

**National Center for  
Educational  
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# **Just for the Kids, Virginia Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005**

Bensley Elementary School, Chesterfield County Public Schools  
Birdneck Elementary School, Virginia Beach City Public Schools  
George Mason Elementary School, Alexandria City Public Schools  
Lebanon Elementary School, Russell County Public Schools  
Robert S. Payne Elementary School, Lynchburg City Schools

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## Just for the Kids, Virginia

### Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

#### The Institute

The Virginia Best Practice Institute was part of a larger national research study to investigate the practices of schools that consistently outperformed 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 Virginia, 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 Virginia 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 Virginia.

#### The School Identification Process

NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the Virginia Department of Education to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in mathematics, English, history, science, and writing in the 2001-02, 2002-03, and 2003-04 school years. The analysis included data from the third- and fifth-grade Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) assessments.<sup>1</sup>

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (mathematics, English, history, science, and writing) and year (2002, 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 low-income, African American, Hispanic, and Asian students; the size of the school; and the percentage of students tested in the subject and year in question. 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 Virginia.

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 97% of the schools in "performance relative to predicted" in third-grade mathematics in 2004 received a percentile rank of 97 for that subject and year. These ranks

<sup>1</sup> History was tested only in third grade, and writing was tested only in fifth grade.



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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 four of five subject areas (mathematics, English, history, science, and writing) 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	Asian	Other	Low Income	ELL
Bensley Elementary School	Chesterfield County Public Schools	PK-5	539	51.0%	23.2%	23.2%	0.7%	1.9%	77.0%	N/A
Birdneck Elementary School	Virginia Beach City Public Schools	PK-5	958	42.1%	7.3%	47.6%	1.7%	1.3%	68.8%	N/A
George Mason Elementary School	Alexandria City Public Schools	K-5	306	14.4%	28.8%	53.9%	2.9%	0.0%	36.7%	N/A
Lebanon Elementary School	Russell County Public Schools	PK-3	405	1.2%	0.0%	98.8%	0.0%	0.0%	60.7%	N/A
Robert S. Payne Elementary School	Lynchburg City Schools	PK-5	434	62.2%	0.7%	32.7%	1.6%	2.8%	80.8%	N/A

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

For additional information about the identification process and selection criteria in Virginia, please visit  
[http://www.just4kids.org/highperforming/general\\_text.cfm?state=Virginia&text=Virginia\\_e\\_identification\\_criteria](http://www.just4kids.org/highperforming/general_text.cfm?state=Virginia&text=Virginia_e_identification_criteria).

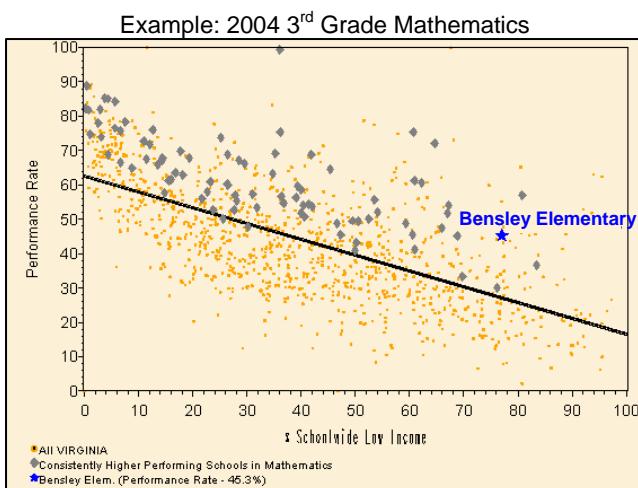


# Bensley Elementary School Chesterfield County Public Schools

## Just for the Kids, Virginia NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Bensley Elementary School, which serves 539 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 36 elementary schools in Chesterfield County Public Schools (55,402 students). Bensley's population is 51.0% African American, 23.2% Hispanic, 23.2% White, 0.7% Asian, and 1.9% other. Within this student population, 77.0% receive free or reduced lunch services.



### Consistent Higher Performance

Bensley Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all five subjects: mathematics, English, history, science, and writing. The analysis included third- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Bensley Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 95.9 in mathematics, 93.1 in English, 95.0 in history, 90.4 in science, and 85.2 in writing.

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	3	5	3	5	3	5	
Mathematics	94	97	98	96	97	94	95.9
English	96	88	98	94	89	92	93.1
History	92	N/A	96	N/A	97	N/A	95.0
Science	89	89	94	80	95	97	90.4
Writing	N/A	89	N/A	90	N/A	77	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.  
For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Bensley Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

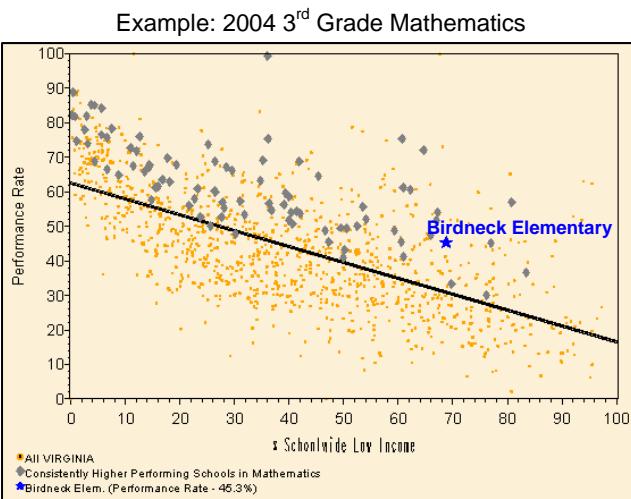


# Birdneck Elementary School Virginia Beach City Public Schools

## Just for the Kids, Virginia NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Birdneck Elementary School, which serves 958 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 55 elementary schools in Virginia Beach City Public Schools (76,304 students). Birdneck's population is 47.6% White, 42.1% African American, 7.3% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian, and 1.3% other. Within this student population, 68.8% receive free or reduced lunch services.



### Consistent Higher Performance

Birdneck Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in four of five subjects: mathematics, English, history, and writing. The analysis included third- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Birdneck Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 94.2 in mathematics, 90.1 in English, 80.5 in history, and 75.5 in writing.

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	3	5	3	5	3	5	
Mathematics	95	94	90	95	94	98	94.2
English	93	91	89	93	89	85	90.1
History	65	N/A	85	N/A	94	N/A	80.5
Writing	N/A	77	N/A	70	N/A	79	75.5

\*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.

For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Birdneck Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).



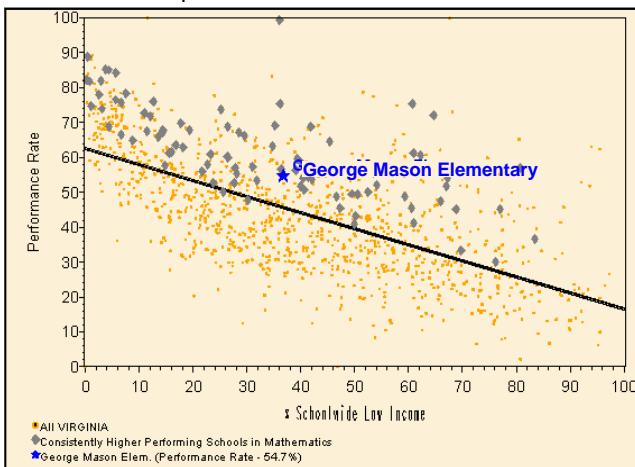
# George Mason Elementary School Alexandria City Public Schools

## Just for the Kids, Virginia NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

George Mason Elementary School, which serves 306 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 13 elementary schools in Alexandria City Public Schools (10,902 students). George Mason's population is 53.9% White, 28.8% Hispanic, 14.4% African American, and 2.9% Asian. Within this student population, 36.7% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Mathematics



### Consistent Higher Performance

George Mason Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all five subjects: mathematics, English, history, science, and writing. The analysis included third- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, George Mason Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 82.4 in mathematics, 83.9 in English, 81.0 in history, 91.3 in science, and 92.4 in writing.

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	3	5	3	5	3	5	
Mathematics	97	69	51	96	85	87	82.4
English	96	74	52	96	84	93	83.9
History	96	N/A	75	N/A	71	N/A	81.0
Science	94	94	73	92	95	96	91.3
Writing	N/A	90	N/A	96	N/A	90	92.4

\*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. For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for George Mason Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

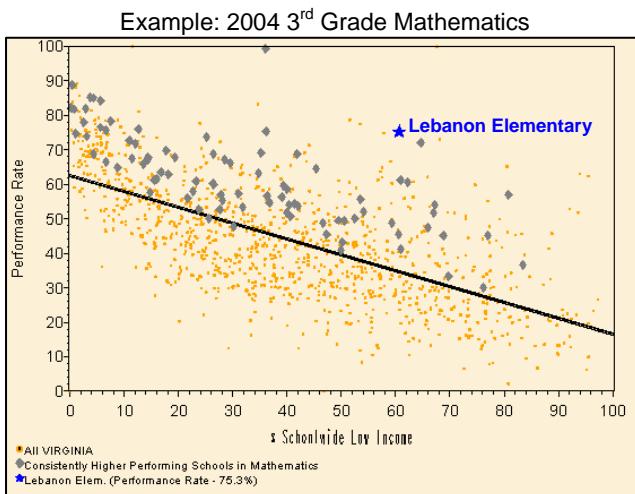


# Lebanon Elementary School Russell County Public Schools

## Just for the Kids, Virginia NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Lebanon Elementary School, which serves 405 pre-kindergarten through third-grade students, is one of eight elementary schools in Russell County Public Schools (4,208 students). Lebanon's population is 98.8% White and 1.2% African American. Within this student population, 60.7% receive free or reduced lunch services.



### Consistent Higher Performance

Lebanon Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all subjects tested in third grade: mathematics, English, history, and science. The analysis included third-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Lebanon Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 99.0 in mathematics, 97.2 in English, 83.8 in history, and 91.6 in science.

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	3	3	3	
Mathematics	99	99	99	99.0
English	94	98	99	97.2
History	89	94	63	83.8
Science	87	90	99	91.6

\*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.  
For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Lebanon Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

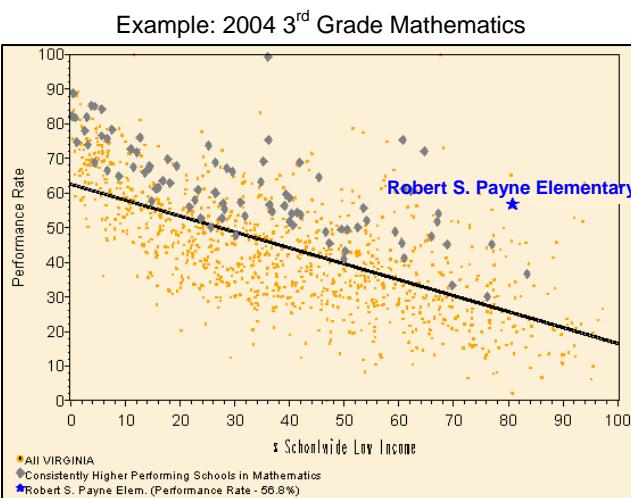


# Robert S. Payne Elementary School Lynchburg City Schools

## Just for the Kids, Virginia NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Robert S. Payne Elementary School, which serves 434 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 11 elementary schools in Lynchburg City Schools (8,775 students). Payne's population is 62.2% African American, 32.7% White, 1.6% Asian, 0.7% Hispanic, and 2.8% other. Within this student population, 80.8% receive free or reduced lunch services.



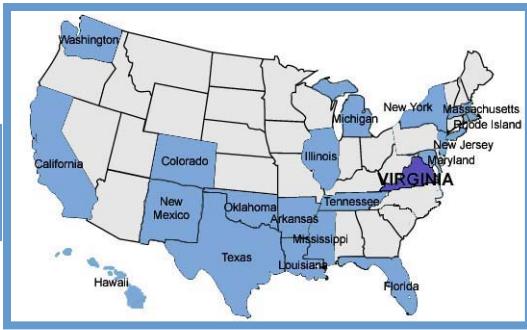
### Consistent Higher Performance

Robert S. Payne Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all five subjects: mathematics, English, history, science, and writing. The analysis included third- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Robert S. Payne Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 95.2 in mathematics, 96.7 in English, 96.8 in history, 96.2 in science, and 95.4 in writing.

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	3	5	3	5	3	5	
Mathematics	97	98	96	98	91	91	95.2
English	98	98	98	98	96	92	96.7
History	98	N/A	98	N/A	94	N/A	96.8
Science	98	95	97	97	96	94	96.2
Writing	N/A	98	N/A	96	N/A	92	95.4

\*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. For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Robert S. Payne Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).



# Virginia 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 Virginia Findings: Curriculum and Academic Goals

- Districts align their written curriculum with the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs). Curriculum maps, pacing guides, and aligned benchmark assessments further clarify the district curriculum.
  - District leaders agreed that their processes for curriculum development were remarkably similar. One administrator stated, "After we align [the district curriculum to the Virginia Standards of Learning], we develop pacing guides. When we develop the pacing guides,

we develop quarterly tests that will go back with those pacing guides. And as we're going back and creating the pacing guides, we develop resource lists for teachers." Another administrator indicated that they call pacing guides "timelines" in his district and write benchmarks by six-week periods. A third administrator added that they write benchmarks by nine-week periods.

- An assistant superintendent stated, "One of the things that we did about four years ago was to make sure that we were aligning the curriculum. When I was a building principal, every school kind of did their own thing. A new superintendent came in and a new deputy superintendent in charge of curriculum and instruction and they made sure we aligned what we were doing as a division. Instead of being just individual schools, we are now a system, and I think the alignment has really made a big difference in our progress."
  - Interviewees stressed the importance of aligning curriculum with the state standards and building curriculum maps that further outline grade-level expectations. The state provides materials that support the Standards of Learning and further facilitate district curriculum alignment. The guidance from the Virginia Department of Education is "not just a list of standards," said one teacher, but also includes "the curriculum frameworks, where they have a central knowledge listed, and questions and different things that [a teacher] can use."
  - Despite the comprehensive nature of the SOLs, all but one of the districts further clarify the SOLs with county (district) curricula, county-wide pacing guides, and school-wide pacing guides. School-based teams align curriculum maps with the state standards.
  - One principal said, "Our pacing guide is somewhat different from the pacing guide that is in the county because ... we modify it to meet the needs of our students, to meet how our students have responded to instruction over the years. ... We actually chunk it a little bit more because we build in lots of maintenance instruction. After the curriculum has been taught, we build in that instructional time to go back and re-teach and to build some maintenance there with our kids. So it's slightly different [than what is used countywide]."
  - District and school leaders inform teachers about curriculum issues and engage them in organized, productive planning. One superintendent said, "One thing that we do have is a large curriculum academy every summer, where we have representatives from each school come, and we have national speakers. ... That's where we kind of lay out school goals, the plan for the year. Over the past five years, we have developed a curriculum planning resource guide for teachers." Most districts reported having similar curriculum planning resource guides.
- **District and school leaders stress that the district curriculum is to be used in all schools by all teachers.**
    - A district leader stated, "Obviously we have preached the fact that [each school's curriculum] should be aligned [to a single district curriculum] and that you should be having consistent opportunities from school to school. To more or less enforce that, we also have our curriculum specialists who go into the individual schools [and also give] principals the tools to ensure that it's happening by sharing data with them. We have somebody in our district right now who is going and visiting every school and documenting best practices, and I think if you can share with principals that this school is performing very well because they are aligning their school curriculum with the division curriculum and they are following the curriculum and *look at their test scores*—that gives a good message to the other schools that this is what should be happening."
    - A district leader stated, "We monitor the curriculum all of the time. We have two sets of individuals who go into classrooms often. Sometimes when you get to the quarterly tests ... it is too late. ... Now the elementary specialists ... [go] back and meet with each principal and look at the quarterly tests so there's no doubt about what is going on [in each classroom]."

- A school leader stated, “We do a pull-out program for special ed—and we make sure that those special ed teachers are using the same types of lesson plans that the regular classroom teacher is using for math and language arts, and they are not more than one week behind what the [regular] classroom teacher is doing. … We don’t have a different curriculum. And that’s worked really [well] for us. And what’s amazing is, one day last week I walked into a [special education] classroom … and I saw the reading lessons being taught … and then I walked into a second grade [general education] class and almost the exact thing was going on in that classroom.”
- School leaders said they monitored the consistency of curriculum delivery across classrooms through established timelines, quarterly assessments, lesson plan review, and walkthroughs.
- **Educators continually review and refine the district curriculum based on student performance data and teacher input.**
  - One district has an annual site-based staff development day when the full staff at each school examines their student performance data and determines strengths and weaknesses. They must then submit a staff development plan based on the analysis. A district leader stated, “I think that has really helped our teachers to develop and give them a better understanding of the curriculum. We have a continual revision process throughout the summer.”
  - A principal stated, “[The key is] looking at aligning curriculum with the textbooks that have been adopted. … We look at a lot of the data disaggregation and [ask], ‘What do we need to do in this area?’ As a school we look at that before we go to the district [curricular review] meeting, and we say at our school, ‘This was an area we were weak in, so we need to really focus on this.’”
  - In Chesterfield County Public Schools, a leader stated, “We have lead instructional personnel for the district. We have lead teachers in each of the schools. There are monthly meetings that are held [in which these individuals] talk about curriculum alignment, and, of course, administrators are a part of the revamping of the curriculum. The curriculum is also worked on in conjunction with our pacing guide because we will restructure the pacing guide based on district data, based on school data.”
  - In Alexandria City Public Schools, a school leader said, “We have curriculum representatives at our building for all of the key core areas. … A curriculum specialist will [also] work with a group of teachers in the summer and pay them a stipend to help write the pacing guides and realign the curriculum based on the data, so when we come back in the fall we usually have new pacing guides that have been readjusted. And every year it has become a lot smoother, because now they’re putting [the curriculum] online so teachers can access it during the summer and start their planning with their team. But it is a process that has been evolving. A couple of years ago, one school might be teaching one of the third-grade objectives and another school may be teaching another one—so now all 13 elementary schools are aligned, and we have quarterly assessments.”
  - Some of the interviewees cited high rates of student mobility—particularly among systems that served military communities—and noted that keeping the curriculum aligned and responsive to the students’ needs requires constant attention. Although each round of review typically originates at the district level, leaders acknowledged the critical role assumed by teachers during the revision process.
  - Within many of the attending districts, a committee or organizational unit is charged with guiding schools through the curriculum revision process. Though the ultimate objectives of the districts’ efforts are virtually the same, the guidance provided to the schools may look very different from one school to another.

- A principal described a planning structure that involves representative teachers from all the elementary schools in the district: “There are eight elementary schools in the district, and teachers and central office staff … meet every four to six weeks to work on [alignment and revision]. … It’s a process that continues throughout the school year.” That principal acknowledged that this arrangement was just one benefit of working in a relatively small district.
- Once the broader framework for curricular revision is constructed, schools add locally relevant details to that structure. One principal described a process that includes teacher surveys about the curriculum guide: “The [survey] forms are really looked at. The instructional specialists do get together with teachers. They look at the suggestions across the board. They then rewrite, and we get our new curriculum guide, which we briefly in-service throughout the school.”
- **The school improvement planning process involves many stakeholders, is central to the activities of the district, and is linked to curriculum, instruction, and student performance data.**
  - A district leader said, “Our school board insists that we present them with data. We have the test data, … attendance data for students, teachers, and administrators, … discipline data, [and] … recruitment and retention data for staff.” All of this information is used to inform improvement efforts.
  - According to a district leader, “The data piece is so huge, and everything is based on what we see as a result of evaluating and looking at data. … That interaction between central office and school-based people [is] how we really come to agree what the goals need to be.”
  - A school leader stated, “We write our school improvement plan every year and I ask for the teachers to sit down and look at the data. And our guidance counselor takes the data—she’s really good at this—and really simplifies it down to what questions [students] missed, what items we need to focus on, and then they write a team goal for the year and an individual goal. At all the grade levels, I fold those goals into our school plan because they are based on the data.” Another principal added, “We do something very similar. We do [a data] presentation. Then we have a walk-about, and we let the teachers [see the data]. There are stickies up under those areas of concern because when you go through your data you [ask], ‘Is it a gender gap? Is it an ethnicity gap? Is it just, *oh my gosh, we scored low in that area?*’”
  - According to one school leader, “The curriculum committee’s responsibility is the development of the SIP, the school improvement plan. On that committee is a representative from each of the grade levels. … We disaggregate test data, look at what our strengths and weaknesses are, … go to the SIP, … look under that goal, and revise the objective based on what the disaggregated data tells us to do.” Every other represented school stated that they use a similar process. One district developed a template on which the district’s goals for student and school performance are clearly stated. Schools outline their school improvement plans on that same template. This strategy of explicitly stating the district’s expectations in conjunction with the request for information is one of the developments to come out of a Curriculum Academy conducted in the district.
  - The state requires each district to create a six-year vision plan. For one district, the process starts with “a strategic planning committee that is composed of teachers, central office administrators, community leaders, school board members … and parents and students.” This process culminates in a six-year plan encompassing a wide variety of data, some of which reflects community-specific measures deemed applicable to the goals of the school system. Each school’s teacher planning committee uses the six-year plan as a basis for the school’s improvement plan, which is, in turn, reviewed by the superintendent.

- One district engages both the school board and a number of advisory boards to develop a twelve-year vision document. Within the parameters of the plan, the district's curriculum and instruction division works with schools to examine their school improvement plans and assessment data. Through this cooperative arrangement between the district administration and the schools, instructional goals—and the frameworks and pacing guides derived from them—remain aligned from school to district to state level.
- Another common factor among the higher performing schools was the incorporation of instructional goals into each school's improvement plan.
- Principals noted that grade-level teams formulate instructional goals for each school year. One principal said, "I ask for the teams to sit down and look at the data." Another principal described a more formalized process: "We operate with a school planning management team that basically is the engine of the school that meets monthly. Under the school planning management team, there are several subcommittees. One of those subcommittees is the curriculum committee, in which we meet each month. So the curriculum committee's responsibility is the development of the SIP, the school improvement plan."



## 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 Virginia Findings: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

- **The knowledge of the powerful effect of strong instructional leadership on student performance guides the choice of professional development activities for principals from within the districts.**
  - In order for intervention programs to be successful, they must be implemented properly. A superintendent expressed concern that principals might not be able to provide guidance to teachers on the use of such intervention programs: "We ... make sure our principals know how intervention programs work also, because we invest a lot of money in intervention. So when we go back and do *Breakthrough to Literacy*, one of the things is they know what that should look like, but they also know how to generate the reports to go back and track student progress."
  - One superintendent described an expectation for principals in that district: "One of the other things that we do is we go back and have to align the curriculum with the new SOLs. We also encourage principals to participate in that. Because that way, right there, they are up front. ... We don't require it, but we strongly encourage them to participate in the curriculum rewrite, as well as the [rewrite of the] pacing guides."
  - District leaders discussed the balance to be struck between the two roles held by principals: instructional leader and building manager. The concern shared by superintendents was that they were finding it more difficult to find instructional leaders. One superintendent added, "We have *so many* managers in our school system. ... That's part of the achievement gap, because the person [who] leads has to be able to know instruction, give teachers support and feedback."

- With time at a premium, one superintendent shifted the structure and focus of meetings in order to make them more useful to the principals. This superintendent said, “My principal meetings have turned from stand-and-deliver to much more of a staff development/workshop approach.”
- A district leader stated, “Not only were not all of the teachers well-versed in what should be taught in the classroom, principals very much had been building managers. … We’ve developed a very well-defined leadership academy for our principals. As part of the evaluation process for our principals, … we have developed a set of guiding questions with [educational expert] Doug Reeves where we actually go out and ask, ‘What is working in your building? What have you decided not to do? What have you thrown out this year that was not working? … Who are your top three teachers? Your bottom three? What are you doing to assess those teachers?’”
- The superintendent in one district emphasizes the importance of hiring and training instructional leaders as principals. To this end, a district leader noted, “The ways people can demonstrate that they’re instructional leaders are actually to have served as a peer coach. … So our peer coaches participate in the assistant principal training, and then they also are allowed to go back and be summer school principals. … Most of the people who move into principalships have actually been peer coaches rather than existing assistant principals because they have a strong instructional piece.”
- **Instructional specialists or coaches who are master teachers provide direct support for classroom instruction.**
  - A principal stated, “Let me tell you the coolest thing that we do, and I think it’s had the largest impact. Two years ago, I was able to hire a literacy coach. My literacy coach literally sits down and analyzes language arts results [by grade level]. [The grade-level teachers] all come in, and she has analyzed for the whole grade level. Yet any teacher [who] did not do well, she actually pulls that teacher aside … and identifies the weak areas. She puts together lesson plans for those weak areas. She gives a mini in-service on the lessons. She then hands the plan to everyone and says ‘Go.’ … If you have some real problems, she sits down with you, gives you more information … and meets with any teacher whose children just didn’t get it. She will then give specific strategies to use with specific children.”
  - Another principal noted that his school has both a mathematics specialist and a literacy coach to support teachers in the classroom. Teachers view the coaches as non-threatening. Following an analysis of student performance within a classroom, the coach may go in and co-teach a lesson. The principal stated, “And I think it means the world [of difference for classroom instruction].”
  - In addition, some districts provided more in-depth, personal attention for struggling teachers. A superintendent told the group about the benefits of having peer coaches for teachers: “We actually have content specialists that go to elementary schools to … look at the lesson; and if something is not going right, they go back … and help them. So it’s not evaluative, and we have two [benefits] also, because [with coaches] it’s not written. … When administrators come in, it’s always a point that if something is not going right, it can be written down, or it can be so noted later on.”
  - One teacher explained, “We get paid to attend workshops; … and not only do we get paid to attend, we leave with supplies ready to go into the classroom: … lesson plans, if you care to use their lesson plans, [and] all the materials to implement [the lesson].”
  - In one school at the Institute, *Soar to Success* coaches visit classrooms to help all third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers implement reciprocal teaching strategies in their classrooms. After teachers are trained, coaches visit their classrooms and observe a lesson. The coach provides non-threatening feedback about what worked.

- **Collaboration among faculty is a key component of capacity building.**
  - Interviewees cited numerous strategies they use to “get everyone on the same page” relative to curriculum. Teachers have opportunities to gather and share information with peers vertically and horizontally. To ensure understanding of and adherence to the curriculum, leaders encourage collaborative communication among grade levels. One principal noted, “We do a lot of vertical teaming where we have our first-grade teachers meet with second-grade teachers, and the second with third, and so forth. And we even do this (fifth- and sixth-grade teacher collaboration) with our fifth-graders transitioning to middle school. But, I think by having that dialogue and that collaboration among a group of teachers at two different grade levels, that kind of ensures that there is an alignment, and that we’re not skipping over a piece when you get to the next grade.”
  - One teacher explained that having only one other fifth-grade teacher led to constant collaboration. More formally, the two classroom teachers meet weekly with a team—the principal, reading specialist, talented and gifted teacher, and special education teacher—to discuss their students.
  - A teacher explained that the principal had developed a “touch base” time—a 30-minute period of time every day during which grade-level teachers’ schedules overlapped.
  - A district leader stated, “[High-quality instruction occurs] when teachers have the opportunity to meet and to plan together and ... also to have time with the principal to talk about instruction. When you have all of those pieces ... a lot of great things go on.”



### 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 Virginia Findings: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- **District and school leaders believe that high-quality classroom instruction with a focus on core academic subjects is achieved and enhanced through the use of the accountability system.**
  - A district leader stated, “We are now finally reaching a period of time where SOLs have been with us for several years. ... We started out with six schools attaining accreditation the first year. We’re now at all but one school of our 86. ... I think [the accountability system] has made us approach our teaching in a focused manner. We’ve aligned our curriculum, and I see real improvement with what’s going on in our district so I think the accountability has made a difference. ... It has caused us to really fine-tune our skills and look at what are best practices.”
  - According to one teacher, “The accountability system has given us a ‘road map’ for consistency throughout the state. Students moving across the state are arriving at the new school with the same exposure and curriculum as other students. Teachers have stronger instructional discussions across schools and districts.”
  - One district leader stated that the accountability movement has led to the development of his district as a learning community: “We talk about grading; we talk about scheduling and timing ... because by talking about it, we can come to some consensus instead of assuming that everybody is on the same page, because we’re not.”

- A district leader stated, “I was the principal at the time when the SOLs came down, and I was in a very high-performing school based on grades and all of that kind of stuff, and [then] we did not make accreditation the first year. It was devastating to our staff [but] ... we started talking about instruction instead of management behaviors, we started taking a really close look at what we were doing in the classroom, and it was so exciting because it was what I went into education for. It was really cool because [the accountability system] brought all of that focus back.”
- Another district leader said that while teacher focus seemed to narrow a bit in the classroom at first—as a result of the accountability system—the teachers are now seeing where they can begin to add more enriching activities.
- **Doing “whatever it takes” to ensure student success, principals and teachers assume collective responsibility for learning and continually adjust instructional practices and arrangements to meet student needs.**
  - One principal stated, “We do a simulation test six weeks out from the actual [state] test itself. My lead teachers are required to develop this simulation test in each of the core areas. ... We disaggregate the data [from the simulation test], look at our strengths and weaknesses across [the] grade level, look at our strengths and weaknesses across [each] classroom, and we restructure groups [across the classrooms], groups of children in the core subjects—math, science, reading.” Students, teachers, and parents now accept that students will be flexibly grouped across classrooms throughout the school year according to their learning needs.
  - In one school, teachers decided to “switch classrooms” for review purposes. The third-grade teachers went into the first-grade classrooms and taught first grade while all of the first-grade teachers went to the third-grade classrooms to review the first-grade skills that were central to the new ones being mastered. The principal stated, “It was wonderful. ... It just made more of a unity in our school. It’s one of the best things we’ve done.”
  - Another principal explained that she has a motto that is continually referenced in her school—‘collaboration, consensus, and no fault.’ To further elaborate the motto, she said that there were no votes in her school. “We keep hassling with [a decision] until we build consensus, ... [and we] work through it until everyone is going to support it and work to make it work.” She also stated that her staff takes full ownership of each student’s learning: “I say to the staff, ‘These scores belong to all of us. We are all responsible, and we will share the success, and we will do what we can to support each other.’” Finally, she indicated that she reminds the staff regularly that it is ridiculous to try to “blame someone” for a student’s lack of success. “Let’s take the data where it is and decide what we need to do to change the outcome of the data, and that’s it.”
- **Teachers use a variety of support personnel to supplement instructional arrangements and provide more individualized learning time for students.**
  - In one school, two reading specialists either co-teach reading classes or use small-group pull-outs to support teachers. A mathematics specialist is also working with the primary classes, teaching lessons and working with small groups of students within the class.
  - Another teacher described instructional support systems in her school: “We have the inclusionary teachers [who] work with a team-teaching approach. ... Our guidance counselor comes into the classroom ... to work on testing strategies. Second- and fourth-grade [students] put together care packages [for third- and fifth-grade] students.” To encourage them on test-taking days, second-grade students personally deliver the care package to third-graders, and fourth-grade students deliver to fifth-graders. This same teacher indicated that there were also technology specialists, mathematics specialists, science specialists, parents, and Title I teachers assisting in the classrooms.
  - Teachers from another school described partnerships with Liberty University, Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Sweet Briar College, Lynchburg College, and the community

college that bolster instructional practices and arrangements for students, particularly through individualized mentoring and tutoring. In this same school, a trainer brings dogs into the school, and students sit in the hallway and read to the dogs.



## 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 Virginia Findings: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

#### ▪ Districts ensure that data systems track student achievement and inform key decisions.

- At least two of the attending districts had implemented the SASI student information management system, which includes the *InteGrade Pro* electronic gradebook. One superintendent found it necessary to supplement the SASI system with local solutions: "With our implementation of SASI, ... we've ended up having to develop a lot of systems ourselves, because technology companies—or *solutions*—they will promise you the world, and oftentimes they can't deliver it for a division of our size. ... It's not doing all that we want it to do."
- Another superintendent explained how to get the most out of one's information management system: "Even though we have two full-time people who work on SASI—and nothing *but* SASI—we have a consultant, and NCS [Pearson] is still the one who owns it, and that person comes into our school district at least five days during the month to ... deal with technical problems."
- Other districts opted for other means of tracking student data. One superintendent said that the district had someone create "spreadsheets that can be given to the principals with the data in [them], and for several years—and they can look at the trends and so forth."
- The remaining district chose a system somewhere between the complicated and expensive SASI and the simple, yet affordable spreadsheet: "We have a basic system. We are working towards developing a data warehouse where we're going to create our own reports that we find we need to have. We have a department of school improvement and accountability; for the most part, they create our charts and give us all the information we need that goes into your school improvement plans."
- From the very beginning of every student's career, the collection of data begins. One superintendent described the genesis of the student's recorded life: "We tag our students at pre-K, and all of the data is entered from the central office to try to follow these students through the elementary grades with PALS [Phonemic Awareness Literacy Screening], SOLs, [and] six-weeks assessments; and all of this information is disseminated out to the schools, so they have access from the Internet. ... Even at pre-K and coming into kindergarten, we look at the type of preschools that kids were involved in—had no preschool, had Head Start, all those different factors—to see what is going on." The technology division compiles the information, building a longitudinal "story" of each student's academic life.
- The collected data are used to guide a number of decisions at the district, school, and classroom levels. At the district level, student data may determine the instructional goals listed in the six-year plan. At the school level, student data may determine the type of

teacher chosen to fill a vacancy, what is offered for professional development for the campus's mandatory training days, or what wording finds its way into the school improvement plan. At the classroom level, student data may determine which units or lessons individual teachers choose to de-emphasize and which they choose to emphasize. In short, interviewees said that student data drive everything they do in order to remain successful.

- **Schools and districts monitor teaching and learning in many ways other than through state requirements.**

- One district leader explained that, "Our curriculum instruction department has developed 'what to look for in a language arts classroom.'" The monitoring tool is very specifically designed to describe what the observer would see in a high-quality lesson, and these characteristics are strongly communicated to everyone—the principal, teachers, and parents.
- Another district leader stated that, "We do running records constantly, but we also do K-6 six-week assessments to make sure that [students] are on target."
- Teachers listed writing portfolios, electronic grade books, online skill checkers, district benchmark assessments, and prepared assessments from instructional programs as just some of the ways that they continually monitor their students' progress. One teacher noted that, while it "seemed like a lot," continual monitoring was essential to differentiating instruction and intervening immediately when a particular student's learning had been interrupted.



## 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 Virginia Findings: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

- **Higher performing schools identify students' needs for intervention early and respond quickly by providing additional resources such as time, staff, and instructional support materials.**

- One district leader described extensive intervention plans that "go into place as soon as we know a student is experiencing academic difficulty. So at the end of the first marking period, we will have an intervention plan right there so that [the student] will go back and get that intervention and that intervention plan is monitored."
- In one district, the community was concerned that students experiencing marginal success were continually promoted through the system. As a result, the district now has two categories of promotion: conditional and regular. A student's promotion is linked to mastery of grade-level objectives. If a student demonstrates weak skills, he/she may be conditionally promoted; but any student can only be conditionally promoted twice in his/her school career. A conditional promotion is tied to a strong intervention plan. The superintendent and school board closely monitor the number of conditional promotions in the district.
- Teachers listed interventions available for students who needed extra assistance: before- and after-school tutoring, special summer programs (both enrichment and remedial), one-

on-one tutoring by support personnel, flexible grouping, supplemental instructional materials, extra time in core subject areas, and volunteer and peer tutoring.

- One principal stated that the most powerful intervention in his school was small-group instruction based on flexible grouping and informed by data.
- **District leaders identify schools needing extra assistance in reaching academic goals. Well-developed systems of intervention are in place to support these schools.**
  - A district leader explained the way his district provides intensive assistance for schools that may be at risk for failure. “We go in and provide some [nationally recognized] staff development. We brought Ruby Payne in to work with some of these identified schools and Doug Reeves, but we also have instructional specialists or instructional coordinators in the various [subject] areas—science, math, social studies, language arts. … They go in and work with the teachers, do lots of modeling of lessons, assist in coaching and so forth. And they go in and work with the school all year long and help them track data, help them look at student performance, help them identify the areas of need, and try to beef those areas up.”
  - One superintendent recalled that, for a school that had scored in the 39<sup>th</sup> percentile on the state’s achievement test, “We put intensive assistance in for that particular school. Last year, for language arts, they scored in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in every area.” The school, which has the second-highest poverty rate in Virginia Beach, is, “our smallest school, and I think that has something to do with [their performance] as well.”
  - For schools that are at risk for not passing or for not meeting accreditation standards, one district indicated, “Instructional specialists go in, and they have to develop a formal plan of action. Then they have to have their test data to show where they are going.” According to a leader in that district, “We called them ‘highlight schools’ prior to this year, and those highlight schools have all now passed and made accreditation.”



# Virginia Elementary Best Practice Institute: Conclusion

**Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework**

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

## **The Findings**

### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

*The school improvement planning process was tightly linked to curriculum, instruction, and student performance data. Aligned with the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs), district curriculum was clarified through curriculum maps, pacing guides, and aligned benchmark assessments. Clearly stated district curriculum was to be used in all schools by all teachers, who also continually reviewed and refined it based on their experiences in curriculum delivery and examinations of student performance data.*

### **Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**

*Professional development and support activities were carefully selected to provide training for principals as instructional leaders. District leaders emphasized that the “person who leads” has to know instruction and to be able to give teachers support and feedback. In addition to the principal, instructional specialists and coaches provided direct support for classroom instruction. Across classrooms, teachers noted that their collaboration with peers was a key component of capacity building.*

### **Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements**

*District and school leaders believed that high-quality classroom instruction with a focus on core academic subjects was achieved and enhanced through the use of the state accountability system. One leader indicated that accountability had provided the “road map” for consistency across classrooms, schools, and the state. Within this structure, principals and teachers assumed collective responsibility for student learning and continually adjusted instructional practices and arrangements to meet student needs. Flexible small groups enhanced individualized learning opportunities.*

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data**

*Constant and continual monitoring of student performance levels was seen as the means to ensure that all students reached high standards. Districts and schools used many measures beyond the state assessment to monitor student performance including writing portfolios, benchmark assessments, online skill inventories, and classroom assessments.*

### **Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment**

*District leaders identified schools needing extra assistance in reaching academic goals. Well-developed systems of intervention were in place to support these schools. Through early identification, students needing greater support were provided with additional opportunities for learning. Interventions included extended learning opportunities, supplemental instructional materials, and small-group instruction.*

## **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 Virginia, 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-Virginia 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-Virginia 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 Virginia.*