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Lauren Campsen, right, principal of Ocean View Elementary School, describes a data chart to Judy Ashcroft, a Broad Prize site visit team member from the University of Texas at Austin.

BROAD PRIZE TIPS

PATH *to* EXCELLENCE

BY HEATHER ZAVADSKY

Districts that have succeeded in closing the achievement gap have no silver bullet or specific reform, but rather carefully integrate practices and support systems that come from district and school leaders and teachers.

A look at recent winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education, which honors urban school districts that show significant increases in student achievement and close achieve-

ment gaps between ethnic and income groups, shows that the districts have very individualized reforms to which they attribute their progress in closing the gap. Yet they also have some commonalities. These systems emphasize:

- Clear expectations defined by a specific curriculum;
- Support systems for teachers coupled with training to improve their practices; and

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- Systemwide data and accountability to constantly measure progress. Norfolk Public Schools, the 2005 Broad Prize winner, closed the gap by changing teachers' approaches to instruction and student learning through systemically empowering teachers and creating a common curriculum.

A CHANGE IN MESSAGE

Norfolk Public Schools includes many highly mobile Navy families, and more than half its students (62.4%) are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Yet Norfolk's results on standardized tests demonstrate higher levels of achievement

than demographically similar districts in Virginia.

Norfolk began to change when now-retired Superintendent John Simpson was hired in 1998. One administrator described student performance at the time as “abysmal.” Simpson was determined to change performance first by changing the school culture, working to create a common curriculum and collaboration. His emphasis on raising student achievement and closing the gap was “something you could feel as clearly as you could hear the wind blow,” said Cathy Lassiter, executive director for middle schools. “He brought a consistent, passionate message highlighting the possible.”

“The bar suddenly was raised,” one teacher said. “We now had to teach everyone and do it equitably, not with just one group.”

The district’s transformation centered on culture, communication, support, and collaboration:

- Creating a clear, uniform message;
- Supporting the message through both internal and external resources;
- Creating an open system of trust;
- Involving key stakeholders in the process;
- Connecting members at all levels of the system to create support; and
- Using data to keep the system on target.

Simpson started by pointing to pockets of excellence within the district as models for others.

District leaders then outlined instructional “nonnegotiables”:

1. Teachers and administrators shall focus on high-quality instruction;
2. Schools shall be communities of learners who engage in collegial planning, sharing, collaboration, and weekly professional development;
3. Teachers and principals shall engage in data-driven decision

making to ensure a focus on teaching and learning; and

4. Teachers shall maximize the use and integration of technology.

The expectations were translated into specific district goals, which committees of district stakeholders further defined through subject-specific strands. These committees detailed what world-class learning would look like in terms of powerful literacy and mathematics.

POWERFUL LEARNING

The district worked to rewrite its curriculum and adopt an instructional focus on higher standards for all students.

Prior to Simpson, the district had decentralized elementary reading, with the result that it had 24 distinct reading programs in place. Simpson standardized elementary reading into one centralized program. District leaders engaged central office administrators, principals, several parents, and more than 1,000 teachers in developing a list of 14 skills for “powerful literacy,” a concept borrowed from Patrick Finn’s *Literacy With an Attitude* (State University of New York Press, 1999).

The tenet behind powerful literacy is to move beyond functional literacy (memorizing facts) to activities that develop higher-order thinking skills. Teachers design and teach lessons in which students analyze and synthesize data, ask questions, solve

problems, and make connections to other knowledge.

Central office administrators gradually introduced the new design throughout the district in frequent training sessions with teachers that addressed several powerful literacy strands at a time, tying the strands to the district’s curriculum guides, textbooks, and other materials.

In mathematics, the district hired an outside consultant to offer week-long institutes in a new curriculum. All teachers took part in 30 hours of professional development over an initial summer and 30 hours of follow-up during the school year. During the school year, teachers were part of study groups that met four times to share instructional strategies and discuss questions and concerns. The district hired substitute teachers to offer classroom teachers released time during the school year.

In addition, the district gave teachers detailed pacing guides that described quarterly objectives. These pacing guides also contained common assessments (typically administered monthly) aligned to the curriculum and resources for teachers. Pacing guides were provided on CDs with hyperlinks to specific activities and a list of common vocabulary to align content across the district.

“It really struck a chord that we were actually talking not just about passing the state assessment,” said one central office administrator, “but

About the Broad Prize for Urban Education

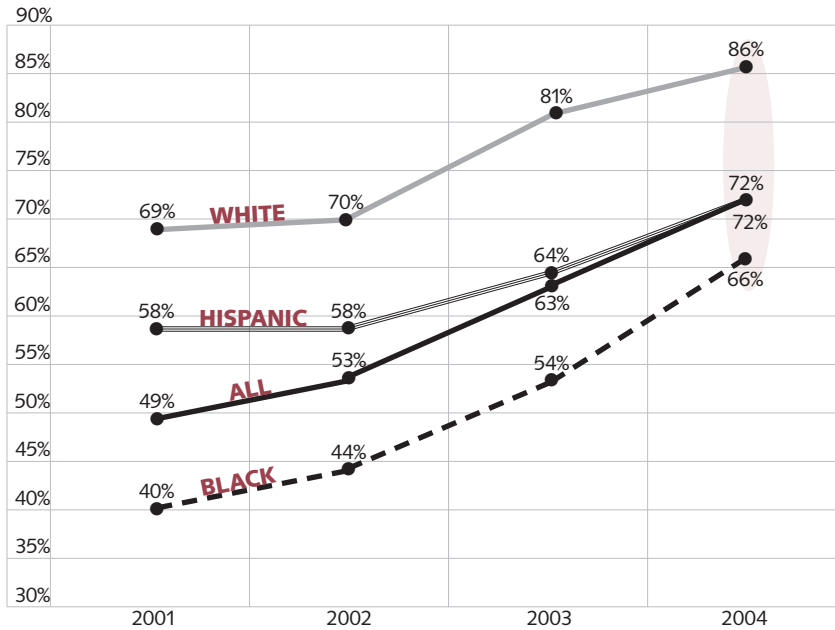
The annual \$1 million Broad Prize for Urban Education, the largest award in K-12 public education in the country, honors urban school districts showing significant increases in student achievement while at the same time closing achievement gaps among ethnic and income groups.

Each year, five finalists are selected from 100 large urban school districts across the nation. The winner and finalists are selected based on academic performance data, site visit observations, and interviews with district administrators, teachers, principals, parents, union leaders, school board members, and community representatives.

To learn more about the Broad Prize for Urban Education, visit www.broadprize.org.

To review a more expansive compilation of the practices from Broad Prize finalists through an interactive Framework of System Practices, visit www.nc4ea.org.

Closer together. Black and Hispanic students narrow the achievement gap in middle school mathematics in Norfolk, Va.



doing something powerful in the classroom to prepare students to be active members in a democratic society.”

The state standards became the floor, not the ceiling, as one person noted.

NEW INSTRUCTION

The new lessons required teachers to respond with new instructional strategies. Teachers had to change from traditional lecture-style teaching and handing out worksheets to asking students to write justifications to their answers in math class.

The dramatic shift in instruction posed a challenge to teachers who were concerned about the time it would take to develop, edit, grade, and teach the units.

When asked how teachers received the instructional changes, central office and school administrators said the powerful literacy and mathematics strands gave teachers the answers they were seeking to problems they had identified through students’ monthly and quarterly assessments. As teachers began to see results, they saw more clearly the connection between teach-

ing and learning and how the changes actually made their work easier. One teacher commented:

“I’ve learned so much! At the beginning of the year, I was just using a running checklist. Now, powerful literacy and mathematics are second nature; I do it without thinking about it. Constantly questioning students during instruction makes it easier. I’m constantly assessing the kids, and I know right then what they need to work on.”

SUPPORT

To support teachers in the changes being made, district leadership decided to merge the curriculum and instruction and professional development departments to become the Leadership and Capacity Development (LCD) Department. The LCD’s purpose was to build the staff’s capacity to deliver the instructional program. To fulfill that charge, LCD instructional specialists spend 70% of their time each week on campuses working directly in classrooms with teachers, and are expected to “roll up their sleeves and work arm-

in-arm with teachers,” said one administrator.

One school department chair said of her school’s LCD specialist, “I can talk to her about things that are both-ering me, and we observe teachers together to determine what my department should be focusing on.”

LCD specialists target their support by working with the school principal to review data, identify areas of focus, and set target goals for the school for the year. The specialists arrange school visits with the principal, sometimes observing in every classroom on a specific grade level or working with teachers during grade-level planning.

To lay the groundwork for frequent school visits, the district had to build a trusting climate united around the common goal of raising expectations for all students. The change began with an administrative retreat and continued through districtwide book readings and discussions using “simple books people could get their hands around and dig into,” as an administrator noted, such as *QBQ! The Question Behind the Question: Practicing Personal Accountability in Work and in Life*, by John G. Miller (Putnam Publishing Group, 2004), which discusses personal accountability and doing whatever it takes to ensure success. The superintendent often attended the book study groups at schools, which helped set the stage for conversation.

To further cement the academic goals, district leaders worked to reinvent the concept of the central office, making it into a place of centralized support that schools could call on to receive immediate assistance. Several district and school administrators described the process as “completely eliminating the us/them mentality.”

Increasing central office administrators’ visibility on school campuses through a structured walk-through protocol was integral to connecting

the central office to schools. To ensure trust and buy-in, the superintendent created a process in which the walk-throughs are used to promote overall observations about how the school is meeting its objectives, but no evaluative data is collected. Walk-throughs now are common practice and occur frequently within school levels and vertical teams as the need is identified.

Collaboration with other teachers soon became a regular event. Facilitated through common planning time on every grade level, teachers meet in teams at least twice a week to plan instruction and review data. In a typical team meeting, teachers review the pacing guides with the calendar, look at classroom level data to determine which instructional units succeeded, and exchange materials. Teachers now are expected to use data to drive instructional decisions, but data also serves to create a common dialogue and processes to discuss and review their work.

CONCLUSION

Norfolk was able to change its overall culture, build a comprehensive accountability system, change its cur-

Norfolk Public Schools

Norfolk, Va.

Grades: Pre-K-12

Enrollment: 36,285

Staff: 3,263

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 25.3%

Black: 69.4%

Hispanic: 3.1%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 2%

Native American: 0.2%

Other: 0%

Limited English proficient: 1%

Languages spoken: 26

Free/reduced lunch: 64.2%

Special education: 14.3%

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riculum and instructional practices, and improve student performance within one seamless system. The key was driving the reform efforts with clear goals and a focus. Norfolk's vigilance to ensure all the pieces fit together is particularly noteworthy as districts and schools become flooded

with numerous strategies and vendors attempting to help with reform.

Administrators and teachers are quick to assert that the district's success did not happen overnight and they don't believe they are where they need to be yet. To move a struggling system in one direction, the district had to change its culture and instructional practices to focus and align the entire system on demanding higher expectations for all students.

The district plans to continue to focus on the same goals with added concentration on establishing consistency and rigor across high schools, creating equal access to Advanced Placement classes, and continuing to close achievement gaps. In Norfolk, every stakeholder is aware of the districtwide mantra of "all means all."

"There is a big excitement in our district now," said one principal.

"Everyone is seeing success. Realtors weren't taking people to Norfolk — they were going to the neighboring bigger city. That's not happening anymore. Everyone sees we are really shining." ■