



Common Strategies for Uncommon Achievement

How Districts Enable and Support High-Performing Schools

By Robert Hanna July 2013

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

What does it take to improve a school? What kinds of programs, systems, and people need to be in place for educational outcomes to improve overall? These and other questions continue to vex policymakers who—along with researchers, reformers, and advocates—pore over data and case studies looking for tools to transform schools into places where all students achieve. Sadly, there is no silver bullet. But there are features and structures of schools that have shown improvement that can help educational leaders see a path forward.

One way to consider how to design plans for school improvement is to start with the success stories—focusing on how educators brought about positive change. This report intends to do just that by considering the performance of districts and schools of an entire state—in this case, North Carolina—focusing on some of those that improved and then teasing out the approaches that leaders in these districts used to foster success.

The report features three effective school districts in North Carolina. The districts vary in terms of the types of students they serve, where they are located, and the number of schools they oversee. The districts include:

- Catawba County, a rural district serving a student population of more than 17,000 students, around half of which were income eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches in the 2011-12 school year
- Montgomery County, also rural but with a smaller student population than Catawba (around 4,000 students), and where more than 70 percent of its students were eligible for subsidized lunches in the 2011-12 school year
- Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, an urban district, with one of the largest student populations in the state (around 50,000 students), and where about half of the students were eligible for subsidized lunches in the 2011-12 school year

More information on these school districts is given in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
District demographics, 2012

District	Total number of students ¹	Percent low income ²	Percent black or Hispanic ³	Number of schools ⁴	Rural/urban, 2010 to 2011 ⁵
Catawba County	17,139	51%	17%	28	Rural-fringe
Montgomery County	4,144	76%	50%	11	Rural-distant
Winston-Salem/Forsyth County	52,612	55%	50%	80	City-midsize

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports - Student Accounting," available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/accounting/data/> (last accessed June 2013); National Center for Education Statistics, "Elementary/Secondary Information System."

Despite the superficial differences, these three districts share the fact that they have a districtwide commitment to supporting teacher collaboration, and many of their schools perform much better than comparable schools in the state.

But how did some of the schools in these three districts post such notable achievements? The case studies we share in this report focus on the high-performing schools in the districts and answer two basic questions: How did these principals work with their teachers to improve school performance? What roles did district leaders play in supporting principals?

There are three themes that emerged from the study of these districts. Leaders in districts' central offices, such as superintendents and other members of their leadership teams, worked hard to ensure that their principals, other school administrators, and teachers adhered to the following routines:

- Principals and other school administrators observed teaching frequently in classrooms.
- Teachers discussed student performance and instruction in focused meetings.
- Teachers used research-based instructional techniques.

These three activities are common to high-performing schools,⁶ and the cases outlined below remind us that school improvement is about supporting teachers to do their best work in their classrooms. When district leaders engage with educators to promote routines such as those listed above, they demonstrate the power that focusing on the core of education—teaching and learning in classrooms—can have on student achievement.

Strategies in common

The three North Carolina school districts in our report share many characteristics with the highest-performing districts elsewhere in the United States. Although there is no so-called gold standard when it comes to determining a district's effectiveness, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation—which has as its stated goal “to dramatically transform urban K-12 public education”—has developed one comprehensive approach to identifying outstanding urban districts.⁷ Each year the Broad Foundation identifies 75 districts serving sizeable populations of low-income students from which it selects four finalists and then one winner each year. The winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education have demonstrated high performance on many measures, including improvements in student achievement and closing achievement gaps. Over time the Broad Foundation has harvested a set of “best practices” from these award-winning districts.⁸ The three routines described above are commonly found in some form in Broad Prize districts.

Furthermore, the three strategies that the districts used to improve teaching have been studied and documented in the research literature and elsewhere. Although each strategy may need to be adapted to the specific school environment, these are common in many districts. Let's examine each in turn.

Principals and other school administrators observed teaching frequently in classrooms

Principals at high-performing schools in our featured districts visited teachers' classrooms regularly to observe their teaching, sometimes devoting a great deal of their day to this task in order to gather critical information about what teaching looked like in classrooms. Observing classroom teaching is a necessary step to improving school performance, according to research on school improvement.⁹ School improvement requires multiple aligned strategies,¹⁰ but there is nothing more important to student learning in school than the work of teachers in classrooms.¹¹ In this report's featured schools, principals and other school administrators used information gleaned from classroom visits and from talks with teachers to make decisions about how to better support effective teaching.

Teachers discussed student performance and instruction in focused meetings

Teachers in each of these schools began to talk about teaching regularly in small-group settings. In all featured districts, these meetings took place weekly. Meetings stayed on track because each team had a designated facilitator who directed the discussion. Furthermore, principals and other school administrators would attend these meetings regularly to monitor and provide advice and support.

District leaders set minimum requirements for how often teachers should meet and what they should talk about at those meetings. The discussions centered on teaching practice and data pertaining to what students were learning. In some instances, district leaders would set specific parameters for how meetings should progress by providing schedules. In all cases, a teacher or a teacher coach was responsible for facilitating these discussions.

Teachers used research-based instructional techniques

Of course, teaching is a profession requiring skills to match techniques to subject matter and students. District leaders expected teachers to use research-based teaching practices, and school leaders paid special attention to observing whether teachers were using these techniques in their classrooms.

Identifying high-performing North Carolina schools

This paper looks at three effective school districts in North Carolina, which were identified by the performance trends in their schools.

Two of the three featured districts were selected based on how many schools met what the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction termed “expected growth.” For each student, North Carolina calculates how much the student’s score changes relative to their previous test results on the state’s assessments. A school is determined to have met expected growth when the average of all of these changes is zero.¹² In Catawba and Montgomery counties, the proportion of schools meeting expected growth increased 10 percentage points between the 2007-08 and 2011-12 school years. Districts were eligible for the study if they had

at least 10 schools in 2012. Out of 71 eligible districts, nine districts met these criteria.¹³ In Catawba County, 78 percent of schools were at expected growth in 2008, and 89 percent were at expected growth in 2012.¹⁴ In Montgomery County, 80 percent of schools were at expected growth in 2008, and 100 percent were at expected growth in 2012.¹⁵

The study also features one large district. Winston-Salem/Forsyth County was selected based on its size and the performance of its students.¹⁶ The county is one of the largest five districts in North Carolina.¹⁷ Four of these districts were recruited for this study, and all had a large number of schools improve more than the state average.¹⁸ Of these four, only Winston-Salem/Forsyth was able to commit to participating in this research. Between 2008 and 2012 half of Winston-Salem/Forsyth schools (40 out of 80) had improved student proficiency rates on state tests more than the state average change of 13 percentage points.¹⁹ Across all schools in the district, the average change in student proficiency over these four years was 12 percentage points.²⁰

Three districts and how they improved their schools

The case studies included in this report explore how one school in each district improved and how the district contributed to that particular school's progress. Every school is different, but the cases presented herein illustrate some ways in which these districts have supported the efforts of school leaders to drive instructional improvement.

The time period for this study included the school years 2007-08 to 2011-12, but it is important to note that the cases featured below include some activities that took place prior to the 2007-08 school year, and one principal was in place before the 2007 school year commenced.

The case studies included in this report rely on interviews with directors for district human resources, principals of high-performing schools, and superintendents from these districts. The report appendix lists the names of those interviewed for this project.

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County: A whole-school model focused on building a professional community

During the 2008-09 school year, Don Martin, the superintendent of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth schools, and other district leaders began offering a new approach for school management and organization to the district's lowest-performing schools that was based on a successful Florida school-district model known as "Single School Culture." Educators in the Palm Beach County, Florida, school district developed the Single School Culture approach and later offered a consulting-like service to other districts wanting to implement the plan. "Under this approach, teachers and administrators in an individual school come to an agreement about everything from cell phone use to ear phones to dress codes to rules for handing in homework," according to a description by the Broad Foundation of Palm Beach County.²¹ In the Single School Culture approach, setting expectations and enforcing them should consistently increase teachers' and students' sense of community, and this process, in turn, should enable educators to share and develop effective instructional practices.²²

Since the 2008-09 school year, Winston-Salem/Forsyth school leaders have provided many intensive services to its lowest-performing schools, and the Single School Culture approach has been central, according to Bud Harrelson, the district's program manager for school improvement. During the 2008-09 school year, 10 schools in the district volunteered as the first cohort of the Single School Culture effort.²⁴ The four schools starting with the lowest levels of student achievement in 2008—less than 50 percent student proficiency—by 2011 had narrowed the proficiency gap with other North Carolina schools with comparable starting proficiency levels thanks to the new program.²⁵ (see graph below)

Fast Facts

Winston-Salem/Forsyth
County School District,
2012²³

52,612 students
(55 percent low income)

3,394 teachers

80 schools

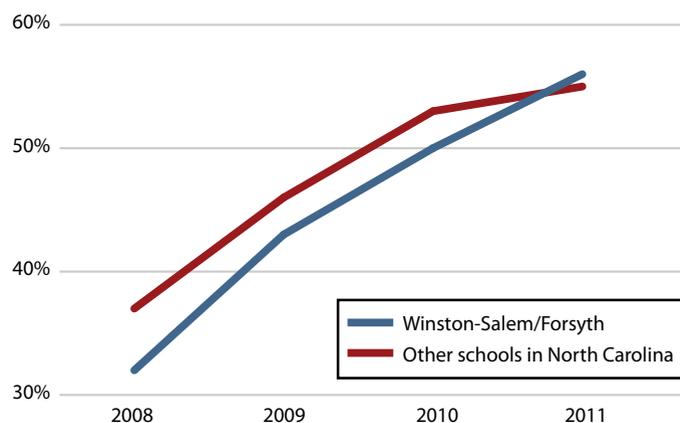
Winston-Salem/Forsyth schools using the Single School Culture model were matched with partner schools in Palm Beach. Leaders from the Palm Beach school district provided, for a fee, personalized support for implementation of the Single School Culture program in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth district. Eventually, after a few years of direct support from Palm Beach, Winston-Salem/Forsyth school staff took full ownership of this approach.

A look at Winston-Salem/Forsyth's Northwest Middle School—a sixth-grade through eighth-grade school—provides an example of how the district implemented the Single School Culture model.²⁶ From 2006 to 2012, Sharon Richardson served as Northwest's principal, and during her tenure the number of economically disadvantaged students increased dramatically, from 51 percent in the 2006-07 school year to 69 percent by the 2011-12 school year.²⁷ According to Richardson, the school's teachers found it challenging to adjust to the new student population, and they needed to learn new techniques to ensure students' success. In her first few months as principal, Richardson asked her faculty for input about what was going on at the school and where they wanted it to go. Northwest's school-improvement team carefully considered the information and insights culled from teachers as it went about developing plans for the upcoming school year. "Everybody wanted us to be consistent and wanted to be on the same page," recalled Richardson. The school-improvement team decided to adopt Single School Culture as its solution to the challenges at Northwest.

A central activity of Single School Culture is the creation of learning teams—groups of teachers that meet weekly to discuss student academic progress. Teachers at Northwest had already been meeting in small groups to discuss teaching based on the Professional Learning Communities model developed by Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour, even prior to the start of the new initiative.²⁸ During early 2008 one teacher from each Northwest learning team was selected to receive training in how to facilitate future meetings using the more prescriptive Single School Culture approach.

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools using the Single School Culture approach, in comparison to other North Carolina schools (only schools with less than 50 percent students proficient in 2008)

Percent of students at or above proficient, 2008 to 2011



Source: Author's calculations using student performance data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Richardson said that the effectiveness of the newly tasked teams depended on what was shared during weekly meetings and whether teachers took new ideas back to their classrooms. “It was that commitment to academics,” she said, referring to her best teams. Northwest’s seventh-grade team, for example, included one veteran teacher and two beginning teachers. The veteran instructor, who was already a strong teacher, picked up new ideas from the novice teachers about how to incorporate the use of new technology to make her classroom a more hands-on learning environment for students. One of the beginning teachers reported that she learned more about how to manage her classroom from the veteran teacher, an issue with which she struggled.

Through these weekly meetings, the school community eventually became more coherent in its direction, but that did not mean that everyone was using the same techniques. According to Richardson, the teams would “develop the map” for the curriculum, “how to get from point A to point B,” but teachers were allowed some freedom in deciding what techniques and strategies to use to get there. Richardson said teachers were required to keep records of the techniques they used. When something didn’t work, teachers would have to discuss these issues at the next learning-team meeting, where team members would work together to tweak techniques or develop new approaches.

The Winston-Salem/Forsyth district has formulated a “List of Essentials” that are required for all of its schools, including Northwest Middle,²⁹ which provides guidance on managing schools and about effective teaching. In one of these essentials, the district emphasizes research-based best practices, including Robert Marzano’s research-based strategies for teachers such as “setting objectives” and “providing feedback.”³⁰ Another essential is a district-developed classroom-walkthrough tool. School administrators are asked to use it and observe teaching in different classrooms every day or around 15 times each week, according to Richardson. These observations are not meant to be used for formal evaluation purposes but instead for supporting teachers’ professional growth.

During her walkthroughs, Richardson sometimes would observe teachers using techniques that she found confusing. Following these classroom visits, Richardson said she would have discussions with teachers in which she would often begin the conversation by asking, “Help me understand what was going on here.”

Northwest Middle’s administrative team, including Richardson, would meet once each week to share what they saw in classrooms. Sharing their observations would allow all of the administrators to learn about what was going on throughout the entire school. “They [would] get a sense of what they’re looking for,” Richardson explained, “so that we all were aware of our problem areas, what our strengths were, and what we need to be focused on the next week for walkthroughs.”

The district provided extensive ongoing support and training to Northwest Middle for its Single School Culture work. District staff would sometimes work directly with learning-team facilitators, and other times the school would participate in video conferences with their Palm Beach advisors, according to Richardson. “I feel like ... [district leaders] offering us this type of support contributed to our success.”

Montgomery County: A skilled instructional coach in every school

When Dale Ellis started as superintendent in 2010, a top priority was to place someone to act as an instructional facilitator in every school in Montgomery County. The person selected to fill this newly created position would be someone with at least five years of teaching experience with a strong track record of improving student performance. “They had to have documented evidence of instructional excellence,” said Ellis. The district selected every facilitator from within the district’s teaching force.

To pay for these new positions, Ellis reviewed the district’s spending and found that there were many expensive programs that were not yielding the results he wanted, so he eliminated programs that he determined to be ineffective, especially those related to subject areas such as math or reading. “We moved away from program teaching and moved into process teaching,” Ellis said. (While program teaching relies on purchased programs to guide instruction, process teaching focuses on examining teaching itself.) Today the facilitator positions are funded with a combination of federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I money and Race to the Top money.

The main responsibility of the facilitators is to support teachers’ instructional improvement. Instructional facilitators are expected to be full-time, school-based resources for teachers. They observe classrooms and provide feedback to teachers. Teachers can also visit facilitators to discuss instructional issues. According to Ellis, instructional facilitators provide what he calls “just-in-time support at the school”—that is, they are available to recommend specific strategies to teachers to meet the immediate learning needs of students.

Ellis said since deploying his new staffers, teachers at each school meet weekly in small teams with their school’s instructional facilitator. The facilitators make sure that these meetings follow a standard protocol developed by the district. Each meeting “is focused on learning” from beginning to end, according to Ellis. Each facilitator has a personal office in each school—what the district calls

Fast Facts

Montgomery County
School District, 2012³¹

4,144 students
(76 percent black or Hispanic)

296 teachers

11 schools

“war rooms”—where teacher-planning meetings take place and on the walls are student-performance data. When teachers enter the room, they can see how their students are performing according to a color-coded system. The three-color system—red, yellow, and green—helps the teachers see exactly how well their students are performing compared to their colleagues’ students based on common assessments. Students labeled green have met their expected learning goals, while those designated yellow or red are further behind.

In addition to leading discussions about student performance, the instructional facilitators discuss teaching techniques. As in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth district, Ellis promotes Marzano’s research-based strategies, and district administrators expect instructional facilitators to discuss these strategies at each teacher-planning meeting.

Ellis also expects schools to assess their own progress against common quarterly benchmarks, which he calls “predictive assessments.” In each school, a school-improvement-plan team examines these data each quarter. Teams determine whether a whole-school approach is necessary or whether the school should work with specific teachers to address areas of weakness. It is an intense effort, as those involved can attest.

“It takes hours, but we go through every bit of our test data that we have for benchmarks. ... We delve down to all of our subgroups,” says Anne McLean, principal at Page Street Elementary, a first-grade through fifth-grade school. Teachers and administrators at her school discussed their strengths and how they would change their approaches when students were not performing as expected, according to McLean. She noted that there has been some cultural change regarding using data to inform instruction. McLean said that initially teachers were uncomfortable with discussing data from their own classrooms, but “we’ve gotten to the point here now where teachers do not even blink an eye to talk about their specific test data.”

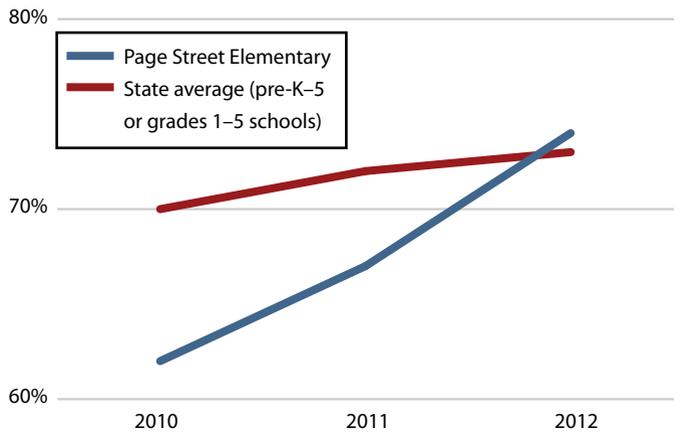
School improvement at Page Street was about more than just data analysis, according to McLean. She observes teachers in classrooms and attends their small-group meetings. “I’m monitoring all the time.” In addition, McLean makes it a point to also model effective teaching. “If I walk in and the teacher says, ‘I don’t understand all this about omniscient point of view,’ well, I step in and try to help,” said McLean. Moreover, she says she looks for student engagement and whether teachers are helping students learn as much as possible.

The efforts have paid off. From 2010 to 2012 student proficiency at Page Street Elementary increased 17 percentage points in tested subjects, better than 75 percent of the more than 350 prekindergarten to fifth grade and grades one through five schools in North Carolina.³² Page Street Elementary closed its proficiency gap with the state, and the school's rate of growth surpassed the average rate of growth for the state. (see graph below)

Montgomery County district's instructional facilitators have played a large role in helping teachers interpret student-performance data, according to Ellis. He noted that the district's director of curriculum support specifically trains the instructional facilitators to analyze student-achievement data and helps teachers determine classroom strategies that are responsive to the data. "That's a big focus of hers, helping them understand the data, how to break it down, and how to align strategies to help improve," says Ellis. The instructional facilitators meet weekly with the director of curriculum to examine data on districtwide assessments and to discuss their observations about teaching in each school.

Page Street Elementary, in comparison to other North Carolina elementary schools

Percent of students at or above proficient, 2010 to 2012



Source: Author's calculations using student-performance data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Catawba County: A whole-school model as a school-culture change strategy

As with the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County district, the Catawba County district's leaders promoted a whole-school model with a core academic component. Tim Markley, former superintendent of Catawba County schools, promoted the Learning Centered Schools approach developed by Mike Rutherford.³³ The approach starts with building teachers' understanding about how students learn, and it provides teachers with techniques for planning and teaching based on this base of knowledge.³⁴ Markley provided Learning Centered Schools training to all the principals in the district.

Donna Heavner has been principal at River Bend Middle School, serving the seventh and eighth grades, since 2006. She said going into her new position she understood that the superintendent expected her to use the Learning Centered Schools approach at her school. What the school needed at that time was “somebody that would go into that school and shake things up and re-energize the culture of the school,” recalled Heavner. She said that she also clearly understood that the district chose her to be a change agent. “I think I was chosen to be a part of this culture in this school, to generate that change.” She said that she was “constantly trying to think ‘How do I implement this with River Bend to change the culture?’”

Heavner spent her first few months on the job getting to know the school, its teachers, and its students. “I just sort of absorbed and watched, and I thought about things we would change and things that we were going to have further discussions on,” she explained.

Beginning that first year as principal at River Bend, Heavner made it a point to meet with every teacher in small gatherings. In the small-group meetings, teachers walk through a list of their students alphabetically, and teachers give students a “thumbs up” or a “thumbs down.” In these meetings, the teachers all have the same students,

Fast Facts

Catawba County
School District, 2012³⁵

17,139 students
(51 percent low income)

1,031 teachers

28 schools

but they have them in different classes. “Thumbs up means everything’s okay with behavior, academics, and emotion,” for that student in each teacher’s classroom, Heavner explained. If one teacher gives a particular student a thumbs down, then the group pauses while the teacher describes the individual student’s issues.

Moreover, Heavner said she expects her teachers to describe their teaching as well during these meetings. She said she wants to know, “What are you teaching? Why are you teaching it? And how are you teaching it?” She attributed the meeting technique she uses to the book, *Wow, What A Team!: Essential Components for Successful Teaching* by Randy Thompson and Dorothy VanderJagt.³⁶

At the beginning of the 2007-08 school year, Heavner introduced the faculty to effective teaching strategies from the Learning Centered Schools model. Throughout the year Heavner said she would highlight one strategy at each faculty meeting and remind the faculty to reflect on their use of that teaching strategy. One such technique is task analysis, where teachers plan lessons by selecting a clear learning goal for the lesson and then breaking that goal into separate tasks for students. Heavner explained that in this way the learner must perform each task in order to meet the goal.

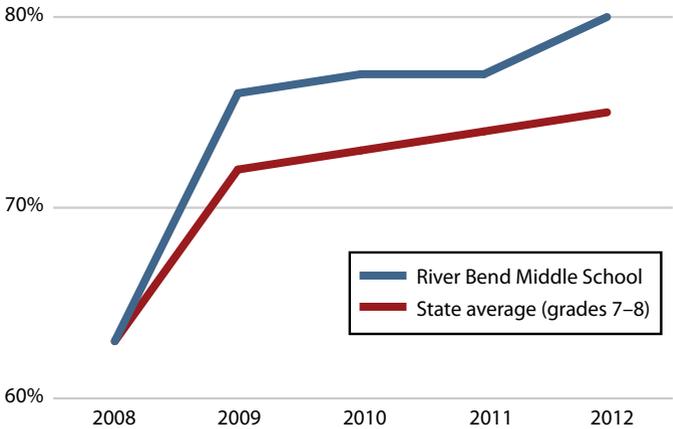
Heavner worked hard to ensure that every function in the school contributed to student growth. To that end, she continually asked questions about schoolwide routines. She encouraged her faculty to reflect critically on their work and do more of what was working and “let the things that were not working for us go,” she recalled. “But anything that was helping us provide growth, we had to center on that and expand it and grow upon it.”

Markley expected his principals to visit classrooms on a daily basis, and he required them to submit reports each month about how often they conducted these visits. According to Heavner, she or her assistant principal would visit each River Bend classroom every two weeks for about 5 minutes to 10 minutes. These meetings were meant to be informal, and they focused on improving instruction, not evaluating teachers.

By the end of her second year, the 2007-08 school year, River Bend had achieved high growth for the first time in four years. Over the next four school years (2009 through the end of 2012), River Bend achieved high growth three times—in 2010, 2011, and 2012.³⁷ Between 2008 and 2012 the school’s proficiency rates increased 18 points, better than most of the state’s 20 other grade seven and eight middle schools.³⁸ (see graph below)

River Bend Middle, in comparison to other North Carolina seventh- and eighth-grade middle schools

Percent of students at or above proficient, 2008 to 2012



Source: Author’s calculations using student-performance data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Policy recommendations

Certainly, schools vary in their performance even in the most celebrated districts. “Each school represents a unique bundle of attributes with a unique set of instructional improvement problems for each principal,” wrote Richard Elmore and Deanne Burney in their study, “School Variation and Systemic Instructional Improvement in Community District #2, New York City.”³⁹ Schools differ in many ways, and improvement strategies must meet each school’s unique needs. As Elmore and Burney observed, “Managing variability, then, consisted of developing school-level leadership appropriate to the setting and tailoring system-level responses to school-level realities.”⁴⁰

The districts highlighted in this report have each provided important resources—both funding and knowledge—to ensure that their various schools were managed in the most effective ways. Despite the diversity of schools in each district, leaders took similar approaches. In the three districts examined here, teachers talked about their work openly in meetings and developed strategies together to improve their teaching. Principals and other school administrators devoted a great deal of time to making sure such faculty collaborations were productive. The districts also identified a knowledge base about effective teaching practices, and principals monitored to make sure that teachers were using these techniques.

Of course, while teachers can learn about different techniques in meetings with their colleagues, ultimately they must implement new teaching strategies in their classrooms in order for student learning to improve. As has been described, in these featured districts, many people—superintendents, principals, and instructional facilitators—have been engaged in supporting teachers to do their best work. When districts organize their schools in these ways, both teachers and students benefit.

This paper has focused on strategies pursued by educational leaders to promote and sustain high-performing schools, and there is the opportunity for policymakers to ensure that all districts are organized and managed in ways similar to these successful districts. In brief, states must create the conditions that allow districts to support the routines detailed here in their schools.

As these three districts have done, state policymakers might consider setting minimum requirements for classroom observations and teacher-learning-team meetings both in terms of frequency—how often they should meet—and duration—how long they need to meet. Certainly, to meet local needs, district and school leaders will need some flexibility to meet these requirements. Nevertheless, these are core activities for teacher learning, critical to school improvement at scale.⁴¹ Ronald F. Ferguson, a faculty member at Harvard University, has made a similar argument in his work on effective high schools, namely that leaders of effective schools “set learning goals and professional development plans for teachers with the same care and quality as the best teachers use to set learning goals for their students.”⁴²

Conclusion

While their approaches might differ somewhat, the featured districts all established routines that were productive at improving student learning. In setting up these routines—observing teaching, discussing teaching, learning more about effective teaching—district leaders provided school leaders and teachers with regular opportunities throughout the school year to become more effective teachers. This research did not compare the practices of these high-performing districts with low-performing ones, but these three successful districts share common practices with other districts recognized as effective. Further research could be done to learn more about how low-performing districts improved many schools at once and what the improvement processes involved.

State education policymakers should consider providing districts and schools with more incentives and resources to promote these routines. Such an effort could include providing educators with opportunities to learn more about effective districts and how they improved over time.

Educators interviewed for the featured districts

Catawba County School District

Dan Brigman, superintendent
Chip Cathey, principal of Murray
Elementary School
Donna Heavner, principal of River
Bend Middle School
Pat Hensley, assistant superintendent
of human resources
Tim Markley, former superintendent
Rob Rucker, principal of Mill Creek
Middle School
Jeff Taylor, principal of Bunker Hill
High School

Montgomery County School District

Dale Ellis, superintendent
Joan Frye, principal of West Middle
School
Kevin Lancaster, assistant superintendent
of operations
Anne McLean, principal of Page Street
Elementary School

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School District

David Fairall, director of human
resources
Donald Martin Jr., superintendent
Sharon Richardson, former principal
of Northwest Middle School
Bud Harrelson, program manager
for school improvement

About the author

Robert Hanna is a Senior Education Policy Analyst at the Center for American Progress. Prior to joining the Center, he worked on school research with Dr. Ronald F. Ferguson at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Previously, Hanna taught math at Boston College High School in Massachusetts.

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Endnotes

- 1 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports - Student Accounting," available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/accounting/data/> (last accessed June 2013).
- 2 This is the percentage of students who applied for free or reduced-price lunches in the 2011-12 school year. See North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports," available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/resources/data/> (last accessed June 2013).
- 3 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports - Student Accounting."
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 National Center for Education Statistics, "Elementary/Secondary Information System," available at <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/> (last accessed June 2013).
- 6 Anthony S. Bryk and others, "Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Ronald F. Ferguson and others, "How High Schools Become Exemplary: Ways that Leadership Raises Achievement and Narrows Gaps by Improving Instruction in 15 Public High Schools" (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard, 2009).
- 7 The Broad Foundation: Education, "Mission and Overview," <http://www.broadeducation.org/about/overview.html> (last accessed June 2013).
- 8 The Broad Prize for Urban Education, "Best Practice Tools," available at <http://www.broadprize.org/resources/tools.html> (last accessed June 2013).
- 9 See, for example, Bryk and others, "Organizing Schools for Improvement"; Richard F. Elmore and Deanne Burney, "School Variation and Systemic Instructional Improvement in Community District #2, New York City" (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: High Performance Learning Communities Project, 1997); Ferguson and others, "How High Schools Become Exemplary."
- 10 Bryk and others, "Organizing Schools for Improvement"; Julie A. Marsh and others, "The Role of Districts in Fostering Instructional Improvement: Lessons from Three Urban Districts Partnered with the Institute for Learning" (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2005).
- 11 See, for example, Steven G. Rivkin, Eric A. Hanushek, and John F. Kain, "Teachers, schools, and academic achievement," *Econometrica* 73 (2) (2005): 417-458.
- 12 For more information on North Carolina's ABCs Accountability Model, see North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "The ABCs of Public Education: Academic Change for Schools" (2012), available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/abc/2011-12/academicchange.pdf>.
- 13 For this paper, the author performed all calculations based on publicly available data from North Carolina's ABCs Accountability Model. This data can be found at North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "The ABCs Accountability Model: The ABCs of Public Education," available at <http://abcs.ncpublicschools.org/abcs> (last accessed June 2013). The nine districts were Avery, Carteret, Catawba, Durham, Franklin, Montgomery, New Hanover, Pitt, and Richmond.
- 14 Catawba had 28 schools in 2008 and 2012.
- 15 Montgomery had 10 schools in 2008 and 11 schools in 2012.
- 16 Winston-Salem/Forsyth did not meet the original criteria set for selection. Specifically, the proportion of schools at expected growth increased between 2008 and 2011 but declined by 2012: 69 percent of the district's schools met expected growth in 2008, 86 percent met expected growth in 2011, and 61 percent met expected growth in 2012.
- 17 Over the period from 2008 to 2012, the five largest districts—by number of schools—are Charlotte-Mecklenberg, Cumberland, Guilford, Wake, and Winston-Salem/Forsyth (alphabetical order).
- 18 The following large districts were invited to participate: Cumberland, Guilford, and Wake. Gaston County was also invited to participate, where there were around 50 schools during the period of study. Charlotte-Mecklenberg, the largest district in the state and the 2011 winner of the Broad Prize, has received a lot of recent attention. The district was not recruited for this study.
- 19 The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction reports student proficiency across all tested subjects. The department refers to this measure as the "Performance Composite." See the following document for more information: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Computing the ABCs Performance Composite, 2011-12" (2012), available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/accountability/reporting/abc/2011-12/composite.pdf>. If the average change is calculated with North Carolina's largest districts excluded, the change is virtually the same: 12.5 percentage points. In the other four largest districts, a large proportion of schools improved more than the state average between 2008 and 2012: Ninety schools out of 163 schools in Charlotte-Mecklenberg; 69 schools out of 86 schools in Cumberland; 53 schools out of 121 schools in Guilford; and 61 schools out of 165 schools in Wake County. The total number of schools given is for schools that were open in 2012. In Gaston, 31 schools out of 55 schools exceeded the state average change.
- 20 Author's calculations. This average includes the 70 schools for which student proficiency rates were available in both 2008 and 2012. When we disregard three schools with extreme values—namely, when the absolute difference was greater than 40 percentage points—the average change is still 12 percentage points.
- 21 The Broad Prize for Urban Education, "The School District of Palm Beach County, Florida: District Profile" (2012), available at <http://broadprize.org/asset/1801-tbp%202012%20fact%20sheet%20palm.pdf>.
- 22 The School District of Palm Beach County, "What is Single School Culture ©?," available at <http://www.palmbeachschools.org/ssci/WhatIsSSC.asp> (last accessed June 2013).
- 23 Data sources are as follows: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Statistical Profile: Public Schools of North Carolina," available at <http://apps.schools.nc.gov/statisticalprofile> (last accessed June 2013); North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports - Student Accounting."

- 24 The first Single School Culture cohort included the following 10 schools: Bolton Elementary, Forest Park Elementary, Hall-Woodward Elementary, Clemmons Middle, Hanes Middle, Kennedy Learning (Middle), Northwest Middle, Southeast Middle, and Walkertown Middle, and Carver High. Source: Bud Harrelson, Winston-Salem/Forsyth's program manager for school improvement.
- 25 Author's calculations based on publicly available student-achievement data. See North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "The ABCs Accountability Model: The ABCs of Public Education." The four schools featured in this chart are Forest Park Elementary, Hall-Woodward Elementary, Kennedy Learning (Middle), and Carver High. The "other schools" list includes all other North Carolina schools with less than 50 percent student proficiency in 2008, but the list excludes other schools in Winston-Salem/Forsyth. In 2008 there were 459 such schools. This chart tracked these schools through 2011, and the number of schools decreased over time, falling to 409 in 2011.
- 26 At Northwest Middle, student proficiency improved at a similar pace as other grade 6-8 schools in the state. In 2008, 62 percent of Northwest Middle students met or exceeded proficiency in tested subjects, and 64 percent of comparable schools' students did so, on average by school. In 2011, 75 percent of Northwest Middle students met or exceeded proficiency, and 76 percent of comparable schools' students did so.
- 27 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports."
- 28 Solution Tree, "Professional Learning Communities at Work TM," available at <http://www.solution-tree.com/plc-at-work> (last accessed June 2013).
- 29 Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, "Appendix B: List of Essentials," available at <http://www.wsfcs.k12.nc.us/cms/lib/NC01001395/Centricity/Domain/4/appendices.pdf> (last accessed June 2013).
- 30 For more information on these strategies, see Robert J. Marzano, Debra J. Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock, "Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement" (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001).
- 31 Data sources are as follows: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Statistical Profile"; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports - Student Accounting."
- 32 Author's calculations based on student-performance data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. See North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "The ABCs Accountability Model: The ABCs of Public Education."
- 33 The Learning Centered School approach has evolved over the past several years. Currently, Rutherford promotes the practices of the original approach plus additional effective practices as "The Artisan Teacher." More information on The Artisan Teacher is available at the Rutherford Learning Group's website, <http://www.rutherfordlg.com/> (last accessed June 2013).
- 34 For more information, see *ibid.*
- 35 Data sources are as follows: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Statistical Profile"; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports - Student Accounting."
- 36 Randy Thompson and Dorothy VanderJagt, *Wow, What A Team!: Essential Components for Successful Teaching* (Chicago: Incentive Publications, 2001).
- 37 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, "Data & Reports."
- 38 Author's calculations. In 2008 there were 20 schools with grades seven and eight. In 2012 there were 25 such schools.
- 39 Elmore and Burney, "School Variation and Systemic Instructional Improvement in Community District #2, New York City."
- 40 *Ibid.* at 19.
- 41 David K. Cohen and Heather C. Hill, *Learning Policy: When State Education Reform Works* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001); Ronald F. Ferguson and others, "How High Schools Become Exemplary."
- 42 Ronald Ferguson, "Introduction." In Ferguson and others, "How High Schools Become Exemplary."
- 43 Massachusetts' District and School Assistance Centers: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, "Accountability, Partnership, & Assistance," available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/dsac/> (last accessed June 2013); New Jersey's Regional Achievement Centers: State of New Jersey Department of Education, "Regional Achievement Centers," available at <http://www.state.nj.us/education/rac/> (last accessed June 2013).

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