

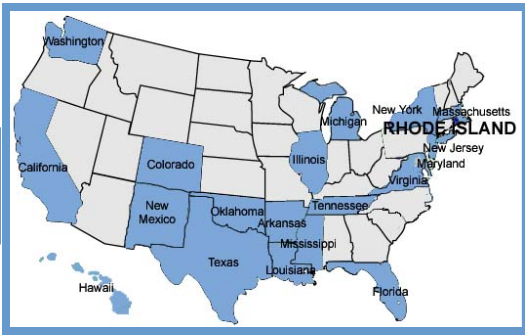
**National Center for
Educational
Accountability**

national sponsor of Just  for the Kids

Just for the Kids, Rhode Island Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

Bradford Elementary School, Westerly Public Schools
Chester W. Barrows School, Cranston Public Schools
Francis J. Varieur School, Pawtucket School Department
Hope Valley Elementary School, Chariho Regional School District
Tiogue School, Coventry Public Schools

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Just for the Kids, Rhode Island

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

The Institute

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

The Summary

A 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 Rhode Island.

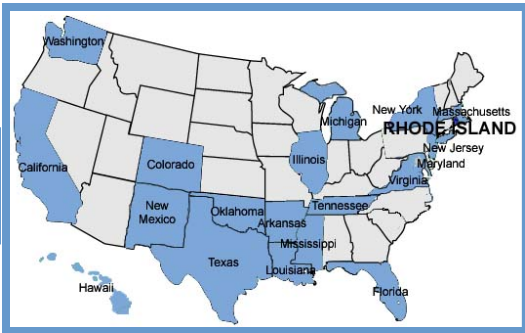
The School Identification Process

NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in English Language Arts and mathematics in the 2001-02, 2002-03, and 2003-04 school years. The analysis included data from the fourth-grade New Standards Reference Exam (NSRE).

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (English Language Arts and mathematics) and year (2002, 2003, and 2004) 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 conducted 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, and Hispanic students; the size of the school; and the percentage of students tested in the subject and year in question.² 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 Rhode Island.

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."

² Percent tested data were only available for the 2002 and 2003 performance data included in the analysis.



Just for the Kids, Rhode Island

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

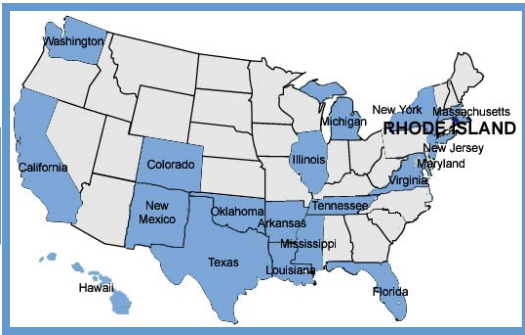
NCEA ranked each school against the elementary schools in the rest of the state based on the extent to which it outperformed its “predicted” percent of students meeting the standard. For example, a school that outperformed 82% of the schools in “performance relative to predicted” in fourth-grade mathematics in 2004 would receive a percentile rank of 82 for that subject and year. These ranks were averaged separately for English Language Arts and mathematics 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 both mathematics and English Language Arts and also meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements in 2004.

The Higher Performing Schools Studied

School	District	2004 Enrollment		2004 School-Wide Demographics						
		Grade Span	No. of Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian	Other	Low Income	ELL
Bradford Elementary School	Westerly Public Schools	K-5	219	1.4%	0.5%	95.4%	0.9%	1.8%	42.9%	N/A
Chester W. Barrows School	Cranston Public Schools	K-5	247	8.5%	10.5%	75.7%	4.9%	0.4%	25.1%	N/A
Francis J. Varieur School	Pawtucket School Department	K-6	432	19.4%	27.8%	48.8%	3.0%	1.0%	54.2%	N/A
Hope Valley Elementary School	Chariho Regional School District	K-5	292	0.7%	1.0%	97.3%	0.7%	0.3%	12.0%	N/A
Tiogue School	Coventry Public Schools	K-5	406	1.7%	1.0%	95.8%	1.5%	0.0%	16.5%	N/A

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

For additional information about the identification process and selection criteria in Rhode Island, please contact Sarah Collins, Director of School Effectiveness Analysis, at sarah@just4kids.org.



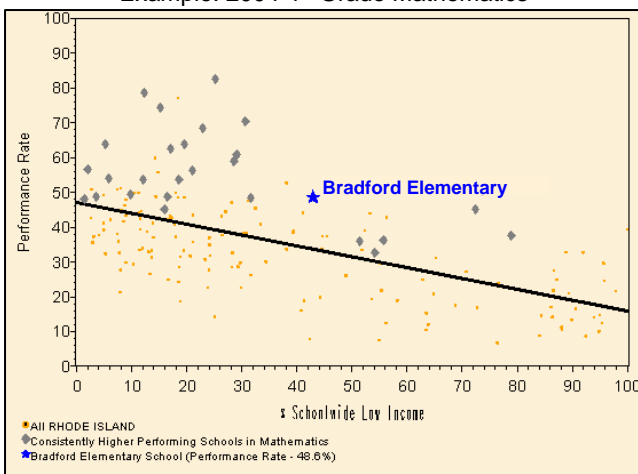
Bradford Elementary School Westerly Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Rhode Island NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Bradford Elementary School, which serves 219 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is one of five elementary schools in Westerly Public Schools (3,692 students). Bradford's population is 95.4% White, 1.4% African American, 0.9% Asian, 0.5% Hispanic, and 1.8% other. Within this student population, 42.9% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Bradford Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and English Language Arts. The analysis included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Bradford Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 89.4 in mathematics and 81.6 in English Language Arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 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 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank	2003 Percentile Rank	2004 Percentile Rank	Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	4	4	
Mathematics	92	97	80	89.4
English Language Arts	74	97	75	81.6

*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.



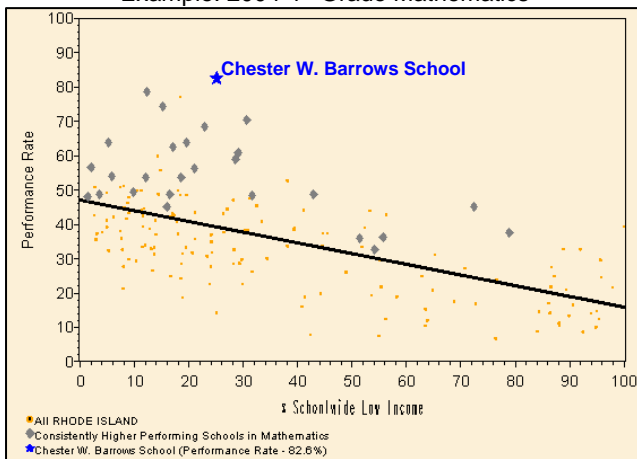
Chester W. Barrows School Cranston Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Rhode Island NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Chester W. Barrows School, which serves 247 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 18 elementary schools in Cranston Public Schools (11,269 students). Barrows’s population is 75.7% White, 10.5% Hispanic, 8.5% African American, 4.9% Asian, and 0.4% other. Within this student population, 25.1% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Mathematics



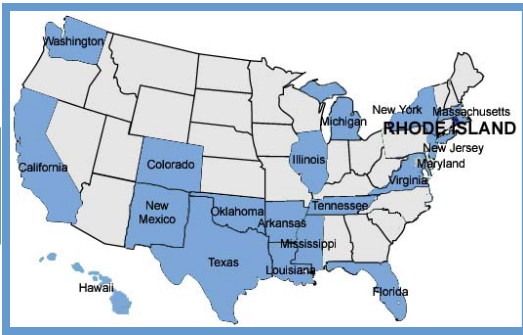
Consistent Higher Performance

Chester W. Barrows School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and English Language Arts. The analysis included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Chester W. Barrows School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 98.1 in mathematics and 88.7 in English Language Arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 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 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank	2003 Percentile Rank	2004 Percentile Rank	Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	4	4	
Mathematics	96	99	99	98.1
English Language Arts	89	83	94	88.7

*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.



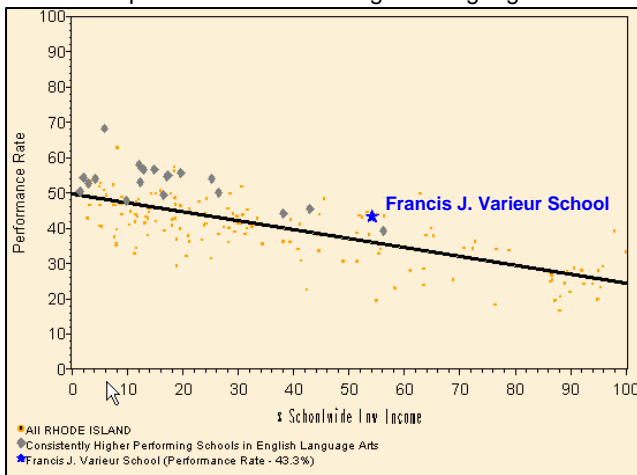
Francis J. Varieur School Pawtucket School Department

Just for the Kids, Rhode Island NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Francis J. Varieur School, which serves 432 kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is 1 of 10 elementary schools in the Pawtucket School Department (9,888 students). Varieur’s population is 48.8% White, 27.8% Hispanic, 19.4% African American, 3.0% Asian, and 1.0% other. Within this student population, 54.2% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade English Language Arts



Consistent Higher Performance

Francis J. Varieur School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and English Language Arts. The analysis included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Francis J. Varieur School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 80.1 in mathematics and 95.2 in English Language Arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 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 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank	2003 Percentile Rank	2004 Percentile Rank	Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	4	4	
Mathematics	92	79	73	80.1
English Language Arts	96	96	94	95.2

*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.



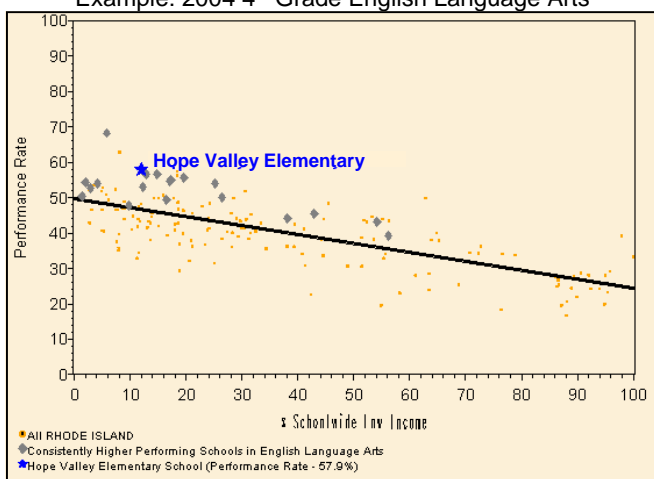
Hope Valley Elementary School Chariho Regional School District

Just for the Kids, Rhode Island NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Hope Valley Elementary School, which serves 292 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is one of four elementary schools in the Chariho Regional School District (3,861 students). Hope Valley's population is 97.3% White, 1.0% Hispanic, 0.7% African American, 0.7% Asian, and 0.3% other. Within this student population, 12.0% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade English Language Arts



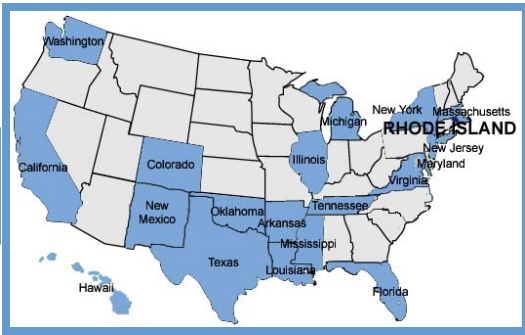
Consistent Higher Performance

Hope Valley Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and English Language Arts. The analysis included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Hope Valley Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 90.5 in mathematics and 97.5 in English Language Arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 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 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank	2003 Percentile Rank	2004 Percentile Rank	Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	4	4	
Mathematics	98	93	82	90.5
English Language Arts	99	99	95	97.5

*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.



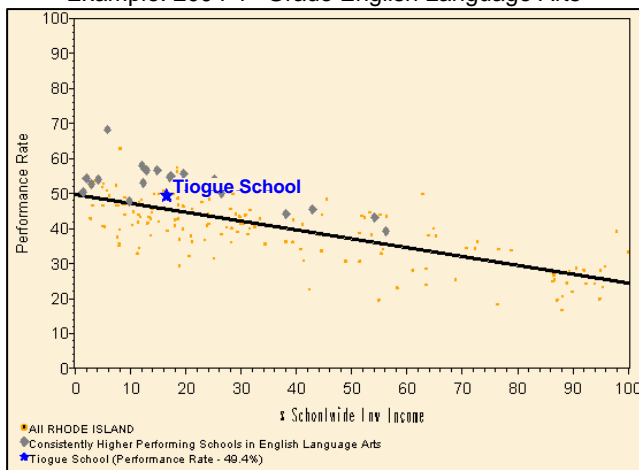
Tiogue School Coventry Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Rhode Island NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Tiogue School, which serves 406 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is one of six elementary schools in the Coventry Public Schools (5,850 students). Tiogue’s population is 95.8% White, 1.7% African American, 1.5% Asian, and 1.0% Hispanic. Within this student population, 16.5% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade English Language Arts



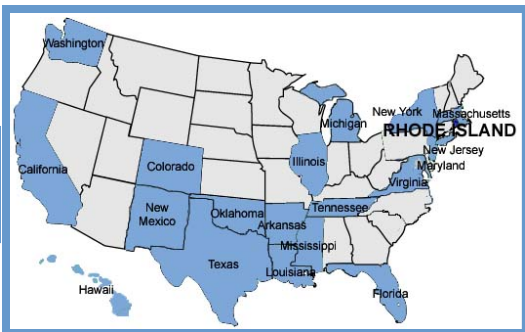
Consistent Higher Performance

Tiogue School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics and English Language Arts. The analysis included all fourth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Tiogue School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 79.0 in mathematics and 81.7 in English Language Arts.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 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 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank	2003 Percentile Rank	2004 Percentile Rank	Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	4	4	
Mathematics	86	69	82	79.0
English Language Arts	93	76	77	81.7

*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.



Rhode Island 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 Rhode Island Findings: Curriculum and Academic Goals

- **The districts supporting higher performing schools develop a curriculum from state standards and further clarify the curriculum through documents such as curriculum maps and aligned benchmark assessments. Educators continually review and refine the curriculum based on student performance.**
 - All of the participating districts in Rhode Island reported that they develop curriculum with input from staff at the school and district levels. All districts start their curriculum development from the framework of the state standards and associated Grade-Level

Expectations (GLEs). District staff initiate and guide the curriculum development process, which includes gathering input from teachers, principals, and curriculum experts.

- Most districts have curriculum maps, pacing guides, and benchmarks; but a few districts develop materials that are even more specific, such as best practice guides. Some districts provide teachers with lesson units that included pre- and post-lesson assessments and rubrics for grading student work. Individual schools often develop their own rubrics and assessments or supplement the materials provided by the district as needed. District- and school-level curriculum coaches help develop these materials and work with teachers to implement them consistently.
- District and school leaders revise the curriculum on an ongoing basis. As one principal said, “There is feedback at all levels. It’s continuous; it never seems to stop.” Apart from daily adjustments that take place at the school level, districts have processes in place to revise curriculum every year based on student assessment results. The districts tend to use both data from the state assessment and data from ongoing classroom assessments to target areas of the curriculum that need revision. One superintendent summed up a process that was similar in all districts: “We look at the test results and we get input from everybody. And then we look to see what is working and what is not working. Where are the gaps? Where do you need to fill in the holes? And then we reassess what we are doing.”
- **District and school leaders structure curriculum development activities so that teachers develop a deep understanding of the academic objectives.**
 - District and school leaders make sure that teachers from all grade levels and, if possible, from all schools are involved in curriculum development work. One superintendent found the inclusion of so many teachers valuable because it provides a venue for “very rich conversations” about the curriculum. Districts make time for teachers to be involved in curriculum development and revision by using regularly scheduled professional development days for curriculum meetings.
 - At least three districts have district-level curriculum coaches who manage curriculum development and work closely with school staff. Some districts send out a call for volunteers to work on curriculum, and principals make sure that their schools are represented on the resulting curriculum committee. A principal from one of those districts said, “Curriculum is by consensus. If five of us want this and two of us don’t, we come to consensus. As each piece of curriculum is put together, there is a consensus that that should be there.” A teacher agreed: “We all feel that we have input in the decisions.”
 - District and school staff spend a great deal of time on curriculum alignment. Most districts have regular meetings throughout the school year to discuss curriculum and make decisions about curriculum issues. At least two districts include staff from all levels—elementary, middle, and high school—to maintain vertical curriculum alignment. Some schools provide common planning times for teachers to address instructional issues or change the focus of faculty meetings to curriculum and implementation rather than “housekeeping details.”



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 Rhode Island Findings: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

- **Rhode Island's size allows for accessible networks of state-wide support among administrators and teachers. In addition, strong networks of support exist within districts.**
 - Most districts have principal meetings at least monthly, and the principals reported that, because their districts and their state are relatively small, they feel comfortable calling the district superintendent or even the state superintendent with questions. A principal said, "I also think that, as a principal, I can call anybody at the state level, regardless of their position, and ask them a question. They are accessible to you, and they know your school."
 - All the districts represented in the Best Practice Institute have strong support networks. Mentors, both formal and informal, advise new principals about the district's practices and answer questions that arise from day to day. One principal explained, "We all mentor. ... In fact, we all spend our time on the phone mentoring one another even though we've all been there for years. I'll say, 'Let me run this by you. What would you do?'"
 - All of the districts assign mentors to new teachers for one to three years; in at least one district, the mentors attend a three-day training before serving. Several districts have a district-level mentor coordinator who assigns mentors and works with them on the best ways to support new teachers. Teachers participating in the focus group appreciated the mentor programs but added that they all take responsibility for mentoring new teachers. As one teacher said, "If there is someone new, everyone tries to help that person. We try to take them under our wing. We even try to help those who are veterans. The principal is also a great mentor for new teachers. She really tries to give assistance where it is needed."
 - Curriculum coaches at the school and district levels also provide support for new and experienced teachers. Principals spend time checking in with new teachers to answer questions and help new teachers learn the school's culture and practices. One principal explained, "My responsibility in terms of a new teacher ... is not only to that new teacher but to everyone else, too, because we're talking about the school culture."
- **Due to low teacher turnover rates, higher performing schools enjoy a relatively stable community of teachers.**
 - School staff reported that they have a standard process for hiring new teachers. Candidates are interviewed by a committee of stakeholders, including parents, who make their decision and forward it to the principal. However, in most districts, the principals rarely use the established process, as teachers are able to "bid" into positions through the teachers' union. One principal said of the union bidding process, "I've been there five years. I've yet to [use the committee process to] hire a teacher, and I've lost quite a few through retirements." Another principal said, "I've only hired one person in 14 years." Though some principals were frustrated with the lack of control they had over teacher hires, others thought that their schools' reputations ensure that only teachers who "really want to work" bid into the school.

- Several schools have had little turnover for years, and the principals of those schools appreciate the strong community of teachers who work and collaborate well together. A principal said, “I think that has impacted the growth of the school and the success of the school. ... I think they developed the skill set to drive the school.”
- **District and school leaders select professional development activities based on student performance data.**
 - Beyond receiving personal attention from mentors, coaches, and principals, all teachers attend professional development meetings, courses, or institutes. District staff typically identify district-wide needs by examining student performance data and then provide training opportunities to address those needs.
 - School staff identify their individual school and teacher needs by examining data and considering the goals listed in the school improvement plan. Most principals reported that they then pinpoint professional development opportunities related to identified needs and allow teachers to choose their own training opportunities from among the identified offerings. In those cases, principal approval of the teachers’ choices ensures that those choices conform to the needs identified at the district or school levels. Schools provide substitute teachers and pay registration fees for teachers who attend trainings.
 - District and school leaders also use professional development activities to equip teachers to align their instruction with the curriculum. One district uses Institute for Learning (IFL) training and materials to help principals, curriculum experts, and lead teachers from across the district keep their curriculum aligned.
- **Professional development activities are ongoing and practice-oriented. Collaboration is the hallmark of most professional development activities.**
 - In most schools, if a teacher attends a class or workshop, the principal asks that teacher to train other teachers and share materials from the training. One principal attributed a lot of the school’s success to teachers who constantly sought out professional development to improve their knowledge and practices. “These are individuals who see it as part of their profession to stay current and to seek more professional development that they can apply to their craft in different ways. And so when you have got your faculty that already sees that as part of what they do as a teacher, the rest of it is kind of easy. They seek it out; they want it. ... They advocate for themselves for what they feel they need.”
 - Most districts and some schools have an on-site staff development coordinator who shapes and provides professional development opportunities for the needs of the district or school. These coordinators often invite guest speakers to district- or school-wide training events. Principals also offer professional development opportunities during faculty meetings.
 - In addition to common planning times, most districts and schools have formal practices called “peer sharing” or “learning walks” that allow teachers to visit other classrooms or other schools to learn from their peers. Through peer sharing, teachers can ask to visit another school to observe teachers who are particularly effective in some content area or in classroom management or discipline.
 - Principals in some schools institute “learning walks,” during which teachers visit other classrooms together and then discuss what they saw. One principal explained that learning walks help the school staff become more collaborative. “It’s made them rethink the way they teach. I think we’ve raised the bar for everyone. ... It helps to build trust, and it helps to create a more positive culture within your school. We are our own best experts, and we need to be able to share that, by creating a comfort zone. I think that’s what’s so positive, and that’s the powerful stuff. But you have to break down the barriers, and people have to feel like you can walk into a room and be nonjudgmental and just observe what’s going on.”
 - Educators collaborate both within the school and across the district. Teachers work together to plan lessons and revise curriculum. Schools have curriculum coaches—usually

mathematics and literacy coaches—who help teachers develop lessons. Coaches also visit classrooms to observe and support teaching and learning. Principals share successful practices with other principals in the district. One principal said, “If we find something that is working for us, we pass it on to the other principals.”

- Teachers noted that they learn best from each other. School leaders try to provide common planning times for teachers at least once a week, and sometimes as many as four times a week. Teachers make time to meet before and after school, and between classes. As one teacher said, “We work on our shared vision to make improvements. ... We share and talk with each other, we work with parents, and we pass portfolios with each other. We always seem to be aware that all teachers are important in a child’s development, from the prior grades to the higher grades. Each of us is willing to take time from our own time to team with each other.”
- To ensure that all teachers are assessing student work using the same criteria, district and school leaders encourage teachers to assess student work together. One school’s teachers meet monthly for “scoring parties,” which they named TEST (Teachers Examining Student Tasks). At these meetings, teachers look at student work together and align their expectations for student performance both horizontally and vertically. This school’s district plans to use TEST as a model for all schools in the district.



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 Rhode Island Findings: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- **Higher performing schools foster a culture centered on teaching and learning—maximizing instructional time for students, institutionalizing collaboration among teachers, and developing a climate of continuous improvement.**
 - Districts pilot instructional programs before their adoption district-wide. In addition, principals and teachers develop or use supplemental materials to meet students’ needs. One principal said, “I tell teachers that you need to take an eclectic approach. What works, works. If there is something in *Investigations* that doesn’t work, then gloss over it, but find something that works for these kids. ... Otherwise, the children are not going to get what they need to get.”
 - Interviewees reported several strategies they use to increase the amount of instructional time in each day. One district lengthened their school day by half an hour. They take teachers off of bus duty as a trade-off for teachers working a longer day. In another district, teachers do not have to do any cafeteria, bus, or recess duty. Teaching assistants fulfill those tasks, so that teachers can use that time to prepare lessons and collaborate with each other.
 - Teachers at some schools further maximize their use of time by team teaching. For example, in one elementary school, two teachers team together so that one teaches all of their students science and the other teaches social studies. This reduces the amount of needed preparation time because individual teachers do not have to prepare lessons in both subjects.

- Beyond giving teachers time to work together, principals also provide time and funding when teachers want to try new strategies or programs. A principal said, “There’s a culture in the schools that people are not afraid to try something new because they know that if it doesn’t work, they are not going to get lambasted for it. It’s okay to try it, and if it doesn’t work, fix it and continue on. If it fails completely, then you’ve learned something.”
- Another principal shared a similar story. “Teachers are not afraid to try initiatives on their own, even if it’s only in their classroom.” Teachers in a few schools seek their own grants to buy computers and other materials for their classrooms, and principals in those schools support the teachers’ initiative. One principal actively seeks ways to give teachers more time to inquire into new programs and practices. “They look at what they are doing. They analyze what’s happening. They figure out where the gaps are, and they are not afraid to go ahead and try new things to support the teaching and learning. And I support them.” This type of innovation can be encouraged because clear learning objectives exist and are measured. Those innovations that do not lead to increased student achievement are not supported.
- Principals had nothing but praise for their teaching staff, and they attributed their schools’ success to the teachers. In particular, principals encourage teachers to work together and focus on solving problems, even when they have to take risks or try new strategies. One principal said, “I think the key thing is the quality of the teachers. They are effective, they are risk-takers, they are self-starters, they are lifelong learners. I give them all the credit.”
- One principal described the collaborative culture of innovation in the school. “If I make a mistake, I’ll be the first one to admit it with the faculty—to let them know we’re all in this boat together, and we’re all here to try things together. I empower my teachers. They know a lot more about some instruction than I do. So we have teacher leaders across the board who step up to the plate and are not afraid to be risk-takers.”



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 Rhode Island Findings: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

- **Educators monitor student learning of the district curriculum through varied and ongoing district and classroom assessments.**
 - Districts have published assessment schedules for gathering student achievement data. Assessments used include PALS (*Performance Assessment Links in Science*), DRA (*Developmental Reading Assessment*), Brigance, CORE (*Consortium on Reading Excellence*), DIBELS (*Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills*), Dolch Basic Word List (sight-word recognition), Rigby READS (*Reading Evaluation and Diagnostic System*), ITBS (*Iowa Test of Basic Skills*), *Stanford-9*, assessment pieces from the *Math Investigations* program, and standards-based practice tests.
 - Schools place a great deal of emphasis on problem-solving skills. In one of those schools, teachers have developed their own anchor papers and benchmarks in problem solving, which are administered three times each year.
 - Teachers assess student progress continuously. In some cases, schools or districts develop pre- and post-tests for lessons—especially for mathematics lessons—so that

teachers can be better informed about how much their students are learning. Teachers adjust their instructional practices continuously in response to what they learn from their ongoing data collection. District and school leaders examine data and decide whether large-scale changes are needed in programs and practices.

- Districts use data to drive program development, program revision, instructional goals, and other aspects of school system management. As one principal said, “Every school looks at those [assessment] results to guide their decision-making: how they are going to invest their money, their time, their school improvement [efforts].”
- One principal reported, “[Teachers use district-wide spelling inventories] to help with the grouping and the teaching of students, based on their needs. And then we have our monthly writing and math prompts, and we have our monthly scoring parties used to assess and drive our instruction.” The “scoring parties” are teacher gatherings for the purpose of grading student work from a grade-level perspective, which ensures uniformity in grading expectations.

▪ **Principals monitor the instructional programs of the school through frequent classroom visits and formal teacher observations.**

- Principals noted that daily visits to classrooms are an important aspect of teacher evaluations, as well as an effective way to manage their schools. One principal with a small staff visits every classroom every day. Although they have more classrooms to visit, other principals stated that frequent visits are a goal for them as well.
- One principal indicated that teachers would describe to him particular content areas or strategies in which they would like to improve. The principal targeted those areas in walk-throughs, providing frequent 10-minute scripts that could be used for review with the teacher.
- Another principal stated, “We use *Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA)* to monitor who the teacher is talking to by gender, etc., and mark their questions and movement.” The principal stressed that the goal in collecting the information was to help teachers improve instruction.
- One principal’s evaluation schedule takes changes in assignment into account. “A teacher new to your building transferring from another school needs to be evaluated that year, whether they’re tenured or not. If they [move] more than one grade level [within the school], they have to be evaluated.”



Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

“Ensuring All Children Learn”

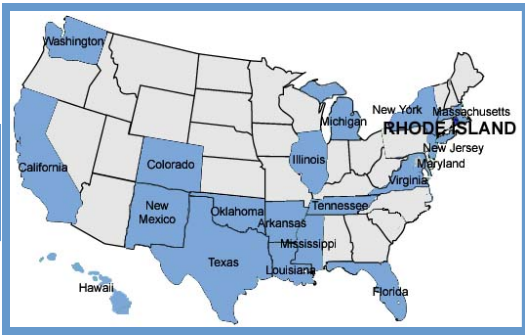
The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance: “What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and skills we said they would learn?” Higher performing school systems have *pyramids of intervention* that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple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

Specific Rhode Island Findings: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

- **Intervention plans for struggling students include additional resources—instructional time, and staff—to address student learning needs.**
 - For students who are struggling academically or behaviorally, schools draft plans, such as behavioral intervention plans, Individualized Education Plans, or Personal Literacy Plans. The principal, teachers, and parents create these plans collaboratively. Planning

sometimes includes other school personnel, such as a curriculum expert, special education teacher, or counselor.

- Interventions for struggling students typically include district and school-sponsored tutors and before- and after-school programs, as well as extended-day kindergarten programs for at-risk students. Several schools have before- and after-school programs targeted specifically to students who need help with reading or mathematics. One school has a before-school “Homework Club” for students who have trouble completing their homework on their own. That same school has a high-poverty population that is served after school by a neighborhood center where students can get help with their homework.
- Principals and teachers are creative about ways to involve more adults in the schools to help individual students. They invite parents and community groups to tutor students, and one school has an arrangement with the local college, which pays work-study college students to tutor at the school. One district has a mentor program in which a professional from the community mentors an elementary student all the way through high school; the program includes training for the mentor.



Rhode Island Elementary Best Practice Institute: Conclusion

Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework

The NCEA analysis identified five consistently higher performing elementary schools in Rhode Island. 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

Districts clarified the curriculum through documents such as curriculum maps and aligned benchmark assessments. District and school leaders created multiple opportunities for teachers to be involved throughout the curriculum development and revision processes so that they developed a deep understanding of the curricular objectives. School leaders and teachers also worked with district curriculum coordinators to ensure alignment of the curriculum across grades and schools.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Collaboration, enhanced by relatively stable communities of teachers and leaders and by small state size, was the hallmark of staff capacity building. Peer sharing and learning walks were used to break down communication barriers and encourage both principals and teachers to learn from one another. Mathematics and literacy coaches collaborated with teams of teachers to develop lessons. These coaches also observed and supported the delivery of the lessons in classrooms.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

The existence and measurement of clear learning objectives allowed school leaders to foster a culture of “innovation without fear.” Since there was a clear understanding that all innovation was measured against student learning results, principals and teachers were reflective risk-takers willing to implement new instructional approaches and then adjust if performance data did not indicate improvement.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

Student performance data guided curricular and instructional decisions. Staff at all levels of the school systems examined and analyzed data continuously as they developed and revised curriculum, chose instructional programs, designed instructional practices, wrote lessons and assessments, and evaluated their own performance. Schools implemented structures such as “scoring parties” to enable collaborative teams of teachers to study student work together. This practice was conducive to the application of consistent standards throughout the grade level.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

Educators in higher performing schools held high expectations for all students. Educators utilized all available resources to support students in reaching these standards. Formal plans, forged collaboratively by school staff and parents, outlined the needed interventions. Programs before and after school were available to provide struggling students with additional instructional time. Principals and teachers sought community members to serve as mentors for individual students.

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 Rhode Island, 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–Rhode Island 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–Rhode Island 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 Rhode Island.