

**National Center for
Educational
Accountability**

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Just for the Kids, New Mexico Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

Booker T. Washington Elementary School, Las Cruces Public Schools
Chimayo Elementary School, Española Public Schools
Dolores Gonzales Elementary School, Albuquerque Public Schools
Enos García Elementary School, Taos Municipal Schools
Katherine Gallegos Elementary School, Los Lunas Schools

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Just for the Kids, New Mexico

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

The Institute

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

The Summary

Researchers 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. The report presents a brief description of each higher performing school, followed by the Best Practice Findings in New Mexico.

The School Identification Process

NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the New Mexico Public Education Department to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in mathematics and language arts in the 2002-03 and 2003-04 school years. The analysis included data from the fourth-grade Standards-Based Assessment (SBA).

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (mathematics and language arts) and year (2003 and 2004) to learn which schools outperformed their demographic peers on the percentage of students meeting the "Advanced" standard on the state exam. NCEA used a Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analysis to compare each school's percent of students meeting the standard with the percent that was "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 English Language Learner (ELL), African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian students; the size of the school; the percentage of low-income students in the grade¹; and the percentage of students tested in the subject. 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 New Mexico.

NCEA ranked each school against the elementary schools in the rest of the state based on the extent to which it outperformed its "predicted" percent of students meeting the "Advanced" standard. For example, a school that outperformed 86% of the schools in "performance relative to predicted" in fourth-

¹ NCEA normally uses the percentage of low-income students within the school to make this determination. Since these data were not available in New Mexico, NCEA used the percentage of tested low-income students for each grade level.



Just for the Kids, New Mexico

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

grade mathematics in 2003 received a percentile rank of 86 for that subject and year. These ranks were averaged separately for each subject across the three years to produce an overall average performance rank by subject. To be selected as higher performing for the purposes of this study, schools had to have overall average percentile ranks above 75 in mathematics and language arts and meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements.

The Higher Performing Schools Studied

School	District	2004 Enrollment		2004 School-Wide Demographics						
		Grade Span	No. of Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Native American	Other	Low Income*	ELL
Booker T. Washington Elementary School	Las Cruces Public Schools	PK-5	460	1.3%	97.0%	1.3%	0.4%	0.0%	100.0%	10.2%
Chimayo Elementary School	Española Public Schools	K-6	273	0.4%	98.9%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	83.7%	64.5%
Dolores Gonzales Elementary School	Albuquerque Public Schools	PK-5	440	1.1%	95.2%	2.7%	0.9%	0.1%	100.0%	30.9%
Enos García Elementary School	Taos Municipal Schools	4-5	228	0.9%	75.9%	15.4%	7.5%	0.4%	100.0%	7.0%
Katherine Gallegos Elementary School	Los Lunas Schools	PK-4	526	1.0%	54.8%	32.1%	11.4%	0.8%	49.0%	5.9%

Student enrollment and demographic data are taken from the Just for the Kids-NM 2004 website. The Institute was conducted in Summer 2005.

*As noted on page 2, the low-income data represent the percentage of tested students at the given grade level. This number does not represent school-wide demographics in this report.



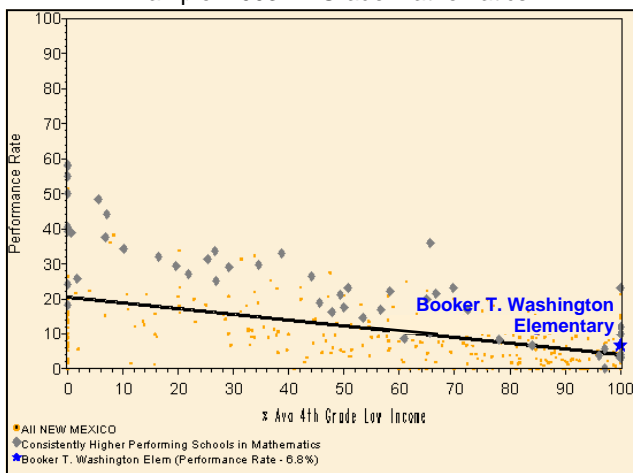
Booker T. Washington Elementary School Las Cruces Public Schools

Just for the Kids, New Mexico NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Booker T. Washington Elementary School, which serves 460 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 24 elementary schools in Las Cruces Public Schools (22,512 students). Washington's population is 97.0% Hispanic, 1.3% African American, 1.3% White, and 0.4% Native American. Within this student population, 10.2% are English Language Learners. Of tested fourth-grade students, 100% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2003 4th Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Booker T. Washington Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and language arts in an analysis that included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2003 and 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Booker T. Washington Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 81.3 in mathematics and 83.0 in language arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer 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	Overall Avg. Rank* 2003-2004
Grade	4	4	
Mathematics	86	72	81.3
Language Arts	85	79	83.0

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.



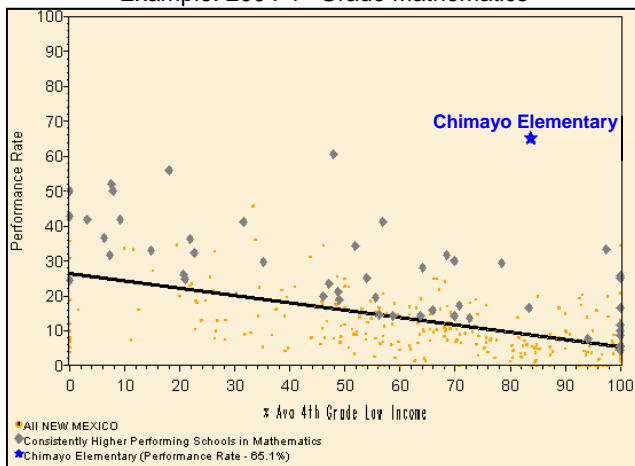
Chimayo Elementary School Española Public Schools

Just for the Kids, New Mexico NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Chimayo Elementary School, which serves 273 kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is 1 of 12 elementary schools in Española Public Schools (4,551 students). Chimayo's population is 98.9% Hispanic, 0.7% White, and 0.4% African American. Within this student population, 64.5% are English Language Learners. Of tested fourth-grade students, 83.7% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Chimayo Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and language arts in an analysis that included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2003 and 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Chimayo Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 82.4 in mathematics and 83.2 in language arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer 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	Overall Avg. Rank* 2003-2004
Grade	4	4	
Mathematics	60	99	82.4
Language Arts	62	99	83.2

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.



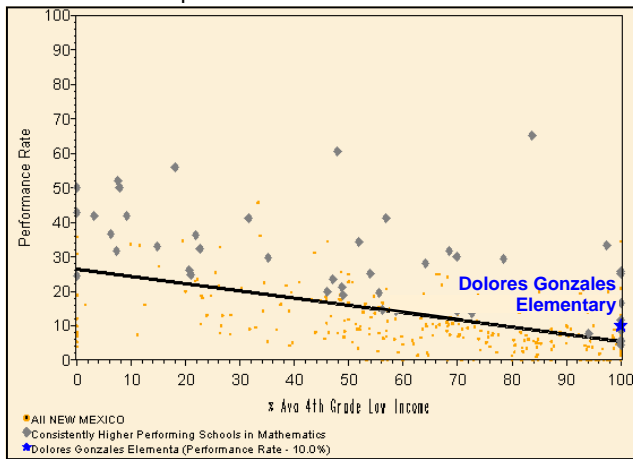
Dolores Gonzales Elementary School Albuquerque Public Schools

Just for the Kids, New Mexico NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Dolores Gonzales Elementary School, which serves 440 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 83 elementary schools in Albuquerque Public Schools (89,870 students). Gonzales's population is 95.2% Hispanic, 2.7% White, 1.1% African American, 0.9% Native American, and 0.1% other. Within this student population, 30.9% are English Language Learners. Of tested fourth-grade students, 100% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Dolores Gonzales Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and language arts in an analysis that included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2003 and 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Dolores Gonzales Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 80.8 in mathematics and 78.3 in language arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer 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	Overall Avg. Rank* 2003-2004
Grade	4	4	
Mathematics	79	84	80.8
Language Arts	79	77	78.3

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.



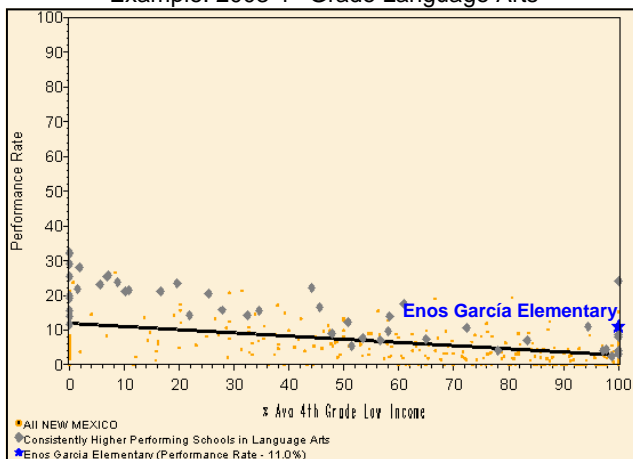
Enos García Elementary School Taos Municipal Schools

Just for the Kids, New Mexico NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Enos García Elementary School, which serves 228 fourth- and fifth-grade students, is one of four elementary schools in Taos Municipal Schools (3,219 students). García's population is 75.9% Hispanic, 15.4% White, 7.5% Native American, 0.9% African American, and 0.4% other. Within this student population, 7.0% are English Language Learners. Of tested fourth-grade students, 100% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2003 4th Grade Language Arts



Consistent Higher Performance

Enos García Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and language arts in an analysis that included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2003 and 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Enos García Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 79.1 in mathematics and 85.2 in language arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer 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	Overall Avg. Rank* 2003-2004
Grade	4	4	
Mathematics	95	63	79.1
Language Arts	98	72	85.2

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.



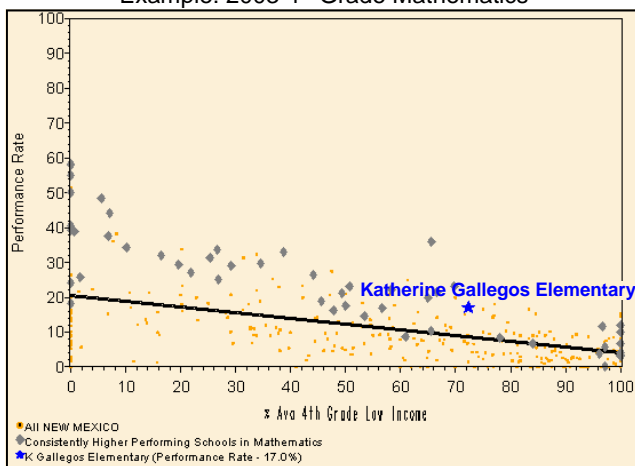
Katherine Gallegos Elementary School Los Lunas Schools

Just for the Kids, New Mexico NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Katherine Gallegos Elementary School, which serves 526 pre-kindergarten through fourth-grade students, is one of eight elementary schools in Los Lunas Schools (8,466 students). Gallegos's population is 54.8% Hispanic, 32.1% White, 11.4% Native American, 1.0% African American, and 0.8% other. Within this student population, 5.9% are English Language Learners. Of tested fourth-grade students, 49.0% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2003 4th Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Katherine Gallegos Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and language arts in an analysis that included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2003 and 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Katherine Gallegos Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 83.4 in mathematics and 77.4 in language arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2003-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer 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	Overall Avg. Rank* 2003-2004
Grade	4	4	
Mathematics	90	77	83.4
Language Arts	91	64	77.4

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.



New Mexico 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.

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 New Mexico Findings: Curriculum and Academic Goals

- **Teacher teams “unwrap” the state standards through collaborative processes. As a result, they are able to clarify documents such as curriculum maps and aligned assessments that ensure vertical alignment of expectations.**
 - For the higher performing schools in New Mexico, curriculum development is an ongoing process that includes teachers, principals, and central office staff. Most interviewees stated

that the process begins with an in-depth examination of the state standards. The first step in that examination is “unwrapping” the standards. The interviewees used the term “unwrapping” to refer to the process of breaking down the learning tasks connected to each standard. One teacher said of the process, “There is a lot of collaboration that takes place within grade levels, and then you meet across grades to really take whatever [the state standards] say and get past the wording and semantics and really say, ‘What does this mean?’”

- Many of the higher performing schools began the process of unwrapping standards and building curriculum, with their districts more recently moving to develop and adopt curriculum maps district-wide. One district administrator said, “The person before us had said that the standards and benchmarks were our curriculum guide, and we fought that for a long time. ... So we are in the process now of establishing a framework for our curriculum guides using the standards and benchmarks as the framework for that.”
- Engaging teachers and principals in curriculum development has the added benefit of revealing district-wide inconsistencies. When teachers from different schools worked together, one superintendent discovered “that a lot of teachers were teaching to a [lower] grade level; they were teaching second-grade standards, and it was a third-grade classroom.”
- District leaders collect information from schools about which standards should be most strongly emphasized in the curriculum. After receiving documents from a number of schools serving a variety of student populations, district leaders identify the standards appearing on most lists. These standards become the district’s “power standards” and earn prominent treatment in the resulting curriculum.
- Unwrapping standards and developing curriculum is a long process. One principal said that the process took three years at his school. During this developmental process, emerging student assessment data were also used to inform the work.
- Schools and districts bring in outside expertise when necessary. At least two principals mentioned using the same service provider to facilitate the curriculum-development process at their schools. One of these principals noted that it was necessary to undertake the major unwrapping and curriculum writing efforts during the summer, “because there really is not time during the school year.” However, school and district leaders also reported engaging in curriculum work throughout the school year, whenever possible.
- During the developmental process, interviewees stressed the importance of aligning curriculum and building curriculum maps that outline grade-level expectations. Teachers and schools work together across the district in a cooperative effort to accomplish these tasks.
- One superintendent engaged aspiring principal candidates and their professor at a local university to develop an aligned core-area curriculum for the district. As a part of this professional development course, the professor had her students develop a vertically aligned K-12 curriculum, which was later distributed to the district’s schools for feedback. Another semester, the superintendent taught a university class that involved the same cohort of students: “And I said, ‘Now we are going to create aligned assessments.’ So this same group of people that had developed the core area curriculum drafted core area assessments.”
- District administrators warned that the ongoing work to further clarify the state standards into support documents like curriculum guides can be misinterpreted as too prescriptive. One administrator noted, “Our goal is to have a consistent literacy framework across the district. There will still be some flexibility and autonomy in terms of the way teachers teach, but they’ll be responsible for the same concepts and the same skills.” Another district

representative recounted the challenges of developing and enacting a centralized curriculum: “There is always a tension between conformity across the district—I call it consistency; they call it conformity—and site-based management. So we were way on this end at one point, and I am trying to pull them over, which is really a painful process. ... I work with the union a lot; ... we co-develop whenever we can. ... [The union representative] will come in and say, ‘You can’t tell teachers how to teach.’ ... I don’t want to tell teachers how to teach; I want to know how kids are learning and know when they are getting there. So that has been more effort than the old way of curriculum development, which was my team going off and developing it and just taking it back to the teachers.”

- **Teachers regularly review and refine district curriculum.**
 - As schools learn from their data, they communicate that knowledge to district leaders, who are then able to revise the “power standards.” The updated power standards are then used to revise the curriculum.
 - Teacher involvement in curriculum revision is time consuming, as acknowledged by one principal: “There’s one day a week—on a Wednesday—when they have 45 minutes. But these teachers, on their own, have decided that they are going to spend lunch together, and that is when they do it, every day at lunch. As professionals, they felt it was important that they take the time and do this, and they spend their lunch together in support of this effort.”
- **Schools’ Educational Plans for Student Success (EPSS) drive budgetary decisions.**
 - Several district administrators explained that educators use the strategic plan as a screening tool to determine which programs to implement and how to allocate funds. One district administrator indicated, “We have more foundations than any place I have ever seen. ... I have been blessed with a bulldog of a director of instruction. ... I’ll often refer them to her. She will say how it meets our EPSS. She has no qualms about saying, ‘These are the three areas we have identified, and does it fit into these? If it doesn’t fit into these, thank you for the offer.’ So we have been able to stay focused that way. ... If it fits into our EPSS, we will be glad to look at it.”
 - Another administrator described how site-based budgeting was also helping to force tighter links with the EPSS: “A lot of organizations now are charging for their services; and now that we are doing site-based budgets, principals are thinking, ‘This is going to cost me some money; I don’t think it really fits into my EPSS plan.’”
 - Another administrator described the budgeting shift: “We have a formula that floats money from the district. We use the same formula to float money to the schools. ... So I’ve seen schools in the last several years make very thoughtful choices that they wouldn’t have made before. They are weighing, ‘Do I really want to send this person to this conference, or can I bring that presenter in?’ To me, it is part of the whole format, because you are changing who makes the decision, and they have to make it around the student data and what they need. ... So the money follows the kids, but the responsibility follows the money.”



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 New Mexico Findings: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

- **Smaller, regional universities serve a valuable role in principal and teacher development.**
 - Superintendents take an active role in seeking out good university programs for principal training and in advising university programs of what training is needed. They noted that smaller, regional universities are willing to provide customized courses for principals' professional development. One superintendent said, "One local university created classes that we felt were missing." When superintendents are unable to access university resources that they believe are appropriate, they create their own principal training programs.
 - District leaders are also actively engaged with universities that prepare teachers. They discuss their needs with local university officials about both undergraduate and graduate teacher education.
 - At least one district provides substantial incentives to teachers who want to pursue higher educational goals, including master's degrees. One teacher explained, "Our district is really good. They are encouraging everybody to be bilingual, so they provide the classes for you, ... and they pay for your books—they pay for everything. You just show up and pass it. They work with the New Mexico Highlands University, and they provide courses for [your] master's program, and they also pay for that. If a teacher wants to get a master's degree, [the district] pay[s] for [it]."
- **Professional development offerings are intended to improve student performance by increasing the knowledge and skills of principals and teachers.**
 - In one district, determining the principals' professional development needs with regard to instructional programs is driven by what teachers are being taught. Remarking on the basis by which training is selected, a superintendent said that central office staff determine what training teachers need. From that, they then derive the training that principals need in order to support teachers.
 - Teachers are instrumental in determining training needs. Recently, in one district, teachers identified the need for more training in mathematics, so the district offered them the opportunity to attend a mathematics and science professional development academy.
 - The majority of district leaders resourcefully meet teachers' professional development needs with appropriate coursework and workshops. Second-year teachers in one district have monthly professional development classes on district-specific issues, such as communicating effectively via report cards. One superintendent explained the importance of training teachers thoroughly in implementing programs in order to realize the full benefits of the program. That superintendent said, "*Open Court*, if it is going to be a good program, you really have to go through the basics with [teachers], so we do a lot of that."
 - A principal discussed the need for training teachers in analyzing performance data and connecting it to necessary instructional changes. That principal had received training from

data analysts hired by the district for that purpose and felt strongly that teachers should also receive the training. The principal hired the data analysts to go to the school and present it to the teachers.

- One principal explained that teachers need training in how to handle a much broader range of issues within the classrooms. Special training issues have been integrated into instructional training. For example, one principal brought behavioral specialists in for a training along with a reading specialist: “So they work in conjunction and give skills to teachers on how to deal with issues. ... You have to be very creative, as far as setting up your professional development, because you have to meet the needs of the school, and that’s something we did this year. We had a needs assessment in a meeting with the community—with the board members and all the stakeholders of the school—and behavior was one of the top priorities.”
- To ensure all class time remained focused on teaching and learning, teachers needed training to help them address social and behavioral issues unique to their districts. For example, one principal described the high rate of drug use in the district: “I have ... families where students are being brought up by great-grandmother, because the grandmother and parents have died of an overdose. Our kids are dealing with a lot emotionally. ... We have [outbursts] in the classroom, and it just stops instruction altogether. ... [We] had a mental health group come in and do teacher de-escalation training.”
- **Educators share ongoing, collaborative support to build each others’ capacity.**
 - Most districts and schools have two types of teacher training—organized professional development opportunities and ongoing, daily support from instructional leaders.
 - One teacher described a hierarchical system of specialists for teacher support. At the district level, teachers can call on instructional specialists for help. At the school level, teachers can seek help from the school’s subject leaders, such as mathematics leaders or science leaders.
 - Distinct from subject leaders, schools also have team leaders. These are full-time teachers who also have major administrative responsibilities and are compensated for their duties as team leaders. The principal explained, “The district appropriates X amount of dollars and gives it to each school. And that amount is then divided by the number of team leaders that the school decides they need to have, and that amount is given to the team leaders above and beyond their salary. ... The work that has to be done within that role has to be above and beyond the teaching day.”
 - One group of teachers described the role of their school’s professional development lead teacher, who collaborates weekly with professional development teachers from other schools. In addition, the school’s professional development lead teacher meets with each grade-level team to examine student performance data. They also use an online resource called *Edutest* to create sample student assessments, and then meet again to discuss the results of those assessments, identify problem areas, and address those areas.
 - School and district leaders encourage teachers to help each other build capacity. Leaders provide time for teachers to meet together and sometimes mandate teacher collaboration.
 - Teachers participate in structured, grade-specific professional development, formal grade-level meetings, meetings with a professional development teacher, and grade-level leader meetings. Some teachers chose to meet more frequently than required. One teacher explained, “The first-grade cluster will say, ‘Let’s meet this afternoon and talk about some themes for this semester,’ and our administrator really encourages that. ... We have some strong leadership in our school as far as teachers and administrators, so our administrator will say, ‘Can you pull first-grade teachers in and maybe talk about this?’ and our strong first-grade teacher will do that.”

- Though interviewees at all levels were enthusiastic about the value of frequent and regular collaboration, they agreed that finding the time to collaborate is a major challenge. One teacher said, “The only time we have to do grade-level meetings is during playground time. ... We don’t have pull-out programs as far as PE, music, or art. I teach PE to the kids. Whenever they have music, I’m there. When they have art, I’m there. So I am with them all day; so whenever [teachers] meet, it is usually on the playground or during lunch.”
- A principal also described how teachers tried to give every spare moment to collaboration: “They did it during lunch; they did it early in the morning before school started, because they took it seriously that it needed to be done.”



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 New Mexico Findings: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- **Districts involve teachers in selecting instructional programs that are aligned with the state standards and, when possible, based on scientific research.**
 - In selecting instructional programs, district leaders indicated that teams of teachers evaluate a variety of instructional programs on multiple criteria. They look first for programs that support the state’s standards and benchmarks. A second consideration is the format of the associated assessments; teachers appreciate programs whose tests closely match the style of the state’s criterion-referenced test. A third consideration is whether the program satisfies the Reading First requirement that core reading programs be grounded in scientifically based reading research.
 - Principals at Reading First schools expressed their commitment to meeting the scientifically based reading research criterion required under the Reading First grant. That commitment was honored more easily after the state clearly identified two programs that could be used to achieve this. One principal said, “And that was so helpful, because then you could tell the teachers, ‘This is research-based.’”
 - One hallmark of the instructional program selection process is the role assumed by teachers and the respect accorded to their opinions. One superintendent described a recent selection process for a series of materials: “We were able to go to the materials center in Albuquerque, and people there had arranged for companies to be there so they could present their materials. So we took a busload of teachers to the center. It was a nice process, because they pretty much all had liked two series. And they all came back to the district, and when those two companies came and presented again, we made a determination from that. ... We still had one school that refused, and they allowed that school not to adopt *Open Court* when we adopted it. [That school’s decision] has come back to haunt the district, ... but we really want teachers to be comfortable with the series that they are going to adopt.”

- Of the role teachers have in the selection process, a principal described a process that empowers teachers: “If [teachers] would like to explore [a particular program], we provide them an opportunity to present in the spring—to our director of federal programs—under the Title V innovative projects. ... If they have sought independent funding, all I ask is that the approval goes before the board. ... To me, it further validates that teachers are professionals, and it shows them some of the processes that one must go through.”
- **Teachers make effective use of instructional programs to ensure that all students master the knowledge and skills measured by the state assessment.**
 - Teachers stated that, in general, they like the packaged instructional programs used in their schools. They said that the programs are useful for guiding their instructional practices, as well as for preparing students for the state’s criterion-referenced test. Some of the programs identified by interviewees included *Corrective Reading*, *Open Court Reading*, *Reading Recovery*, *Everyday Math*, *Renaissance Math and Reading*, and *Second Step* (for behavior and conflict resolution).
 - Superintendents, as well as teachers, appreciate the fact that some programs are not only aligned with the state’s standards and benchmarks, but also provide ample practice for the state’s criterion-referenced assessment. The programs offer support for teachers who are working to change their practices, so that students can meet the challenges presented by the new assessment. One superintendent said, “This criterion-reference[d test] is a new baby, and [teachers are] starting to look at, ‘Okay, now I’ve got to do this differently, and I’ve got to do this’; and so, in a lot of ways, I like the new system and the way it addresses different aspects of [instructional practice]. ... I think what I am hoping will come out of it is that teachers will take some different approaches in their instructional practice in the classroom.”
 - Another superintendent described one way in which the new state assessment had already affected instructional practice: “Schools that picked *Everyday Math*, when they looked at the tests, it was like, ‘Okay, this is much more aligned to the kind of math we have been struggling with and complaining about.’ So not only is it reinforcing the kind of instructional practices that we have been saying as a district we need to be moving towards, the CRT [criterion-referenced test] really pushes them there.”
 - According to one teacher, using the *Open Court* program has improved her students’ test scores, demonstrating the effectiveness of the program. She particularly liked that “... it [runs] the whole gamut: It goes through vocabulary, it has a theme for each section, and the format of the test questions was very similar to the criterion-referenced test. When my students took the test, it was like their weekly assessment.”
 - Programs are carefully monitored to determine their impact on student performance. For example, one teacher described a case in which data proved an intervention program to be ineffective: “We had to test every student, and if they didn’t have a fluency rate that put them into the regular reading program, they had to go into the *Corrective Reading* program. But our test scores didn’t bear out the success that was anticipated at the district level, so we abandoned it. We looked at the numbers and determined it was not doing what we needed it to do.”



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 New Mexico Findings: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

- **Educators use student achievement data to monitor and adjust instruction and resources.**
 - Superintendents, principals, and teachers all mentioned their systemic use of data to improve student performance. A teacher described the process of learning not only how to collect data but also how to analyze it and use it to guide changes: "We were at a point a while back where we just *had* data, and the state came to visit. We were so proud to share our data, [but then] they asked how we *used* our data. ... We have district measures, we have cluster measures, we have Reading First measures—it is coming from all over. So we have gotten to the point that we have time to talk about it and set goals based on it. But, it has been a long process; I would say six years, maybe."
 - District and school leaders said that assessment is an ongoing activity. Numerous assessments are being used at both district and school levels, including assessments tied to the statewide criterion-referenced test (CRT). As one superintendent said, "There is a state accountability system that we all slip in, so we all have that same system. There might be a variation from district to district how we manage it, but what we collect and how it is collected is regulated, and it is all based on the CRT."
 - In first grade, teachers use the DIBELS (*Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills*) to find out which students are at risk. They can also use the TPRI (*Texas Primary Reading Inventory*) to further pinpoint areas where students need help. One teacher said, "We like [TPRI] better than DIBELS because it gives you ideas and teaching strategies on how to address specific needs."
 - Teachers listed a panoply of classroom assessments designed to help them identify competencies in which specific students require further instruction. These assessments include the *Woodcock Reading Mastery Test*, *Success for All* assessments, and *IPT (IDEA Proficiency Tests) Reading and Writing Tests*, as well as assessments created by teacher teams to pinpoint areas not addressed by packaged tests.
 - Teachers provided specific cases in which assessment data have caused them to alter or modify their instruction. One teacher explained that, after one assessment, "... it was kind of a shock to some of the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers to discover that kids didn't maybe understand place value, ... and they used a lot of that information ... to revamp their programs and to fix up some of the math problems."
 - One teacher described how schools in the district used data to schedule their pull-out specialist resources more efficiently: "We have done a lot of programmatic changes based on the DIBELS, ... and now our SLP [speech-language pathologist], instead of just doing her part working with articulation problems, she goes in classrooms and works on phonemic awareness. So, we have changed a lot of programs based on what our data shows. It becomes really dynamic because we can say [to the SLP], 'We just administered such-and-such test, and this child is no longer at risk; they are not at benchmark—but almost—so we are going to take them from you now, and we'll give you a new student to work with.'"

- Teachers not only use data, but in some districts they are trained to analyze that data themselves. One leader explained, “Our district trains teams of people from each school when the data comes in. They bring in the teachers’ assistants, they bring in teachers, and other key people at the school, so they all hear the same data. And we always bring someone from the outside to come in, because they [the community] always hear it better from them.”
- Given the constraints on time and other resources, teachers maximize those resources by relying on data to inform decisions about how to place specific students, which competencies to emphasize, and for what length of time. As in other domains, the higher performing schools rely on data and creative solutions to ensure that all students receive effective, appropriate instruction.
- **Principals monitor instruction using walk-through observations and assessment data reviews.**
 - The comprehensive data derived from classroom assessments provide administrators with an accurate measure of each teacher’s effectiveness, even with regard to specific competencies. In addition to data analysis, however, most administrators also rely on low-tech classroom walk-throughs to determine whether teachers are struggling. Superintendents and principals alike noted the understanding that could be achieved only by asking questions of students or sitting among the students, observing the teacher from the students’ perspective.
 - One teacher noted, “We hand in lesson plans, and we get visited a lot by our principal.” Another teacher said, “We get a formal visit every nine weeks, but our principal is always very aware of what is going on and has a great eye for detail.” Yet another teacher added, “[Our principal] does come into the classroom once every two weeks, just kind of pops in, and he also does the formal [visits].”
 - One teacher said, “At our school, we have a professional development plan, so [our principal comes] and checks on that. We also have walk-ins sporadically, and we have to hand in our lesson plans in hard copy.” Another added, “We don’t have to turn in our lesson plans. We turn in a semester plan or a nine-week plan. Our principal does check on us to ensure we do what is on our plan. She will come in and visit and observe. She does a walk-through about every nine weeks.”
 - In addition to conducting walk-throughs focused on classroom instruction, administrators also want to see how that instruction affects student learning, and they get that information via data. One teacher stated, “We have formal observations and professional development plans, at which point we set goals. You have a conference with the principal to discuss how you will reach [those goals]. Recently, I have noticed that she has been looking at data and talking to teachers about it.”
 - The principals all spend a significant amount of time visiting classrooms, talking with students, and communicating with their teachers. Though assessment data clearly play a vital role in monitoring teachers, administrators confirm the data by personally investigating the instructional activities taking place in their schools.



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 New Mexico Findings: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

- **Students needing additional instructional support—especially in mathematics and literacy—receive focused interventions.**
 - The primary focus of interventions used in the higher performing schools tends to be improving reading skills. Teachers and principals alike acknowledged that, without the most basic literacy skills, students have difficulty learning and performing proficiently on state accountability tests.
 - One district-level intervention for struggling students is the “Blue School.” One teacher described the Blue School: “It is a separate school that is just for reading, language arts, and math, and that is *it*. They are not getting any science and social studies because the philosophy is [that] if they are having trouble with reading and comprehension, [then] science and social studies needs to take a back seat, until they have acquired the skills to both read and comprehend material. Kids have to be referred to that school for tutoring.”
 - Summer school is a way to meet both students’ academic needs and other needs, as well. For students at risk of being retained a year, one principal presents the “bad news” in a positive way: “Most [parents] are very agreeable, if you show them the data and show them their child is not making it, and you think you could really help them this summer—‘We need your help’—and bring them in as a partner, rather than making them feel bad about it. A lot of them can’t really help their situation. Hey, this is a place where their child can get breakfast in the morning, they get academics and fun stuff until noon, and we will even feed them lunch. If you want them to stay until 5:00 PM, they can. Six weeks of the summer, how do you like that? What a deal!”



New Mexico Elementary Best Practice Institute: Conclusion

Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework

The NCEA analysis identified five consistently higher performing elementary schools in New Mexico. 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

State standards and benchmarks were the foundation upon which curricula were developed. In some school districts, curriculum maps and pacing guides were developed after a process of “unwrapping” the state standards and benchmarks. Curriculum development was ongoing and involved both horizontal and vertical alignment. District commitment of time, money, and personnel fostered the successful development and use of each district’s curriculum. Classroom teachers were deeply involved in curriculum revision.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Principals were chosen largely by school-based selection teams, often after a preliminary screening of candidates by district leaders. Superintendents were actively engaged with university teacher preparation programs. Districts provided incentives and opportunities for those seeking administrative credentials or master’s degrees. Teachers creatively found time for collaborating with each other, both within schools and across districts.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Teachers played an integral role in program selection and were generally happy with the programs that had been adopted. Teachers found it easy to implement their programs with fidelity, since many of the programs were aligned with the state’s criterion-referenced test.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Districts used local monies to develop their own data systems, but expressed hope that the state was taking a stronger leadership role in managing student performance data. Teachers administered an impressive array of assessments that yielded data useful for identifying student learning needs. Administrators used assessment data to gauge teacher effectiveness, but also devoted a great deal of time to classroom visits, conversations with students, and debriefings with teachers.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

Districts had programs designed to provide intensive reading and mathematics instruction for students in need of additional help. These included the “Blue School,” which included intensive instruction in only reading, language arts, and mathematics, and six-week summer school programs. Administrators sought to develop struggling teachers into productive, effective teachers.

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 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 New Mexico, including a comparison with average-performing schools, in order to distinguish unique practices of the higher performing schools.

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–New Mexico 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–New Mexico 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 New Mexico.