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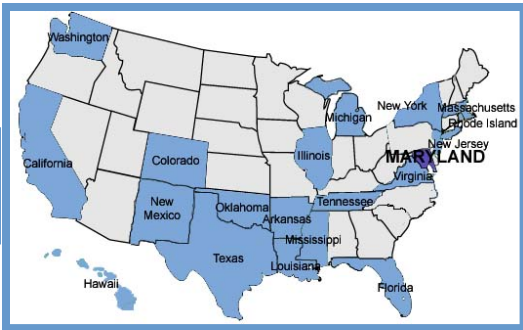
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Just for the Kids, Maryland

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

Cromwell Valley Elementary School, Baltimore County Public Schools
Mars Estates Elementary School, Baltimore County Public Schools
Millington Elementary School, Kent County Public Schools
Ocean City Elementary School, Worcester County Public Schools
Seabrook Elementary School, Prince George's County Public Schools

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Just for the Kids, Maryland

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

The Institute

The Maryland Best Practice Institute was part of a larger national research study to investigate the practices of schools that consistently outperform their peers. Research teams studied schools in 20 states to identify key practices of consistently higher performing schools in a variety of policy contexts.

In Maryland, a research team studied five consistently higher performing elementary schools to learn how they had attained and sustained their level of higher performance. Schools were identified through an in-depth analysis of academic achievement developed by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) using data publicly available from the state.

The 2005 Maryland Best Practice Institute was sponsored by the National Center for Educational Accountability and received funding from The Broad Foundation.

The Summary

The research team conducted a day-long series of focus groups with teachers, principals, and district administrators to study the classroom-, school-, and district-level practices contributing to each school's success. NCEA's Best Practice Framework provided the structure for each focus group. NCEA analyzed transcripts of the focus group discussions to prepare this summary report. This report presents a brief description of each higher performing school, followed by the Best Practice Findings in Maryland.

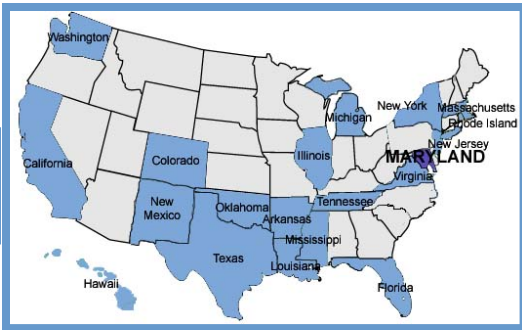
The School Identification Process

NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the Maryland State Department of Education to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in reading and mathematics in the 2002-03, 2003-04, and 2004-05 school years. The analysis included data from the third- through sixth-grade Maryland School Assessment (MSA).

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (reading and mathematics) and year (2003, 2004, and 2005) to learn which schools outperformed their demographic peers on an average of the percentage of students meeting the "Proficient" and "Advanced" standards on the state exam.¹ NCEA used a Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analysis to compare each school's percent of students meeting the standard with the percent that would be "predicted" or "typical" for a school in the state with the same demographics. The demographic and other variables used in this analysis were each school's percentage of low-income, English Language Learner (ELL), African American, Hispanic, and Asian students; and the size of the school. Normally, NCEA also prefers to take students' prior year test scores and length of enrollment in the same school into account, but that longitudinal information was not available in Maryland.

NCEA ranked each school against the elementary schools in the rest of the state based on the extent to which it outperformed its "predicted" average percent of students meeting the "Proficient" and "Advanced" standards. For example, a school that outperformed 95% of the schools in "performance

¹ This formula translates to a school receiving one point for any student who was "Proficient" and two points for any student who was also "Advanced."



Just for the Kids, Maryland

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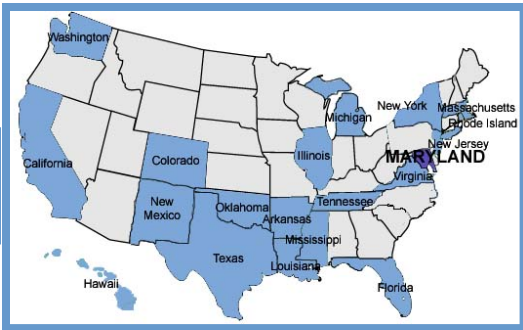
relative to predicted” in fifth-grade mathematics in 2005 would receive a percentile rank of 95 for that subject and year. The average performance for each subject area across the three years was ranked separately to create an overall percentile rank by subject. To be selected as higher performing for the purposes of this study, schools had to have overall average percentile ranks above 70² in both mathematics and reading and also meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements.

² The overall percentile rank requirements ranged from 70 to 90 depending on how many grades were tested in the school. In a state like Maryland where third through sixth grades are tested, a K-3 school has only one tested grade, whereas a K-5 school has three tested grades. Our research indicates that in such states it was considerably easier for the K-3 schools to appear higher performing, so we scaled the required overall percentile rank based on the number of grades involved in the analysis.

The Higher Performing Schools Studied

School	District	2005 Enrollment		2005 School-Wide Demographics						
		Grade Span	No. of Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian	Other	Low Income	ELL
Cromwell Valley Elementary School	Baltimore County Public Schools	K-5	428	29.4%	4.9%	62.1%	3.5%	0.1%	11.0%	0.0%
Mars Estates Elementary School	Baltimore County Public Schools	PK-5	450	61.1%	5.3%	31.8%	1.8%	0.0%	72.6%	1.4%
Millington Elementary School	Kent County Public Schools	PK-4	221	5.9%	12.7%	80.5%	0.0%	0.9%	35.8%	8.8%
Ocean City Elementary School	Worcester County Public Schools	PK-4	484	2.9%	4.1%	90.5%	1.2%	1.3%	21.2%	5.8%
Seabrook Elementary School	Prince George's County Public Schools	PK-6	307	83.1%	11.7%	2.3%	2.6%	0.3%	61.2%	3.2%

Student enrollment data and demographic data are taken from the Just for the Kids-Maryland 2005 website. The Institute was conducted in Fall 2005.



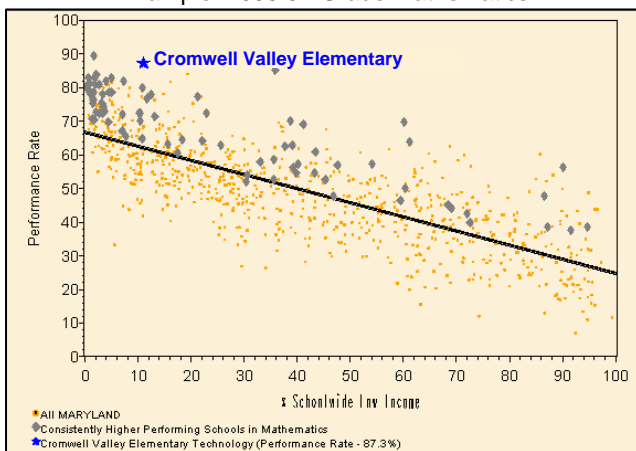
Cromwell Valley Elementary School Baltimore County Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Maryland NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Cromwell Valley Elementary School, which serves 428 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 103 elementary schools in Baltimore County Public Schools (107,701 students). Cromwell Valley's student population is 62.1% White, 29.4% African American, 4.9% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian, and 0.1% other. Within that student population, there are no English Language Learners, and 11.0% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2005 3rd Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Cromwell Valley Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in both mathematics and reading. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from 2003 to 2005. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Cromwell Valley Elementary School demonstrated overall percentile ranks of 97.0 in mathematics and 99.0 in reading.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2005 data, with the Institute occurring during the fall of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2003 and 2005.

Subject	2003 Percentile Rank			2004 Percentile Rank			2005 Percentile Rank			Overall Percentile Rank* 2003-2005
	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	
Mathematics	97	N/A	92	99	87	92	99	93	95	97.0
Reading	96	N/A	97	98	93	98	99	97	97	99.0

*In the methodology for identifying 2005 consistently higher performing elementary schools, we replaced the overall average rank (an average of individual percentile ranks) with an overall percentile rank (a percentile rank of the average of performance). For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Cromwell Valley Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.



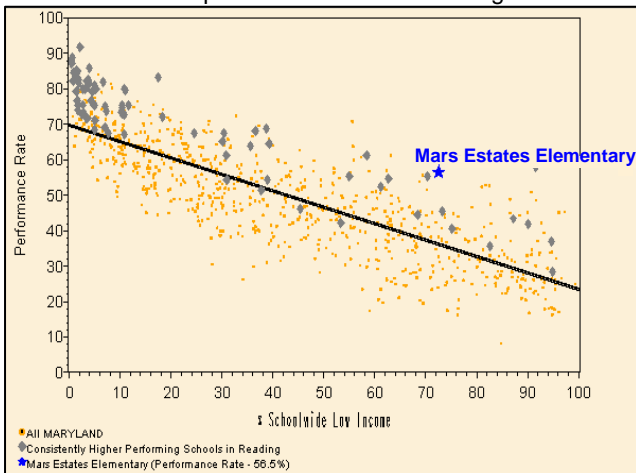
Mars Estates Elementary School Baltimore County Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Maryland NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Mars Estates Elementary School, which serves 450 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 103 elementary schools in Baltimore County Public Schools (107,701 students). Mars Estates's student population is 61.1% African American, 31.8% White, 5.3% Hispanic, and 1.8% Asian. Within this student population, 1.4% are English Language Learners, and 72.6% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2005 5th Grade Reading



Consistent Higher Performance

Mars Estates Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in both mathematics and reading. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from 2003 to 2005. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Mars Estates Elementary School demonstrated overall percentile ranks of 88.0 in mathematics and 97.0 in reading.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2005 data, with the Institute occurring during the fall of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2003 and 2005.

Subject	2003 Percentile Rank			2004 Percentile Rank			2005 Percentile Rank			Overall Percentile Rank* 2003-2005
	3	4	5	3	4	5	3	4	5	
Mathematics	89	N/A	66	90	87	59	66	84	96	88.0
Reading	90	N/A	84	96	91	79	89	93	97	97.0

*In the methodology for identifying 2005 consistently higher performing elementary schools, we replaced the overall average rank (an average of individual percentile ranks) with an overall percentile rank (a percentile rank of the average of performance). For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Mars Estates Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.



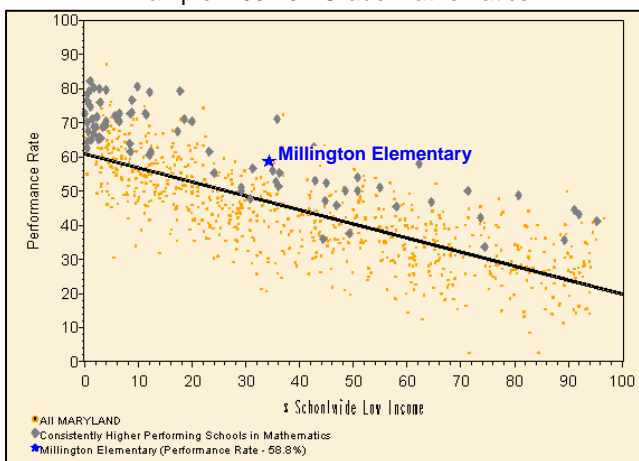
Millington Elementary School Kent County Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Maryland NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Millington Elementary School, which serves 221 pre-kindergarten through fourth-grade students, is one of four elementary schools in Kent County Public Schools (2,514 students). Millington's student population is 80.5% White, 12.7% Hispanic, 5.9% African American, and 0.9% other. Within this student population, 8.8% are English Language Learners, and 35.8% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 3rd Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Millington Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in both mathematics and reading. The analysis included all third- and fourth-grade achievement data from 2003 to 2005. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Millington Elementary School demonstrated overall percentile ranks of 97.0 in mathematics and 92.0 in reading.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2005 data, with the Institute occurring during the fall of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2003 and 2005.

Subject	2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		2005 Percentile Rank		Overall Percentile Rank* 2003-2005
	3	4	3	4	3	4	
Mathematics	93	N/A	92	96	99	95	97.0
Reading	85	N/A	91	83	94	88	92.0

*In the methodology for identifying 2005 consistently higher performing elementary schools, we replaced the overall average rank (an average of individual percentile ranks) with an overall percentile rank (a percentile rank of the average of performance). For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Millington Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.



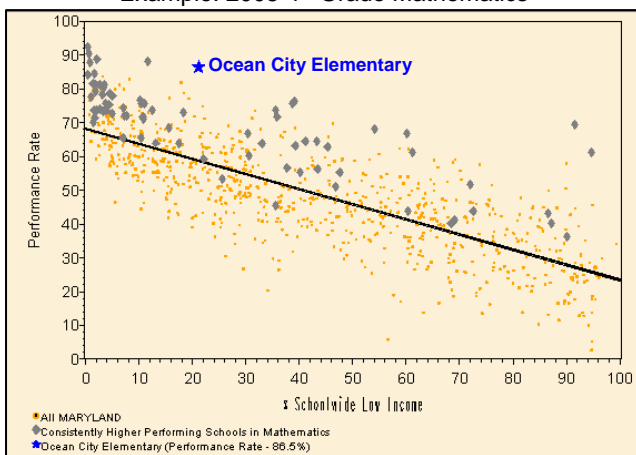
Ocean City Elementary School Worcester County Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Maryland NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Ocean City Elementary School, which serves 484 pre-kindergarten through fourth-grade students, is one of five elementary schools in Worcester County Public Schools (6,676 students). Ocean City's student population is 90.5% White, 4.1% Hispanic, 2.9% African American, 1.2% Asian, and 1.3% other. Within this student population, 5.8% are English Language Learners, and 21.2% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2005 4th Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Ocean City Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in both mathematics and reading. The analysis included all third- and fourth-grade achievement data from 2003 to 2005. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Ocean City Elementary School demonstrated overall percentile ranks of 99.0 in mathematics and 99.0 in reading.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2005 data, with the Institute occurring during the fall of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2003 and 2005.

Subject	2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		2005 Percentile Rank		Overall Percentile Rank* 2003-2005
	3	4	3	4	3	4	
Mathematics	99	N/A	99	99	98	99	99.0
Reading	99	N/A	97	99	98	98	99.0

*In the methodology for identifying 2005 consistently higher performing elementary schools, we replaced the overall average rank (an average of individual percentile ranks) with an overall percentile rank (a percentile rank of the average of performance). For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Ocean City Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.



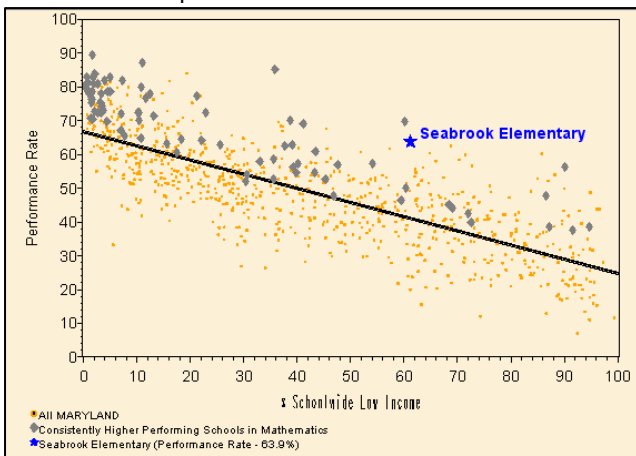
Seabrook Elementary School Prince George's County Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Maryland NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Seabrook Elementary School, which serves 307 pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is 1 of 139 elementary schools in Prince George's County Public Schools (136,095 students). Seabrook's student population is 83.1% African American, 11.7% Hispanic, 2.6% Asian, 2.3% White, and 0.3% other. Within this student population, 3.2% are English Language Learners, and 61.2% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2005 3rd Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Seabrook Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in both mathematics and reading. The analysis included all third- through sixth-grade achievement data from 2003 to 2005. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Seabrook Elementary School demonstrated overall percentile ranks of 97.0 in mathematics and 92.0 in reading.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2005 data, with the Institute occurring during the fall of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2003 and 2005.

Subject	2003 Percentile Rank				2004 Percentile Rank				2005 Percentile Rank				Overall Percentile Rank* 2003-2005	
	Grade	3	4	5	6	3	4	5	6	3	4	5		6
Mathematics		96	N/A	82	N/A	89	88	81	86	97	99	89	84	97.0
Reading		85	N/A	67	N/A	81	95	64	79	97	92	93	77	92.0

*In the methodology for identifying 2005 consistently higher performing elementary schools, we replaced the overall average rank (an average of individual percentile ranks) with an overall percentile rank (a percentile rank of the average of performance). For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Seabrook Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.



Maryland Elementary Best Practice Institute: Findings

Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework

Five organizing themes provided the structure for studying the practices of consistently higher performing schools. The themes are listed below.

1. Curriculum and Academic Goals
2. Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
3. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
4. Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
5. Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

These themes are used below to summarize the findings of this study. The themes represent the broad topics that connect best practices across different school system levels—district, school, and classroom. Together, these themes capture the primary instructional activities undertaken by school systems and represent the major content areas in which practices of higher performing school systems differ from their average-performing counterparts.

The first theme described in The JFTK Best Practice Framework forms the foundation of The Framework. Each of the other four themes rests upon the assumption that there is absolute clarity about what is to be taught and learned by grade level—pre-K-12. Therefore, Curriculum and Academic Goals forms the base of The Framework. Building upon that base, higher performing schools are deliberate about selecting and developing their human resources (Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building) and equipping all staff with evidence-based tools and strategies to deliver the curriculum (Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements). With people, tools, and strategies in place, higher performing schools regularly monitor student progress (Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data). Finally, higher performing schools are quick to respond to student achievement data—recognizing success and intervening or adjusting whenever necessary to ensure all students reach the stated standards (Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment).



Theme One: Curriculum and Academic Goals

"What is Taught and Learned"

This theme focuses on the learning target. What is it that we expect all students to know and be able to do by grade and subject? Consistently higher performing school systems have clear academic targets from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Principals and teachers understand the learning goals and understand that these goals are for all students and are non-negotiable.

Specific Maryland Findings: Curriculum and Academic Goals

- **Districts* align curriculum documents to the Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC). Essential curriculum guides and aligned benchmark assessments further clarify the district curriculum.**
 - While the term “voluntary” is found in the title of the state standards, every educator described the VSC as the “required” curriculum; the state test for which students are

*The state of Maryland is divided into 24 local education agencies (LEAs), or districts. Throughout the report, educators often refer to the district as the “county.” In this report, any reference to the county should be interpreted as the district school system level.

accountable is aligned to that curriculum. Districts extend the curriculum to ensure greater rigor in expectations for student learning. In addition, districts continually add greater clarity to the state framework through instructional support units, including pacing guides and model lessons.

- One principal credited the VSC with an increase in performance across the entire district: “Years ago when it was the Maryland Learning Outcomes, we weren’t quite as effective as a system. It was more up to individual schools and teachers to make sure we were hitting those goals. But with the Voluntary State Curriculum, and some changes that have been made at the district level, I think together they do a very nice job. ... We’re always double-checking to ensure that lessons are hitting the Voluntary State Curriculum—the indicators and objectives.”
- Teachers typically contribute to district guides through summer workshops, development meetings throughout the year, and written comments on pilot curriculum documents. Staff from Prince George’s County stated that they have contract time in the morning. Each grade level meets for two hours every week. This time is allocated primarily for curricular work, including vertical and horizontal team planning.
- One small school system without district-level curriculum leaders finds it beneficial to pool resources with other systems. As part of a consortium of nine small districts, the district shares curriculum and support resources, including benchmarks and other assessments, monitoring tools, professional development, and data systems.
- Leadership in one county by educators “whose careers have been based on writing curriculum” has brought large benefits to teaching and learning in the schools. These experts also effectively disseminate the information to principals and teachers throughout the county.
- The principal from Ocean City Elementary School stated, “We also have a very inclusive guide which helps us to focus on the VSC. It includes everything which tells you how to include the textbook, what supplementary materials you need to use, and what questions you need to ask.”

▪ **Educators continually review and refine the district curriculum based on student performance data.**

- District leaders were unanimous in citing benchmark data as the driving force behind district-level curriculum revision initiatives.
- In most higher performing schools, teachers are intensely involved in annual curriculum revisions. Most district curriculum revision processes include teachers from various grade levels and content backgrounds. Teachers expressed appreciation for the relationship between constant revision of the curriculum and student achievement. As one teacher said, “The criticism is that we exposed [students to the material], but we didn’t really teach for mastery, and now the curriculum reflects that change.”
- One principal found that the VSC was an impetus for curriculum revision in that district: “For math, in particular, the current materials that were in use were pre-VSC. When you see that there’s not a match between your current program and the Voluntary State Curriculum, then clearly revision is needed, and that’s the process that we’re in now.”
- An educator from Millington Elementary School stated, “One of the things I think is really critical [to our success] is that teachers have interaction with the curriculum and feel ownership of it. They feel like it is really theirs; and so for me, curriculum is something that we use all of the time. We discuss it and it becomes a part of what we’re doing.”



Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

"Selecting and Developing Leaders and Teachers"

This second theme focuses on the selection and development of a school system's most precious commodity—people. Once the academic goals of the system are clear, the leaders and teachers are selected and given professional development opportunities to make these goals a reality for every learner in the system.

Specific Maryland Findings: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

- **Districts actively develop leadership capacity among new and aspiring administrators through formal or informal mentors.**
 - One district is particularly committed to developing the talent that already lies within the system. This district has an Aspiring Leaders program through which courses and internship opportunities are available to teachers interested in becoming administrators.
 - In another district, the superintendent seeks to hire principals who have been successful in other leadership roles in the district.
 - One district's program for building principal capacity consists largely of a veteran principal's role as a mentor to newer leaders. According to that principal, "I'm on my eighth assistant principal, so 50 percent of the [district's current] principals have been my assistant principals."
- **Facing staffing challenges due to high turnover, districts and schools approach recruiting creatively.**
 - At least two teachers mentioned their respective principals' willingness to use local funds to "buy teachers" to maintain manageable class sizes. That is, given discretionary funds, the principals use the funds for new teacher salaries. Two teachers noted that their districts "front-load" pay as a recruiting incentive for new teachers.
 - Principals pointed out that they are beneficiaries of the teacher preparation and certification programs in nearby colleges and universities. One district scouts for prospective teachers via its Great Expectations program. As described by a principal representing that district, "A school could hire a PDS [professional development school] teacher mid-year. They would work the rest of the year in the classroom of a certified teacher; and then in September, if our numbers warranted hiring this individual, we would keep them."
 - Another benefit of district relationships with professional development schools is the effective communication of needs. For example, as one superintendent recalled, "The interns came to us—they were juniors or seniors in college—and they didn't have any phonics instruction background, and we told their supervisors. Now they have it, so they did listen in that area."
 - Given the fact that teachers are more likely to stay with the school if they are successful during their first three years of teaching there, leaders note that they give special attention to extra supports for new teachers.
 - One principal noted, "This year it was interesting because we hired a number of our instructional assistants who had been in the building in a different capacity. What was nice there is that they knew the system, we knew them, and that helped. The other one that we

have depended on, especially at our middle- and high-school levels, has been our resident teacher program, which is someone who has a four-year degree in another area who goes through specific training and comes in as a resident teacher, especially to fill in our math and science positions. We've had some people who have been very successful."

- **Mentor teachers support new teachers and focus on curricular and instructional issues.**

- One principal said that all new teachers are required to attend new teacher induction prior to the first week of school. "They also have two other meetings that occur in the summer that are more curriculum-based. One was language arts, and that was three days. There was a mathematics one that was [also] three days. They are optional, but teachers are strongly encouraged to attend and [are] paid for all three of those things."
- Though all districts do offer some formal support, the most useful assistance for new teachers in most districts is the willingness of principals and veteran teachers to provide practical support. This support often includes giving new teachers some opportunity for participating in campus efforts to develop and align curricula.
- Principals often serve as informal mentors for teachers. For example, a few principals meet with teachers before planned observations in order to clarify their expectations and allow teachers to be as prepared as possible. According to one principal, "[Teachers] come to me with a draft of their lesson plan. We want to set people up for success. Somebody taught me to do that many years ago; it was a nice thing done for me, and I think it's a nice thing to do for other people."

- **Faculty use vertical and horizontal teacher collaboration as embedded professional development opportunities often centered on the alignment of curriculum and instruction.**

- One principal explained that the entire school faculty is taking the same course to learn how to turn frequent testing into a positive learning experience. "We're looking closer at formative kinds of assessment in the classroom—how you utilize that to encourage kids and not beat them over the head with it. [It's] assessment *for* learning, rather than assessment *of* learning. The teachers seem to be really into it."
- One superintendent lauded the role of principals in that district for maintaining continuity in the school despite high teacher turnover. According to the superintendent, the principal conscientiously meets with grade-level teams during their frequent, planned collaborative meetings. The principal participates in those meetings, often suggesting areas for emphasis, assisting in the process of "tweaking" the collaborative planning structure in order to make it a sustainable, repeatable part of that school's culture. The superintendent noted the benefit of having enough momentum among teachers to carry over into a new principal's tenure at that school, adding that building capacity among teachers not only affects teacher success, but new principal success as well.
- Aligning instruction to the curriculum is a key component of new teacher orientation and professional development. To monitor the delivery of the stated curriculum and the instructional practices of new teachers, mentors observe their classrooms frequently. Mentors increase new teachers' awareness of the alignment of the content of the grade level with classes both before and after it. A number of teachers noted that the faculties of their respective schools meet monthly or at other regular intervals to verify that everyone is on track and aligned with the curriculum. In one school, teachers and principals meet every Wednesday evening to coordinate schedules for checking on newer teachers, again to ensure that all instruction is aligned with the curriculum.
- To encourage teachers to help each other build capacity through collaboration, principals provide common planning times and schedule regular meetings for teachers. One principal

described a plan for ensuring that teachers work together across grade levels: “I’ve set up a cluster-meeting kind of concept that we have at least once a month so [teachers] get opportunities to converse and be with some of the other grade levels, too. They make friends that way and get ideas from other teachers.” Vertical collaboration also figures prominently in another principal’s teacher-support schema. In that school, mentors often include teachers from other grade levels.

- Another principal reported that even faculty meetings are used as capacity-building time: “Every staff meeting is professional development time. We don’t do business during that time. That’s done by email or by other ways.”



Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

“The Right Stuff—Time and Tools”

This theme focuses on the “things” that higher performing school systems use—the arrangement of time, the instructional resources and materials, technology, etc. Strong instructional leaders and highly qualified teachers need evidence-based tools and resources to reach high standards with every learner.

Specific Maryland Findings: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- **Districts seek and select instructional programs that are tightly aligned to the academic objectives of the curriculum. Student performance data also inform program selections and evaluations. Commercial instructional programs provide a base of instructional resources that districts and schools supplement to better align with the curriculum.**
 - One principal noted that publishers of instructional programs have aligned their products so closely with the VSC in language arts that the district can depend on the materials provided with those programs. For mathematics, however, “the curriculum materials don’t fully address all the areas of the Voluntary State Curriculum, so there needed to be lots of adaptations, changes, and modifications in order to make sure that we really were addressing the Voluntary State Curriculum.”
 - District leaders look for textbooks and instructional programs that are aligned with the state standards and with the district’s own goals and needs. One superintendent said, “We also look at our data. We have a textbook adoption cycle, but, given the No Child Left Behind regulations, we also look at our student performance. We change what we’re adopting or what our budget priorities are based on what our student needs are. We’ve seen that happen the last three years much more than it has in the past.”
 - Interviewees reported that national initiatives are making it easier to find programs and textbooks that meet their needs because publishers are producing materials that meet those national criteria. A superintendent explained, “If we don’t find a product, we wait. We will often ask publishers, ‘What are you doing to address X or Y need?’ We find out when publishers are coming out with products that may better address the problem.”
 - Assessments for measuring the effectiveness of instructional programs include STAR (the *Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading*) and DIBELS (the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills*), and standardized tests, such as the Maryland Formative Online Benchmark Assessments. Educators stressed that they do not wait for summative data,

but constantly refer to formative assessments, looking “every couple of weeks to see how kids are doing.” For example, in one school teachers created unit tests for the Algebra I course. “We set up a data system so that our teachers could record and do an analysis to see either by child or by a skill grouping if there is a deficit and what we can do about it.”

- Most district and school leaders agreed that packaged instructional programs could be extremely helpful in teaching the curriculum, though one superintendent was careful to separate the two: “We look at programs we are using and consider the programs just to be support materials. We’re careful to send the message that the program is not curriculum.”
 - Focus group participants noted that they almost always supplement the adopted instructional programs with their own specialized materials.
 - Another principal pointed out the benefits of acting on local data to supplement a district-selected program. “For us, a lot of those are generated either by teachers or school improvement teams looking at data and saying, ‘What are our needs?’” The principal recalled an instance several years ago, when the school had adopted the *Everyday Math* program. Although the program “has been terrific,” according to the principal, “there are some holes.” In response, teachers identified supplemental materials to fill those gaps.
- **Higher performing schools have a clear understanding that the instructional program is not the curriculum, but rather a tool for delivering the stated curriculum. Educators make continual adjustments to instructional programs and practices when student performance data indicate a need.**
- When one principal’s school determined that its adopted reading program was not as effective as they had hoped, the principal had all of the school’s third- through sixth-grade teachers trained to use the program’s pull-out intervention materials (*Soar to Success*) as the primary in-class program. “The Reading Director went along with me, and it worked. The kids’ scores started rising,” the principal reported, adding, “Sometimes it happens that way. You just have to take a chance and move.”
 - When asked how they respond when student performance data show areas of needed improvement, one principal stated, “Then we go back and look at our curriculum. So if we’re finding that children aren’t scoring well in an area, then we know we have to ... look at the curriculum because we must have a weak way of addressing that [learning objective] and we go back and do that [adjust]. Because we’ve never found a program that will do everything that we need it to do. And, at least in Worcester County, we don’t want teachers relying on any book as their curriculum, so they have to move beyond that.”
 - Another educator noted that, “There are a number of reasons a product [instructional program] may or may not give you the results you want right away. We all know the obvious reasons, but the less obvious reason to the general public is the staff development that we devoted to the implementation of the particular program. Did we devote enough time? Was our staff development effective? It’s not just necessarily that we didn’t get the student results we wanted because the materials were bad.”



Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

"Knowing the Learners and the Numbers"

After clearly identifying what is to be taught and learned by grade and subject and ensuring that the schools are equipped with the staff and the tools to successfully deliver the curriculum, the school system then asks and answers an important question: "How are we going to know if students learned what we said they would learn?"

Specific Maryland Findings: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

- **Districts have data systems to manage student information and assessment data.**
 - One district collects and manages extensive data on all of their students. According to the superintendent of that system, "We were looking for some type of data management system that would eliminate the 500 pieces of paper and 'I've got to look here and here and here.' We've gone with a system that scores our benchmarks and ties it to the indicators. So teachers can pull up their class, pull up a student, etc. We give benchmarks every six weeks. There's a lot of time teachers are spending in scoring and charting. They can look at each test by item, by student, [and/or] by indicator, which we don't get at the state level."
 - Other systems mentioned by district administrators include *Data Tracks*, which affords teachers the ability to access data within minutes of scanning students' tests through the system; and *Cognos*, which is used for reporting data to meet No Child Left Behind requirements. The *Cognos* system proved to be too expensive for district-wide implementation in one district, but department chairpersons are able to export *Cognos* data to Microsoft *Excel*, thereby giving teachers access to the data.
 - One principal offered a glimpse of the benefits derived from a student information system called *Power School*: "[It includes] online grade books to which we can offer full parent access if parents sign up for that. They can log on and check the grades teachers are putting in their grade books."
- **District, school, and classroom benchmark assessments are used to continually monitor student learning.**
 - All of the districts represented at the Maryland Best Practice Institute provide students with regular practice writing Brief Constructed Responses (BCRs). Those systems have explicitly included BCRs in their curriculum maps, so time is allotted for both the writing and the review of those responses. According to one superintendent, these BCRs are also used to monitor the curriculum: "Engagement is hard to measure. We have both extended and brief constructed responses where students are writing and expressing how they understand something in a more conceptual way, scored by panels of people."
 - A teacher attributed the school's success in reading to a particularly popular practice that focused on the use of BCRs: "Students have to turn their writing in and we then turn it over to the principal. Students will get their piece back with comments from their teachers and the principal. The principal will even read or talk about the kids' writing over the intercom, which [the kids] love."
 - Teachers added that they also use classroom assessments such as DIBELS (the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills*), phonics screening, and unit and chapter assessments provided as part of packaged instructional programs. One district leader appreciated how DIBELS allows teachers to see even small improvements: "It's pretty

depressing when you're not seeing the kind of growth you'd like to see. But with this assessment you can see the growth. You can see that your teaching has made a difference, that every couple of weeks the kids are moving along."

- Superintendents mentioned a number of other assessments being used in their districts, such as the *Scholastic Reading Inventory* (SRI). For mathematics, one district is using a program called *Yearly ProgressPro* by McGraw Hill, "which is an assessment tool that's given intermittently, and we can track the progress of children with certain math skills. Both of those data programs will go into the *Performance Matters* system, our data management program."
- Principals talked about the Maryland Formative Online Benchmark Assessments, formerly known as the Princeton Review. These computer-based assessments, aligned to Maryland's VSC, are administered four times throughout the school year. Principals were concerned, however, that the assessments did not test the same indicators each time, precluding a dependable measure of growth in specific areas over the course of the school year.

▪ **Data from district and state assessments forge the foundation for all decision making.**

- Though districts and schools employ different means for extracting usable information from the available data, all attending district leaders, principals, and teachers provided examples of applications for that data. The interviewees' discussions revealed that they based every decision on interpretations of the data (e.g., curriculum development and revision, staff selection, professional development activities, intervention needs, and selection of instructional programs).
- One superintendent summarized a common practice among the districts at the Best Practice Institute: "Every June we take all of our data and have an assessment summit. We work with the principals to examine those data with all of the executive team, supervisors, and so on. Then principals do the same thing with their school improvement teams, looking at their campus data." Another district leader added, "We're really looking at data more than we ever have in our whole lives."
- Though most district leaders cited the importance of quantitative data for making instructional decisions, one superintendent revealed a sophisticated and respectful understanding of data's utility. When talking about the common expression "data informs instruction," the superintendent explained, "Data doesn't necessarily inform instruction. It helps us identify areas of need. And sometimes even that has to be examined carefully, because the data might tell us that children aren't achieving in this area. But it may not tell us anything about *why*. And it doesn't direct us to what intervention strategies are the best. ... Again, the key is quality dialogue—talking about what the data show—and then getting your experts in that content area or grade levels to really talk about what interventions you are doing, what doesn't seem to be working and why, or maybe the data doesn't even reflect those interventions. We don't want to make shallow decisions based on numbers."

▪ **School leaders frequently observe teachers to monitor instructional practice and curriculum delivery as a supplement to monitoring assessment data for instructional effectiveness.**

- In addition to using assessment data to track teacher and school efficacy, district leaders and principals visit classrooms often to observe each teacher's instructional practices. In one school, the principal occasionally co-teaches lessons. Other principals expect to see objectives and standards listed on the board or lesson outlines displayed on teachers' desks.
- Teachers described the documents and activities through which their principals evaluate their performance. Most teachers said that observations are both formal and informal. At

some schools, pre-observation conferences in which the teachers and principals discuss expectations and goals precede formal observations. One participating teacher had been observed a total of nine times during the previous school year. Of those nine visits, four were unannounced visits by district leaders. One school, according to the principal, was in the process of using portfolios in the teacher evaluation process.

- One principal noted the importance of “daily monitoring of instruction.” He stated, “You have to ensure that what is available is being used and taught.”



Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

“Ensuring All Children Learn”

The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance: “What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and skills we said they would learn?” Higher performing school systems have *pyramids of intervention* that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted.

Specific Maryland Findings: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

- **Higher performing schools address instructional and learning needs by investing in available resources such as time, additional staff, and area experts. All available staff help address student learning needs.**
 - Investments in student achievement require the commitment of district leaders, principals, and teachers, and often involve extended school days, extended-year programs, and fuller use of school staff during the school day. Principals devote significant time to involving parents in intervention strategies, as many school-wide intervention efforts are greatly enhanced through parental support.
 - One principal, after being hired at a low-performing school, invested significantly in extra staff. “I had something like \$300,000 - \$400,000 to work with, and what I did was buy extra staff members. We have a formula to determine how many teachers you get. I bought additional staff members to bring class sizes down. Instead of 25 or 30 or 35 [students], I might have 15 or 20. Some of the parents said, ‘Shh, don’t tell anybody. We have our own private school here!’”
 - One principal listed several strategies for improving campus performance: an extensive after-school program that is made possible through a 21st Century School Grant; the *Accelerated Reader* program; and a period of time during which students have silent reading and teachers conduct intervention activities. The principal added a strategy that requires cooperation among stakeholders to succeed: “We mobilize any moving body in our building to take intervention groups. Basically, anybody who moves—except our school secretary, because we need someone to hold down the fort while we’re all doing this. So I work with a group of boys. We also employ volunteers, and we have a few really terrific volunteers who come in and work with our students as well.”
- **Higher performing schools carefully identify the target of intervention. If student learning problems exist within a classroom, the teacher is the focus of intervention. If learning problems exist across classrooms in a common academic area, the curriculum and instructional resources are the objects of intervention.**
 - At the district level, data are the primary indicators of any need for teacher intervention. One superintendent pointed out that, using assessment data, “We can break it down and

split the children who are not proficient into two groups of data. We can look at the number that are really scoring at the bottom. When you see that, you know there is a clear instructional problem—something is not being taught. We use data to identify teachers who are having problems with instruction.”

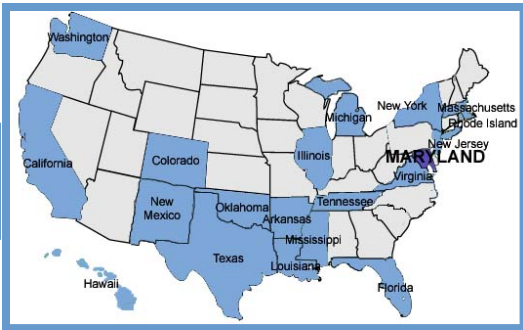
- When asked how districts act upon evaluations indicating that instructional programs are ineffective, one superintendent responded, “We go back and look at our curriculum. Because, the program isn’t the curriculum; the program is what supports you as you’re teaching the curriculum.”

- **Administrators and mentor teachers are a primary source of support for struggling teachers.**

- Teachers from the higher performing schools cited growth plans as the most common method for dealing with ineffective teaching practices. With the principals’ assistance, struggling teachers develop plans for addressing the specific areas in need of improvement. Progress on those plans is monitored, and struggling teachers expect more frequent observations as well.
- Recognizing that some teacher performance problems do not always stem from poor instructional preparation, principals include other types of supports as part of a growth plan. According to one principal, “We might send a struggling teacher to another school to observe, then talk with that teacher afterwards. Then we may go to someone within the school and ask them to help the teacher out, even if it is just emotional support.”
- In a district with fewer resources, teachers voluntarily offer assistance to their colleagues. As one teacher said, “I know that one teacher had some behavior difficulties, and she worked with the counselors and was allowed to go watch other teachers. People flock to each other.”

- **Educators use student performance data to determine the need for instructional interventions.**

- Schools use a number of different strategies to identify and help struggling students. In some schools, teachers have regular meetings during which they list students who are at risk, report on the interventions they have tried, and discuss other interventions that may work with those students. One school has a Student Support Team that identifies students in need of further testing and modifications for learning.
- Some teachers and principals rely on formal screening tools to identify areas where students need improvement. For example, some schools use fluency and phonics screening tools and then begin assisting students with programs like *Reading Recovery*, *SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phoneme Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words)*, Scholastic’s *Fluency Formula* (a 15-minute-a-day supplemental program), and the Scott Foresman *Early Reading Intervention* program.
- Schools offer before- and after-school tutoring and extended-year programs, use adult volunteer mentors and gifted student mentors, and stay in frequent contact with parents.



Maryland Elementary Best Practice Institute: Conclusion

Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework

The NCEA analysis identified five consistently higher performing elementary schools in Maryland to participate in a Best Practice Institute. District, school, and classroom representatives from each school participated in a series of five focus groups organized by the themes of The JFTK Best Practice Framework. Summaries of the findings of those focus groups are presented below by theme.

The Findings

Curriculum and Academic Goals

The five higher performing schools at the Maryland Best Practice Institute used written and detailed district curriculum based on the Maryland Voluntary State Curriculum. The developed essential curriculum guides and formative benchmark assessments to assist in the delivery of that curriculum. Finally, they continually reviewed and refined curriculum materials based on student performance data.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Internal leadership development programs produced instructional leaders particularly well-suited to individual schools. Professional development was based on student performance data and was enhanced by formal and informal mentoring processes. Higher performing schools cited collaboration among teachers as a “key” factor in capacity building and instructional support.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Districts selected instructional programs and practices through thoughtful, purposeful processes to ensure alignment with the district curriculum. District leaders, principals, and teachers were clear that even tightly aligned instructional programs were simply tools to address the curricular goals and standards, not the curriculum itself. Due to their demonstrated performance levels, higher performing schools enjoyed some flexibility from their districts in implementing instructional programs.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

*In most districts, a shift in attitudes about assessment was evident, both at the school and the district levels. One school’s entire faculty was working through a course that emphasized the use of assessment **for** learning, as opposed to assessment **of** learning. While the sophistication of the systems used to store and share data varied widely, the use of the data did not. Educators described student assessment as ongoing and continuous as they pored over data to determine student learning needs. Regular Brief Constructed Responses provided students with the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and receive formative feedback on their progress toward the academic objectives.*

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

The schools used all available educators to address student learning needs. Through assessment data, schools and districts were careful to identify the appropriate target for intervention: individual students, teachers, the curriculum, or the instructional program.

Next Steps

NCEA's state-study protocol assumes that the state framework of best practices will be built based on a three-year study of consistently higher performing and average-performing schools at the elementary-school level (Year One), middle-school level (Year Two), and high-school level (Year Three). Based on this protocol, NCEA's next step will be to leverage the results of this Elementary Best Practice Institute to conduct a full study of higher performing elementary schools in Maryland, including a comparison with average-performing schools, in order to distinguish unique practices of the higher performing schools. Then, NCEA should continue to build upon those findings by conducting the study of consistently higher performing and average-performing middle and high schools using the same framework of best practices.

One of the dangers of studying consistently higher performing schools is drawing conclusions based on a single school example. To avoid this danger, the conclusions for the JFTK-Maryland Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005, focus on a description of the practices that are most consistent across the higher performing schools in this study. Without a comparison group of average-performing schools, we cannot highlight only those practices that were found to be systemically different in the higher performing schools as a group. Therefore, the conclusions from the JFTK-Maryland Elementary Best Practice Institute have also been informed by the findings from a much larger body of schools studied (300+ across five years and twenty states), which included average-performing comparison schools, to help determine meaning in the context of Maryland.