was illustrated by the Baldrige work. The district invited the union president to participate in the beginning stages of the Baldrige process, including taking part in the design, participating in workshops, and being a member of the first visiting team to Pinellas County, Florida. As a result, the union president became an early advocate of the Baldrige process and played an important role in spreading the buy-in among teachers throughout the district. A district administrator observed that the union is "a very important player. They have the respect of the teachers. If the union president is on board with something, the teachers are likely to feel comfortable."

By working closely with the board and the teachers union, Dr. Costella raised the bar of trust between the district and these two entities. A district leader commented, "She built trust by giving the sense that everybody has value." As ideas emerged, these stakeholders showed considerable willingness to engage in and experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning, such as the Baldrige initiative and curriculum writing.

Distributing Leadership

In addition to building relationships, Dr. Costella placed great importance on developing the leadership capacity in Kent. For example, with the backing of the board, she increased the responsibility of the district's principals early in her tenure. Principals were expected to work as instructional leaders and were evaluated based on their abilities to create learning communities and to rally their staffs around instructional rigor. Principals were replaced if they did not perform. During her time in office, Costella replaced the majority of principals. Interestingly, many of the vacancies were filled by internal candidates. We will talk more in the next section about the role of the principalship, district support for principals, and the district's efforts to build its school leadership capacity.

As central office leaders sought to build leadership capacity, they created structures to support and distribute leadership. The Baldrige initiative, SIT teams, Helping Teachers, and the Professional Development Council were a few of the initiatives instituted to extend the leadership beyond the central office. For example, implementation of the Baldrige initiative required all stakeholders to learn a new vocabulary and new ways of working. Many stakeholders not only were willing to engage in this new process, but became champions of it. Such a rapid and full embrace of this process from the board, the teachers union, and teachers would never have occurred without the trust Dr. Costella had established.

In addition to building and supporting district leaders, the superintendent and her staff also modeled leadership practices. Nowhere was this modeling more prominent than in the use of data. From the beginning of the superintendent's tenure, she looked to data as a key vehicle to shape reform efforts and worked directly with teachers and principals, in their schools, to model effective data use. She noted,

> In the beginning we started looking at data. We were trying to find answers to questions we had and get better at defining areas of difficulty. It drove me crazy when I first came in to the district; we had all this money going in different directions…grant money…opportunities…but we were not really looking at whether or not it was supporting our efforts.

As she brought new practices into the district, the superintendent worked side by side with teachers and administrators in learning the techniques of those new practices—such as the tools and principles of Baldrige, the techniques to analyze and use data for decisionmaking, and the strategies of the layered curriculum.

Dr. Costella also provided leadership as a resource agent, bringing in funds to enhance the district's capacity to provide professional development. Furthermore, she worked strategically to build a pool of experienced grant writers in the district. Now principals, teachers, and other administrators have the expertise to identify and obtain targeted funds.

Board Leadership

The school board played an important role in Kent's leadership structure. The original push toward increasing student achievement and raising the bar for success began with the board. As noted, the board hired Dr. Costella based on her instructional expertise and gave her a mandate to increase the instructional cohesion and rigor in the district.

In general, the board became involved in areas where it saw itself best positioned to act. It set policy to guide the work of the district and continually pushed the district office to seek ways to improve instruction. Resources provided by the superintendent, the Maryland State Association of School Boards, and others, enabled the board to become very knowledgeable about reform practices and data use. The board, however, did not engage in the day-to-day work of the district. Explained one administrator, "Our board is excellent. They do not…micromanage. If issues come up, they'll direct the superintendent to study it and work on it. And we do. And then we report back to them about what has been done."

In addition, the Kent school board modeled effective leadership, working collaboratively with the central office and facing difficult questions head-on. A board member commented,

> The board takes the majority of its cues from the administration. There's not a log of secondary agendas. The board members are not coming with other agendas. The board is not coming with board-initiated divergence. I think the administration and the board are on the same sheet of music.

The board also worked cooperatively with the union. As a board member explained,

> We have a good strong dialogue with the local union and communicate with one another, even if we're agreeing to disagree or to work on disagreements. We encourage the teacher association to be effective listeners...so we have to give respect by listening to them as well.

Union Leadership

Perhaps nowhere were the notions of partnership and distributed leadership more powerful than in the district–union relationship. The district and teachers union leaders, over time, recognized that only by working together could they effectively address the needs of teachers and students. The strong relationship between the union president and superintendent helped to model trust throughout the district and paved the way for more productive work for all stakeholders. A union leader explained,

> Probably one of the most meaningful things that I think developed between the administration and the teachers association is the open dialogue. Dr. Costella and I meet once a month….We have been able to head off major grievances and major confrontations because of our ability to work behind the

scenes and within the framework to try to accommodate people and to come
up with the best solution for all sides. And that's been very, very effective.

The union also exerted its leadership through its solution-oriented approach to problems and its willingness to learn about and promote new approaches to teaching. As challenges arose—such as when teachers were not attending district inservice activities—the union worked with the district leaders to find mutually agreeable ways to solve the challenges. This quiet, focused leadership set a tone in the district, addressed challenges as they arose, and perhaps most important, decreased the amount of time and negative energy spent on problems.

State Leadership

Another piece of the leadership puzzle in Kent was not a local player, but rather the state of Maryland. Together, the Maryland State Board of Education, the Maryland legislature, and the Maryland Department of Education played an important role in setting the context for reform in Kent and aiding in the district's efforts to improve its instruction.

According to Kent County leaders, the state's most important contribution was its demand for high academic standards. Instead of viewing the standards as a negative to work around, most educators believed the standards provided the district with the push and a structure to increase student achievement. A teacher shared the impact of the standards:

> There are a lot less people sitting in front of the class and lecturing the whole period….Kids are actually involved much more and they're learning more as a result of that. The writing is far superior to what it used to be.

Another added, "Now with MSPAP and the outcomes from MSPAP, students are expected to do more than just the [basics]. It's higher order thinking. It's being able to communicate well."

Teachers, principals, and district leaders acknowledged that the state not only established standards, but also provided significant support in building teaching and leading capacity. The state was a leader in building induction efforts for teachers and in providing training for new principals. The superintendent noted, "[The] state has done a lot. [State leaders] are really attempting to meet needs….The State Department is very sensitive about needs of school systems and principal leadership."

The State Department of Education also built a strong reciprocal communication system to provide information and to obtain feedback from districts. Each month, the department brought together all superintendents for a two-day meeting; assistant superintendents were brought together for a separate one-day meeting. Kent made maximum use of these venues and opportunities to stay connected to state policy mandates, to learn about new resources, and to provide input to state leaders on how policies impacted the district. In

addition, district staff and teachers regularly sat on state-level curriculum committees and ad hoc task forces.

Building Internal Leadership Capacity

The district office understood that if it was to encourage and expect more widespread leadership from schools, it needed to develop policies and structures that supported principals and teachers as leaders.

Principal Roles and Development

Considered catalysts for change, principals in Kent County were expected to operationalize the district vision at the school level. Their charge was to build high quality instruction in their schools. Therefore, they were expected to regularly spend time in classrooms, to develop structures for teachers to collaborate and reflect, and to spearhead professional development of their staffs.

Most principals embraced the notion of instructional leadership and endeavored to meet it. Observed one administrator, "Our principals are among the best instructional leaders in the state. They are eager learners. They are not resistant to change, and they are thoughtful about change. They learn from each other." Principals attempted to carry through the district vision at the school level. They used data and encouraged their teachers to use data. Elementary principals in particular spoke of how they used data in their schools. One principal remarked,

> When we looked at the data we found out. . .that reading for literary experience was our weakest area. So we had to then become informed as to what we needed to do strategically in the classroom to improve in this area, which meant looking at things like current research, books that were provided to us in the area of reading….The School Improvement Team purchased those books under the recommendation of someone in the State Department who was in charge of reading.

Principals also worked with their staffs to develop goals and strategies to improve student achievement. Principals observed their teachers in their classrooms and worked closely with teachers to find new and creative ways of improving instruction. For example, some principals encouraged teachers to visit other schools in the county to observe their colleagues. One principal explained,

> We will look at our data and say, "My kids are not performing well here…. Who can I call on? Who can I go visit?" That's when we start pulling in all the resources. That's when we get on the phone and say, "This school's doing a really good job here. Maybe our teacher could get to see that teacher." So, we've done a lot of those things, really looking at specific [areas] of weakness. One of the things that's always kind of neat, too, is that the state has a website that allows us to do some comparisons at

a state level . . . .We can go out and look at this school with similar characteristics as ours and compare and set up a visit.

Because of the district's small size, many Kent teachers collaborated via telephone and e-mail; others looked to the Helping Teachers and SITs to provide insight and improve skills. Explained a Kent principal,

> Yesterday my [SIT] team met and we broke into groups of three. One was looking at CTBS data, another was looking at local math assessment, and another group was looking at MSPAP data. Out of that discussion . . . a teacher said, "Language usage at our school is at a 59.8. We've got to visit others." They don't say a school; they say a name of the teacher. "We've got to go to Sue's class. We want to see what she's doing because her scores are high."

> **I think having that sense of collaboration and support is key. It's important to say to a teacher, "It's okay to have challenges. It doesn't mean that [you're] a failure as a person"….We all work hard to encourage teachers and to help them also set goals and to grow professionally. —Kent principal**

Principals also supported teachers in trying new approaches and taking risks. As one principal shared,

> Teachers are given permission to use whatever their unique students need to learn the Essential Curriculum. For instance, since the curriculum drives the standard of learning for our students, if a teacher wants to use a novel instead of the textbook to teach a concept with the curriculum in science, it absolutely is permitted and encouraged. And as much as we can, we financially support that.

Teachers themselves spoke of this willingness on the part of principals to try new things. One teacher commented, "We have an administration that's always looking for best practices and certainly I think principals are very important. Neither one is looking for a single solution for any one problem. We certainly at our school have done a wide variety of programs."

Despite both the clear mandate and support from the central office and the principals' understanding their own roles, principals struggled to create structures that maximized teacher collaboration. Many attributed some measure of the district's success to its small size. One board member noted, "We are a small district. That creates a level of intimacy that encourages collaboration and emotional support." Principals noted that the small size of the district enabled them to communicate well and integrate strategies. However, size did not create economies of scale. As a result, principals in the district were expected to fulfill their roles of both instructional leader and manager. Although district leaders were

aware of principals' myriad responsibilities, they had not been able to lessen principals' loads. Noted the superintendent, "We have looked at how to clear the plate of administrative issues [for principals]. We have not been very successful with that." To succeed, principals worked long hours. In fact, when principals were hired, they were forewarned about the intense workload demanded of them.

Despite the long hours, principals felt that they were well-supported by the central office in terms of materials, political support, and encouragement. Noted one principal, "The district supports us in many ways, and [district leaders] encourage us to try new things. The district works to get resources for schools and for us. If you want something, you can basically get it from the central office." Yet, fully aware of the high-stakes environment in which they operated, the principals knew they were expected to be instructional and managerial leaders and to show results.

> **We get a lot of support, but the expectations are clear. They expect results. There is no wishy washy fooling around.—Kent principal**

To help principals become instructional leaders, the district also provided significant training and support. For example, the district brought principals together as a group for monthly problem solving meetings and individually in conferences, districtwide leadership tasks, and school meetings with the superintendent. The district held monthly meetings for all administrative and supervisory (A&S) staff: central office staff, principals, and Helping Teachers. While initially these meetings were discussions about budgets and other administrative duties, as reform efforts progressed, principals sought greater meaning in these sessions. At their suggestion, A&S meetings shifted to provide increased instructional focus and to allow principals additional time (one-half day each month) to meet as a unit.

In addition to monthly meetings, principals received significant hands-on support from the superintendent and assistant superintendent. Every six weeks, the superintendent visited with each principal to discuss successes, challenges, and what supports he or she needed from the district to be more effective. Kent County principals also took on significant districtwide leadership roles. They were required to chair strategic planning committees, to serve on ad hoc task forces, and to write and administer grants.

Because of its size, the district could not mount intensive training efforts to prepare principals for these leadership roles. However, it took advantage of external resources in order to send principals to the state-level principals academy and other respected training institutes.

Teachers as Leaders

The board and central office recognized that reform in such a small district would not happen without significant district-level and school-level leadership and deeper involvement of teachers. Prior to Dr. Costella's arrival, the few teacher leadership

positions that existed were vague and unstructured. The sharpened districtwide vision and the structure provided by the Baldrige approach pushed the district to create teacher leader positions to fill district needs. Over time, the district increased the number of teacher leaders to enhance the reform effort. The most prominent teacher leader structures were Helping Teachers, the Professional Development Council, content leaders, and SIT and Baldrige cadre teams. The district also included teachers in shorter-term leadership assignments such as curriculum writing and as members of ad hoc task forces.

Today, each school has a core of content leaders in math, science, and reading who attend districtwide meetings with their peers in other schools and bring ideas and training back to their buildings. The Baldrige cadre approach and the districtwide Professional Development Council structures have created significant opportunities for ongoing, job-embedded professional development and greater involvement of teachers in setting and promoting district goals. In addition, as the district has shifted professional development expectations to the school building level, teacher leaders have played a more significant role as professional development providers. For example, Helping Teachers work with other teachers to plan and implement summer curriculum writing sessions. In many schools, SIT teams and/or Baldrige cadres are responsible for professional learning.

While the growth of teacher leader positions brought significant expertise and resources to the district's professional development work, a few challenges remained. The challenges resided not in the work of the teacher leaders, but in conflicts in structures and expectations. These conflicts could best be described through the work of Helping Teachers and content leaders. While Helping Teachers were praised highly for their work, some expressed frustration in their role—frustration that stemmed from many issues.

First, the name *Helping Teachers* and the original job description provided a sense that these "teachers on assignment" would spend significant time in schools modeling lessons and providing an extra arm of support for teachers. However, due to demands from external funding structures and administrative needs, Helping Teachers had limited time to work with teachers in the classroom. This discrepancy led to some discontentment. Noted one teacher, "Helping Teachers have brought tremendous amounts of money into the county from various grants they've written, and we all benefit from the grants, so it's not like they aren't doing anything. . . .Helping Teachers' jobs are defined in part by the restrictions of the grants….They work extremely hard. . . .Its just that they are not helping teachers."

In addition, teacher leaders, such as content leaders and Helping Teachers, were expected to perform more hands-on assistance to teachers than they were able to fulfill. As noted, Helping Teachers had very limited time to work directly with teachers on site. Content leaders struggled with a similar expectation. They were seen as a cadre of trainers who would work in their buildings to train their peers, but in reality, time constraints limited roles outside a train-the-trainer model.

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The distributed leadership structure among the superintendent, board, union, and state set the groundwork for improving instruction and achievement in Kent County. However, only by building internal leadership capacity at the school level were district leaders able to infuse improvement throughout the district. The district allocated resources to develop and assist the principal corps. With this support, principals played the roles of both instructional and managerial leaders within their schools. Principals received additional help from teacher leaders, who augmented the school's instructional emphasis by providing professional learning opportunities for fellow teachers. Both principals and teacher leaders struggled to fulfill their responsibilities within limited time frameworks. Despite the challenges, however, these school-level leaders furthered the district's ability to instill the vision and to increase instruction and achievement throughout Kent County.

Conclusion

Kent County provides a powerful example of how a district central office, in partnership with its board, union, and school-based staff, can lead reform to build success for students. The Kent story is one of focused vision, policies and practices aligned to the vision, data-driven decisionmaking, continuous learning, strong stakeholder relations, and distributed leadership.

The Kent story was rooted firmly in the ability of district leaders to create focus around improving instruction and achievement. As we saw in the beginning of our narrative, Kent began its efforts to create a shared focus by bringing stakeholders together in a strategic planning process. What emerged was a living strategic plan that prioritized increasing student achievement. With the strategic plan in place, Kent leaders set about to determine ways in which they could bring this vision to life within the district's schools.

Kent leaders viewed improving instruction as their primary vehicle toward increasing student achievement; as a result, they sought to align their resources and practices toward improving instruction. As a key step, the central office brought teachers together over the course of several summers to build and revise a districtwide curriculum that was aligned to state standards and district goals and connected across grade levels. While district leaders emphasized the importance of providing teachers and principals with strong curricular guidance, they acknowledged that the newly aligned curriculum would not make its way into the classroom without intensive professional development. As a result, the district sought to align not simply its curriculum to its core goals, but also its professional development activities.

Making a difference in instruction necessitated that re-focused professional development efforts were ongoing and school-based. It also required the active engagement of teachers. Perhaps the most effective professional development efforts in the district were what one might call "problem-solving professional development." This type of professional development occurred when the district or school identified a need—such as the need to raise math scores or the need to create an aligned curriculum—and brought teachers and administrators together to address such challenges. In Kent, illustrations of problem-solving professional development abounded. For example, content leaders in math emerged when the district realized that math scores were declining.

One of the hallmarks of the Kent approach was the infiltration of data use across the system. Kent's principals and teachers clearly were data users. Data informed what and how teachers taught. In seeking solutions, teams of teachers worked together, reflected together, sought external guidance, and, as a result, learned new approaches to address the needs of students. These types of efforts embedded professional development into the process of solving a problem and were identified by teachers as among their most significant learning experiences.

As we looked at the story of Kent's success, two other important themes emerged. First, when Dr. Costella entered the district she brought with her an ethos of continuous

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learning. Over time, as this ethos spread through the district, stakeholders recognized that it was okay to experiment, to assess progress, and to make adjustments as needed. Nobody was expected to get it right all the time. But all stakeholders were encouraged to identify needs, to try new approaches, and to evaluate. This sense of listening, assessing, and adjusting was seen throughout the district.

The district also readily embraced a set of professional development norms supported by the research that called for teachers to learn together, reflect together, and plan together within the context of their school day. While this was a theme throughout the district, it was not without its challenges. Administrators, principals, and teachers alike talked about the difficulty in finding time to work together. Furthermore, many teachers felt overwhelmed by the rising tide of expectations and demands and the lack of additional time or new structures to support them. Noted one teacher, "we are trying so many new things and we get a little frazzled, but we work hard and are constantly monitoring new ways of doing things."

Because of its small size, Kent relied heavily on external resources. While Dr. Costella's efforts to spread grant-writing expertise across the district netted some sizeable grants, when the grant money was not there, the district was unable to provide the types of professional growth opportunities it needed to sustain its reform efforts. In Kent, many programs struggled to remain afloat in the face of diminished funding.

Yet overall, the Kent story was one of collective engagement to improve performance. Perhaps one of the most important distinguishing features in Kent was the way in which district leaders used their own power to create cohesion among stakeholders throughout the district. Leaders determined the importance of creating a common vision and used a variety of district-driven processes and structures to develop and diffuse this vision. Most important, they developed mechanisms to distribute leadership throughout the system so that union leaders, principals, and teachers all played a significant role in creating and leading the reform.

Appendix I

Kent County Public Schools

Achievement Data

Table A.1 Kent County Public Schools

Percentage of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Higher on the
  Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP)—Reading—1994–2002

	1994	1995	1996	1997	
READING, Grade 3					
African American	22	21	26	25	
White/non-Hispanic	52	46	55	54	
READING, Grade 5					
African American	12	6	31	20	
White/non-Hispanic	40	28	48	43	
READING, Grade 8					
African American	15	6	38	16	
White/non-Hispanic	35	28	35	40	

Table A.2 Kent County Public Schools

Percentage of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Higher on the
  Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP)—Mathematics—1994–2002

	1994	1995	1996	1997	
MATHEMATICS, Grade 3					
African American	36	32	36	40	
White/non-Hispanic	58	66	65	80	
MATHEMATICS, Grade 5					
African American	15	9	44	22	
White/non-Hispanic	45	44	68	65	
MATHEMATICS, Grade 8					
African American	21	14	51	18	
White/non-Hispanic	62	60	64	68	

1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
49	62	60	55	39	17
69	75	72	57	54	2
27	30	29	28	41	27
51	57	58	63	51	11
10	17	25	29	28	13
38	38	43	50	39	4

Notes: Due to reasons of privacy (n < 5), data are not represented for Hispanic and Asian students. Kent County's scores in 2001 and 2002 show a decline that is reflective of a broader statewide decline in MSPAP scores.

Source: These data were provided by the Kent County Public Schools.

1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
76	71	70	46	44	8
81	95	90	77	67	9
21	25	24	16	19	4
58	69	59	51	49	4
29	30	42	29	27	6
69	75	75	73	63	1

Notes: Due to reasons of privacy (n < 5), data are not represented for Hispanic and Asian students. Kent County's scores in 2001 and 2002 show a decline that is reflective of a broader statewide decline in MSPAP scores.

Source: These data were provided by the Kent County Public Schools.

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