



SREB

The Three Essentials:

*Improving Schools Requires
District Vision, District and
State Support, and Principal
Leadership*

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LEARNING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP PROGRAM



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Executive Summary

In all the talk about the building principal's key role in producing "turnaround" high schools, one critical factor often gets lost in the policy shuffle:

Districts matter.

The vision and actions of system leaders and school board members frequently determine whether principals can be effective in leading school improvement. Districts cannot necessarily make weak principals succeed, but we have seen too many districts create conditions in which even good principals are likely to fail.

And states matter, too.

At the point of intervention with struggling schools, whether states opt to bypass the central office or decide instead to include district leaders in their capacity-building efforts will — more often than not — determine whether their intervention efforts have much staying power.

The Three Essentials

These understandings about the three essentials of school improvement have emerged from close observations of the inner workings of seven school districts, as the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Learning-Centered Leadership Program sought to answer this essential question:

What are the conditions school districts can create that make it possible for principals to be more effective in leading school improvement?

This research is part of a comprehensive effort to pinpoint the key leadership factors that improve student achievement and increase the number of high school graduates who are ready for college and careers. In this study, SREB examined the role of the district office in providing principals with the working conditions they need to improve teacher effectiveness and student performance in the middle grades and high school.

This investigation included 35 interviews with superintendents, school board chairs and selected central-office leaders from seven diverse school systems in three SREB states. The research design was shaped in part by earlier SREB studies that analyzed principals' perceptions of the support they receive from higher up in the school governance structure.

The findings in this report include two overarching conclusions:

First: Three essential elements must be in place for struggling high schools to improve in substantive ways:

- √ State capacity-building
- √ District vision
- √ Principal leadership

Second: These elements are rarely all present and working in sync.

As a result, despite federal mandates, state interventions and system expenditures of millions of dollars earmarked for reform, many school districts serving high-needs students have a substantial percentage of schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals under the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*.

What Is Missing

Plainly put, the problem is this: Districts and states are failing to create the conditions that make it possible for principals to lead school improvement effectively.

What happens instead? In some districts, administrators attempt to exert complete control over every phase of instruction and school operations. They try to own all the problems and enforce all solutions from the top down. In other districts, administrators turn all the problems over to the principal, offering little or no sense of direction or support — just a demand for results.

Five of the seven districts studied fell into one of these two categories. In the two highly supportive districts, however, district and school board leaders exhibited a clear vision of what constitutes a good school and have created a framework in which the principal has autonomy to work with faculty on an improvement agenda with collaborative support from the district.

Few principals have the capacity to rise above a school district's lack of vision and clear purpose. If district leaders cannot see beyond "test-prep" — if they expend most of the system's time, attention and energy on getting kids to pass low-level tests and meet minimum standards — then even the most capable principals will likely find themselves trapped in caretaker roles, presiding over schools and faculties that lack the direction, the goals and the belief in themselves necessary to create a powerful learning experience for all their students.

The State's Essential Job

While districts must create the right vision and support system for school improvement, they cannot be expected to act alone in this effort. State departments of education must build capacity, helping local districts develop a coherent vision for the future of their schools, as well as the knowledge and skills to support principals and teachers as they create their own vision and goals at the school level — and then hold themselves accountable for results.

States need to take a hard look at how they fix broken schools. Under federal pressure to overhaul struggling schools through aggressive intervention, state education leaders tend to assume a “triage” outlook, concentrating their capacity-building efforts on saving the individual school and not addressing the chronic problems of the host system. This is a bit like performing a heart bypass and ignoring the systemic causes of the clogged arteries. The patient will improve for a time, but the underlying illness remains.

In the intervention setting, it is the state educator’s job to create the leadership capacity necessary to reach and sustain higher levels of performance wherever that capacity is lacking. In most districts where schools continually struggle, improved capacity is needed both at the school level and among central office administrators, school board members and key community leaders.

As long as a school district remains dysfunctional, “fixed” schools will not stay fixed for long. States must focus on building the district’s ability to articulate a strategic plan and vision that includes system goals, a framework of best practices, supportive policies and a smart alignment of resources. Most important of all, states must prepare district leaders with the knowledge and skills to build a similar capacity among their principals and teachers.

The District’s Essential Job

The district — including the school board, the superintendent, key staff and influential stakeholders in the community — must have the capacity to develop and articulate both a vision and a set of practices that send a clear message of what schools are to be about. This is a message not only for educators, but for the community at large. This message creates public understanding of what the school system is trying to do to prepare more middle grades students for challenging high school work and to graduate more students from high school prepared for the next step.

The authenticity of this message is affirmed through the district’s development of a strategic plan that manifests the vision — and then by district actions that establish the conditions necessary for principals and teacher leaders to create a different kind of school. These conditions include aligning all policies and resources to the plan; creating a collaborative and supportive working relationship with each school; expecting and supporting the principal to become the school’s instructional leader; and communicating the vision and strategic plan to the public in a highly visible way that provides the context for principals to make decisions supported by parents and the larger community.

The School’s Essential Job

The principal and teacher leaders within each school must engage the faculty and develop a vision of what the school must do if it is to graduate more students who are prepared for life and work in the 21st century. If state and district leaders have done their jobs, if the vision and desired outcomes are clear and the necessary supports are in place, then the principal and teachers can begin to design and implement solutions tailored to the unique needs of their own students and communities. Two decades of SREB research supports effective practices that include relevant, rigorous, hands-on learning activities and programs to ensure that every student is connected with a goal and an adult who will serve as his or her mentor and champion.

Under these conditions, principals can be given a broader range of autonomy to make decisions within the boundaries of a strategic framework and to have control over the schedule and placement of faculty within the school. With the vision, framework and supports in place, the principal can be held accountable for working with staff to develop an improvement plan within the boundaries that the district has established, while the district provides support for professional development that can be customized to each school. Ownership of problems shifts from the district to the building level, with the district staff supporting the school in creating and implementing the interventions at the school level. The empowered principal becomes directly responsible for engaging the faculty in creating a comprehensive school improvement plan, for fidelity in implementing that plan and, ultimately, for improving results.

Taking Action on the Three Essentials

The findings that emerged from this study, other research and SREB's extensive experience in working with districts to improve the effectiveness of middle grades and high schools support actions that district and state leaders must take if they want to not only "turn around" schools but also keep them moving aggressively ahead on the road of continuous improvement.

Actions by Districts and Schools

- 1. Work with a cross-section of community and school leaders to create a strategic vision for graduating students who are prepared for a range of postsecondary options.** The district must define the purpose of high schools and the core values for achieving their goals. The cross-section of the community creating this vision must include the perspectives of less-educated and less-affluent residents, whose children make up a growing proportion of students.
- 2. Focus on policies and support services that will enhance each school's ability to achieve its own strategic vision and plan within the context of the district's vision.** Districts must develop collaborative structures for working with school principals and school leadership teams to create school environments that improve student engagement and learning. This will require a shift in the role of district staff and a corresponding shift in accountability systems to base performance evaluations, rewards and incentives for district staff on their effectiveness in helping schools.
- 3. Develop tools and processes that principals and teachers can use to ensure that instruction for all groups of students is aligned with college- and career-readiness standards.** Districts must define for principals and teachers a level of instruction that engages students in intellectually challenging, authentic and relevant assignments that foster student motivation. Districts cannot rely on the scope and sequence found in pacing guides to replace creative planning by teachers.
- 4. Invest in high-quality professional development for the district staff, school principals and teachers.** Effective districts invest in the learning not only of students, but also of teachers, principals, district staff, superintendents and school board members. Low-performing schools are not likely to turn around unless educators who work in the schools have extensive opportunities to learn and implement

more effective practices to engage students in learning challenging materials. Because many students enrolled in low-performing schools have trouble reading, these schools must initially make literacy the centerpiece of professional development.

5. Lead schools to analyze a variety of data — beyond test scores — and discover the root causes behind student failure or dropping out. To fully understand the causes of low achievement and low motivation, schools need more information about how students perceive their school experiences, the beliefs school faculty hold about students and about the purpose of the high school, and the ways in which at-risk students receive (or do not receive) extra help. Once schools understand why students are failing, districts need to assist schools in defining how to address the problems using proven practices.

6. Give school principals real authority in the areas of staff selection, school scheduling, instructional programs, and use of and redirection of new and existing resources. Principals and teacher-leaders of low-performing schools need flexible resources and the ability to redirect current resources to adopt a comprehensive school improvement design — aligned with the districts' strategic vision — that can help them improve the school's climate, organization and practices.

7. Consider working with an external school improvement provider to develop a strategic vision that can move the district forward. Too many consistently low-performing districts try to solve their problems by bringing in new superintendents every two to four years and firing principals of schools that do not make AYP. An outside facilitator can help a district break that cycle by working with district leaders and the school board to identify community goals and create structures that enable school and district leaders to meet performance goals and serve students better.

8. Develop a succession plan for school principals. Districts can help themselves and their schools by investing in professional development to prepare future school leaders. The first step in succession planning is to identify (early in their careers) talented teachers who have the potential to become principals. The district should develop a collaborative approach with a university or approved outside entity to provide potential leaders with learning experiences designed to prepare them to lead and improve the district's most challenged schools, including authentic internship experiences in the district.

9. Engage parents and the larger community in ongoing dialogue about the changes needed to prepare more students for success in high school, college, careers and citizenship. Districts must work continually with parents and community leaders to ask and answer a variety of questions related to the common vision for school improvement. These questions should guide the community in realizing a vision for schools that require students to think, solve problems and produce high-quality work; help students see a connection between their studies and their future; and require educators to respect students and ensure that students succeed.

Actions by State Reform Leaders

Many school districts lack the authority, the reach and resources to change on their own. States can take the following actions to help districts better support principals and, in some cases, must be the agents of change.

- 1. Broaden accountability indicators beyond minimum academic standards** to include increasing annually the percentages of students who graduate prepared for college, advanced training or careers.
- 2. Develop a system of incentives for the recognition and reward of schools that show significant improvement in meeting new accountability indicators** such as increasing the percentage of students leaving grade eight ready for high school, reducing the failure rates in grades nine and 10, and increasing the percentages of students who are on track at the end of grade nine and 10 to meet college- and career-readiness standards by the end of high school.
- 3. Pursue policies that recognize a broader definition of academic rigor** by: joining a college-preparatory academic core with quality career/technical studies; approving and funding career/technical programs only if they have embedded academic content and intellectually demanding assignments; providing alternatives through which students can demonstrate preparedness for further study, advanced training or employment, including completion of special projects; and creating incentives for high schools to join with other entities to provide relevant and intellectually challenging learning experiences for students.
- 4. Offer a vision of best practices — based on research and a wide range of evidence — that will improve low-performing high schools if implemented properly.** These include making discipline-focused literacy and literacy training the centerpiece for all classrooms and providing 15 to 20 days of professional development for all faculty over the course of three years, targeting specific school and classroom practices and tailored to particular problems confronting the school.
- 5. Ensure that principals have autonomy** to select their faculty, discretion to allocate resources for the improvement of their school, and authority to select professional development that is aligned with their school improvement plans.
- 6. Ensure that every district has a comprehensive vision, strategic plan and system to help principals lead their schools and to hold schools accountable for achieving results.** Assist every district in working with its community to shape a bold vision for improving schools. States can provide external facilitators and consultants to work with districts in developing their district plan and involving the community and others in that process. States also can assist districts in performing resource audits and offer ideas for redirecting resources to better support a school improvement framework.

Contents

Introduction	1
Study Method	3
Extending Previous SREB Research	9
Seven Strategies: How Districts Can Support Principals Effectively in School Improvement	11
Strategy 1. Establish a clear focus and a strategic framework of core beliefs, effective practices and goals for improving student achievement.	11
Strategy 2. Organize and engage the school board and district office in support of each school.	17
Strategy 3. Provide instructional coherence and support.	21
Strategy 4: Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals, teacher-leaders and district staff.	27
Strategy 5: Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices, and assist schools to use data effectively.	32
Strategy 6: Optimize the use of resources to improve student learning.	37
Strategy 7: Use open, credible processes to involve key school and community leaders in shaping a vision for improving schools.	42
Actions States, Districts and Schools Should Take to Better Serve Students	45
Endnotes	51

Introduction

American school districts' actions can either lead schools to greater success or stifle progress in student learning. Yet, despite their central role in education, school districts are among the least understood components of the nation's public education infrastructure.¹ Often, the school board and district staff are considered no more than middlemen in the education enterprise, passing federal and state funds on to schools — where the “real work” of education takes place — and keeping track of school compliance with federal and state laws, regulations and policies.

To shed greater light on the crucial role of districts in improving student achievement, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) conducted 35 interviews with superintendents, school board chairs and selected central-office leaders from seven school districts in SREB states.* **The purpose of these interviews was to investigate the role of the district office in providing principals with the working conditions they need in order to improve middle grades and high schools. The central question underlying all of the interviews was, “Can key district leaders effectively articulate the ways in which their district helps principals improve their schools?”** The results of this study add to a growing body of research — and to SREB's extensive work with middle grades and high schools — showing the difference districts can make in improving education.² Just as some teachers succeed while others fail and some schools succeed while others fail, some districts consistently excel while others continue to underperform. Findings from this study suggest a strong relationship between specific district practices and student achievement results.

This study of district staff members' perceptions of their support for principals complements a previous SREB study on principals' perceptions of school district support. (See SREB's *The District Leadership Challenge: Empowering Principals to Improve Teaching and Learning*.) Qualitative research methods were used in both studies to develop a rich understanding of principals' working conditions from interviews with key district staff and school board members. Highly supportive school districts are implementing many of the best practices encouraged by Wendy Togneri and Stephen Anderson in their groundbreaking 2003 study, *Beyond Islands of Excellence*. SREB has adapted Togneri and Anderson's recommendations as a framework for its investigation of district practices; those recommendations are consistent with SREB's experience in supporting comprehensive school reform in the 1,200 schools that are a part of the SREB *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* network and the 500 schools in the *Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW)* network. **The result of SREB's work is a set of seven strategies that supportive districts can use to help their middle grades and high school principals succeed in improving student achievement and the learning environment:**

Strategy 1: Establish a clear focus and a strategic framework of core beliefs, effective practices and goals for improving student achievement. Highly supportive districts provide principals with a focused mission and vision of key beliefs and practices to guide school improvement. This can be a short

* Due to the small sample size for this study, appropriate caution should be used in drawing wider conclusions from the results of the study.

mission statement, such as “Striving for excellence — no exceptions, no excuses.” Or, it can be a living framework collectively adopted and developed by the community over a period of time and continuously monitored and revised by an active school board.

Strategy 2: Organize and engage the school board and district office in support of each school.

In highly supportive districts, the school board continuously focuses on improving student achievement, and central office personnel spend the majority of their time in the schools, working with principals and teachers to create cultures of success uniquely suited to the students’ needs and the faculty’s strengths. Principals are given the authority to make hiring and firing decisions for their schools and are expected to be (and supported as) instructional leaders.

Strategy 3: Provide instructional coherence and support. Highly supportive district leaders understand the challenging work principals must do and, in many cases, have been successful principals themselves. These leaders support the principals’ focus on instruction and model that priority by publicly focusing on curriculum and instruction in school board and superintendent’s meetings. They routinely engage school and teacher-leaders in developing and using tools such as walkthroughs, pacing guides and proven, research-based instructional practices — rather than micromanaging staff.

Strategy 4: Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals, teacher-leaders and district staff. Highly supportive districts give principals tools to be effective instructional leaders and continuous learners. The districts set aside time for collective learning and instruction-focused professional development and provide beginning principals with induction and mentoring to increase their chances of success as effective instructional leaders.

Strategy 5: Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices, and assist schools to use data effectively. Highly supportive districts have adopted strategies to help principals disaggregate, analyze and interpret their student achievement data quickly to discern student deficits and identify weaknesses in school and classroom practices. They help schools use formative and benchmark assessments to ensure that the results of high-stakes tests do not come as a surprise to teachers or principals.

Strategy 6: Optimize the use of resources to improve student learning. Highly supportive districts provide principals with resources — human and financial — and the flexibility to use those resources to address unique school needs while remaining consistent with school and district improvement frameworks and strategic plans. Schools with greater needs receive greater resources and assistance in assessing which school and classroom practices are working and in eliminating ineffective practices. These schools also are supported with outside coaches and facilitators who are skilled in assisting the school and teacher-leaders to address how low-income and minority students are being taught and how instruction must change if achievement gaps are to be closed.

Strategy 7: Use open, credible processes to involve key school and community leaders in shaping a vision for improving schools. Highly supportive districts engage the whole community in setting a common vision for student learning. They seek principals’ and teacher-leaders’ ideas on major decisions about district policies, changes in curriculum and instructional improvements, use of professional

development resources and the district's budget. They encourage principals to use leadership teams to lead their schools and to engage the school community in setting a vision and creating a school improvement plan.

The seven strategies begin with the district setting a direction by articulating a vision for schools, specific goals consistent with that vision and a framework of best practices that principals can use to achieve that vision and meet key goals. The strategies give principals and their teachers the support, the capacity, the resources and the flexibility to meet their goals. A comprehensive strategic plan provides principals and their staff with direction and support so they can shape and implement a school improvement plan based on the unique context of their school and the academic, social and emotional needs of their students. Once the district has assisted each school leadership team in developing a school improvement plan — and has provided the resources, the high-quality professional development, and the technical assistance, coaching and feedback to the school principal and teachers — **the school leadership team should be held accountable for implementing the plan with fidelity and, eventually, for improved student performance.**

The seven strategies outlined in this report create a framework for districts to provide principals with the direction they need and to build their capacity and their staff's to lead their schools more effectively. **As long as school district boards and office staff operate without a sound and comprehensive strategic plan, the flavor-of-the-month approach will prevail, and low-performing schools will not have the continuity of direction and support they need to become functional and successful schools.** Supportive districts and their leaders know that without a thoughtful vision, effective principal leadership and teacher cooperation, little progress will be made to improve student outcomes.

Study Method

The purpose of this study is to illuminate how districts support principals to improve student learning. Participating districts were selected from three SREB states. District selection criteria were designed to yield a sample that was representative of the 16-state SREB region, based on district size, demographics and student achievement. To protect the identity of districts and respondents, each district is assigned a fictitious name in this report.

SREB staff worked with superintendents' offices to identify six leaders in each district for interviews. Desired respondents included:

- the superintendent.
- the school board chair or other board member.
- chief district officers for curriculum and instruction, professional development, assessment and accountability, and business operations.

SREB staff conducted all interviews by telephone, and the recorded interviews were transcribed. SREB research staff coded the interviews to identify common and recurring themes.⁺ The seven strategies served as a theoretical framework for coding the transcripts, with an initial set of approximately 50 codes identified for likely responses that were then expanded upon as the interviews and coding work progressed.³ Codes were added to the electronic transcripts, allowing staff to reference individual passages to verify context and meaning, while preserving the richness of the original source material and maintaining a close connection between findings and underlying data. Staff analyzed the frequency and distribution of responses and classified them as indicative of high or low support for principals. The criteria for “highly supportive” comments were identified through researching the existing literature on school reform, principals’ working conditions, and district office reform, and through the positive examples mentioned in multiple interviews of what effective districts do to support the work of principals. The quality of responses was considered from the perspective of a wide range of best practices previously identified in other research. A process of peer debriefings was used with SREB senior staff and consultants to validate many of the findings, especially those that seemed unexpected, contradictory or counterintuitive.⁴

An overall level of district support then was calculated by determining the average number of positive/supportive comments per respondent. These composite scores revealed three tiers of district support: highly supportive (more than 40 supportive comments per interview); moderately supportive (30 to 40 supportive comments per interview); and minimally supportive (fewer than 30 supportive comments per interview). (See Table 1.) The interviewees included 10 respondents from the two highly supportive districts, nine from the two moderately supportive districts and 16 from the three minimally supportive districts.

⁺ Coding is a common technique in qualitative research, during which researchers tag similar selections of text in field notes or transcripts with a common code, most often a brief descriptive phrase, allowing for common responses to be clustered and considered together.

Table 1
Classification of Districts by Level of Support Provided to Principals and Schools

District	Size (student population)	Tenure of Current Superinten- dent	Number of Superinten- dents in Last Decade	Child Poverty Level (2006)*	Percent Non-White (2008)	Average Number of Supportive Comments Per Respondent	Level of Support
Abel	Fewer than 5,000	8 years	2	18%	6%	63.0	High
Archer	Between 10,000 and 20,000	3 years	3	14	65	47.2	High
Broad	Between 10,000 and 20,000	3 years	6	24	45	34.7	Moderate
Benson	Between 20,000 and 30,000	3 years	3	16	33	34.5	Moderate
Carter	Greater than 50,000	4 years	3	19	90	29.8	Minimal
Carlton	Between 20,000 and 30,000	9 years	2	28	78	26.2	Minimal
Carlisle	Between 20,000 and 30,000	2 years	3	36	82	24.2	Minimal

Sources: State Departments of Education and District Offices

* Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) — <http://nces.ed.gov/>, 2006. This is the most recent year for which data were available.

The more supportive districts in this study tended to be smaller and have fewer minority and economically disadvantaged students. An exception to this observation is Archer County, with its high percentage of minority students — but the county also has the lowest poverty rate of the districts in the study.

Districts’ support-level rankings are corroborated by their achievement data. (See Table 2.) The highly supportive districts had district graduation rates of at least 75 percent for each of the three most recent years, and at least 90 percent of their schools met AYP for each of the two most recent years. None of the other districts matched this high performance on either criterion (Carter County’s graduation rate was 75 percent in 2008, but it was lower in 2006 and 2007, and only 71 percent of its schools met AYP in 2008).

Table 2
2008 District Performance*

District	Schools Meeting AYP	Graduation Rate	English/ Language Arts State Test	Math State Test	Level of Support
Abel	90% (71%)	85% (84%)	Above Average	Above Average	High
Archer	94 (80)	78 (75)	Average	Below Average	High
Broad	77 (80)	67 (75)	Below Average	Below Average	Moderate
Benson	40 (39)	71 (70)	Above Average	Below Average	Moderate
Carter	71 (80)	75 (75)	Below Average	Below Average	Minimal
Carlton	63 (80)	58 (75)	Below Average	Below Average	Minimal
Carlisle	30 (39)	51 (70)	Below Average	Below Average	Minimal

Sources: State Departments of Education and District Offices

* State averages appear in parentheses

The seven strategies advocated by this study are applicable for all districts, large and small. Some of the specific best practices reported in this report, such as the organization of professional learning communities and the district instructional leadership team in Abel County, will be more easily implemented in smaller districts. In a district with 10 schools, the superintendent can personally lead a book study with all of the principals; in a district with more than 100 schools, that is not possible. The details of implementation have to be adapted to the district, but the principle is universal. Districts need to provide school leaders with quality professional learning experiences to improve principals' and teachers' competencies and to make them more effective in implementing proven instructional practices.

Profiles of the Seven Districts

Abel County: Abel County is a small, rural district in a state that passed a major education reform initiative in the early 1990s that provides substantial site-based leadership for its schools. For example, school principals in the state are interviewed and selected by the members of a school council. The state does not have a graduation test, removing a hurdle that substantially lowers graduation rates in many other states in the nation. Abel County outperforms state averages on the reading and math academic indices at the elementary, middle grades and high school levels. The county's only high school is a member of the *HSTW* network, and its scores on the 2008 *HSTW* Assessment were at the 76th percentile in science and above the 80th percentile in both reading and math. The student population in the district is more than 90 percent white, and 46 percent of its students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. The superintendent at the time of the interviews subsequently took a position as the superintendent of another district in the state, and the school board promoted another district leader interviewed for this study to become the superintendent.

Archer County: Archer County is a medium-sized, suburban district on the fringe of a major metropolitan area, with rapidly changing demographics, including a growing minority population. About 16 percent of students in the state do not pass one or more parts of the state comprehensive graduation exams, contributing to a statewide issue of low graduation rates (and correspondingly high dropout rates). It is therefore noteworthy that Archer County's graduation rate exceeds the state average. The district's student population is approximately 50 percent black, 35 percent white and 9 percent Hispanic. The superintendent has been recognized as an outstanding leader in the state.

Broad County: Broad County is a medium-sized district some distance from major urban areas, but containing a medium-sized town. It also faces issues relating to comprehensive exams lowering graduation rates. Fifty-five percent of the district's students are white, 37 percent are black, and 6 percent are Hispanic, although the Hispanic population is growing. The district has a significant tourism industry and substantial wealth disparities among the students it serves. Forty-eight percent of students in the district qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. At the time of the SREB interviews, a charismatic superintendent was initiating major changes in the district, specifically focused on raising graduation rates. The school board has since dismissed the superintendent over an issue unrelated to school performance. This abrupt change in leadership is likely to result in changes to the district's reform efforts.

Benson County: Benson County is a medium-sized district centered on a medium-sized town, outside the immediate vicinity of major population centers. It is located in a state that took an early lead in developing a statewide testing and accountability system. The state has moved aggressively to raise its math and reading proficiency standards, and due in part to this policy, only 39 percent of schools in the state met AYP in 2008. Leaders in Benson County examined student achievement data in depth about five years ago and were disappointed. Since then, community leaders have worked to strengthen the district's focus on academics. One step included convincing a former school principal and district administrator to come out of retirement and chair the school board. The board and the superintendent have forged a strong working partnership, the community is actively involved, and while test scores still lag behind state averages, they have improved. The district's student population is 67 percent white, 23 percent black and 9 percent Hispanic.

Carter County: Carter County is a very large suburban district on the fringe of a major metropolitan area. Several decades ago, the district was recognized as one of the best in the nation, but that perception has been replaced by a sense that the district is struggling. A change in demographics over those years resulted in a district that serves a more economically disadvantaged, higher minority population. There are some pockets of affluence and educational excellence in the district, and better-educated, more affluent parents have struggled to insulate their neighborhood schools from larger problems in the district, creating considerable tensions among the community, the district office and the school board. Recently, the district has replaced 20 or more principals a year in hopes of turning around chronically low-performing schools. Many of the high schools in the district are a part of the *HSTW* network, but the level of program implementation at about half of those sites is low. The district's student population is 76 percent black, 10 percent white and 8 percent Hispanic, and 64 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

Carlton County: Carlton County is a medium-sized urban district serving a small city. The district graduation rate is less than 60 percent, and only 63 percent of schools met AYP in 2008. Six high schools in Carlton County are *HSTW* sites, all six of which are below the median for scores on the *HSTW* Assessment math and science tests, and five of which are below the median for scores on the reading test. The district's student population is 73 percent black, 22 percent white, and five percent other, with 72 percent of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches. The district leadership has failed to create a vision and framework of guiding principles and to provide the support necessary to improve its schools.

Carlisle County: Carlisle County is a medium-sized rural district with a high level of poverty. According to federal data, approximately 36 percent of students in the district live in poverty — a much higher percentage than in any other district in the study. The district is unusual for the region and the state in that it has a high percentage of Native American students. Carlisle County is a high-implementation *HSTW* district. On average, the *HSTW* schools in Carlisle County showed large gains on the *HSTW* Assessment reading test between 2006 and 2008. On state end-of-course tests, the district modestly outperforms the state in achievement for economically disadvantaged students, but achievement data for students who are not economically disadvantaged are much lower than the norm for the state.

Extending Previous SREB Research

This report builds on and extends the work of SREB in *The District Leadership Challenge*. The reports were developed in parallel, with the 35 district interviews for this report conducted simultaneously with the writing of *The District Leadership Challenge*, which was based on the analysis of 22 principal interviews. Both reports use the framework of seven strategies to determine support being provided to principals and support needed. This study of district staffs' perceptions allowed SREB to explore and further develop issues that arose in the interviews with the 22 principals for *The District Leadership Challenge*.

Two issues that overlapped with and validated information from SREB's earlier discussions with principals were **the importance of district staff visiting schools** and **the importance of school principals being able to select their own staffs**. *The District Leadership Challenge* study found that principals in the most-improved schools were more likely than principals in least-improved schools to report that district staff frequently visited them. The principals of the most-improved schools also were more likely to report that district leaders' visits were purposeful and focused on improving instruction. When talking with district leaders for this study, SREB found that 70 percent of the district leaders in the highly supportive districts said that district staff spent a lot of time in schools, compared with only 44 percent of respondents from moderately or minimally supportive districts.

Likewise, in discussions with principals for *The District Leadership Challenge*, SREB found that while most principals had control over hiring decisions for teachers, many principals had no control over selection of literacy, numeracy or graduation coaches for their schools. District leaders in this study identified several counter-productive district hiring practices that undermine the work of principals. While 80 percent of the respondents in highly supportive districts mentioned a strong district commitment to letting principals hire the staff they need to help their schools succeed, fewer than half in the less-supportive districts spoke of the importance of supporting principals in making their own decisions on personnel issues.

These two reports offer different perspectives on a similar set of questions about how districts can best support the work of principals. They illustrate the adage that "where you stand depends on where you sit." Some of the district staff interviewed for this study believe that they are working hard and believe that they are effective. **However, SREB interviews show that these district leaders' counterparts in highly supportive districts are more proactive and more school- and instruction-oriented.** Also, many principals have limited knowledge of how highly supportive district offices operate and how they can help schools. The principal of a least-improved school who reported getting "anything and everything I ask for" did not appear to be asking for much — many principals accept what they get and are unable to imagine how their district office might better support them and their school improvement efforts.

Some principals have lost confidence in their district's ability to help improve schools, and they want the district simply to get out of the way. The positive examples of district support in both *The District Leadership Challenge* and this study show that enlightened district support is crucial to implementation of proven school and classroom practices and in obtaining improved student achievement and that **improving schools without effective district support is nearly impossible.**

Interviews with district office staff revealed that some districts have more capacity to support principals than others. **Districts with the most capacity developed their support for principals deliberately and over time.** They spent years learning, reading, reflecting, planning and meeting. They faced brutal facts. They listened to their community, especially when the community had unpleasant things to say. They brought in outside consultants to help facilitate their learning or strategic planning, but they owned their own problems and created solutions collaboratively with teachers, parents and community leaders. **The superintendents in the highly supportive districts challenged their central office staff to continuously develop and improve their knowledge and skills as instructional leaders.** They led by example, continuously learning and improving their own abilities. This study represents important lessons from districts that have implemented seven key strategies in support of their principals and schools.

Seven Strategies: How Districts Can Support Principals Effectively in School Improvement

Strategy 1: Establish a clear focus and a strategic framework of core beliefs, effective practices and goals for improving student achievement.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Promote school leaders' confidence in their ability to succeed and in their belief that improved school practices are important to their students' future.
- Share a common vision of high expectations for all groups of students and have a strategic planning framework that enables school leaders and faculty to customize a set of strategic goals and actions for their school.
- Hold district leaders and staff accountable for working collaboratively with principals, their school leadership teams and faculties to implement a strategic plan and to hold principals accountable for creating excellent leadership teams.

Set High Expectations

More respondents in the highly and moderately supportive districts said their districts stress high expectations of students than in minimally supportive districts. (See Table 3.) While approximately 80 percent of respondents from highly and moderately supportive districts offered comments indicative of high expectations, less than half of respondents from minimally supportive districts offered such statements.

Table 3
Comments Indicating High Expectations

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents Indicating High Expectations*	Total Number of Comments	Average Comments per Respondent
High	80%	28	2.80
Moderate	89	13	1.44
Minimal	38	13	0.81

* Note for this and all similar tables in this report: There were 10 total interview respondents in the group of highly supportive districts, nine respondents in the group of moderately supportive districts and 16 respondents in the group of minimally supportive districts.

The district with the strongest emphasis on high expectations, Abel County, has a succinct and powerful mission statement: “Striving for excellence — no exceptions, no excuses.” Mission statements in education have become ubiquitous, but this district has succeeded in turning the mission statement into a district culture. All four respondents from Abel County made clear references to setting high expectations, with an average of 4.25 references per interview. The other districts in the study averaged fewer than two references to high expectations, and only four of 31 other respondents referenced high expectations as many as three times in their interviews. Abel County has embraced high expectations and recognized that gaps in achievement often are the result of lower classroom expectations for some students.[‡] The superintendent of Abel County said this about high expectations:

“It’s just the belief in this district that all kids are going to learn. And you hear a lot of people saying that, but we really believe it. ... I think it’s just a matter of being very diligent about dealing with kids in the most effective way and recognizing the fact that we’re their opportunity for success. ... Our administrators have really, really worked hard to get that done. Our teachers have worked hard to get that done. It’s just an attitude of, ‘We’re their hope, and we’re there for them, and we have to do whatever it takes to be sure they stay in school.’ ”

In contrast, seven of the minimally supportive districts’ 13 comments representing high expectations were provided by a single respondent. Clearly, that one respondent believed in the importance of setting high expectations, but **one person — no matter how passionate or skillful — cannot set the tone for an entire district.**

Examples of statements that indicate districts have high expectations include observations that districts can set goals for themselves beyond *No Child Left Behind* or state requirements:

- *“There’s also nothing preventing us from going above and beyond.”*
- *“Even though [the goal for] No Child Left Behind is 100 percent for reading and math by 2013–2014, we’re actually aspiring to go toward 100 percent in all subject areas.”*

Other interviewees evidenced higher expectations through district increases in participation in and performance on Advanced Placement (AP) tests. Over the last four years, one of the districts has more than tripled the number of AP tests its students take and now has more students scoring at least a 3 and qualifying for college credit.

Minimally supportive districts tend to set low expectations by focusing most of their time and energy on strategies for helping students meet minimum AYP requirements, rather than teaching an accelerated curriculum using engaging instructional strategies to prepare more students for success in college, advanced training or a good job. ACT Inc. recently provided an example of the gap between the skills most high school students have and the skills they should be gaining to be ready for college. It reported that only 23 percent of the nation’s high school graduating class of 2009 is prepared for college in all four areas covered by the ACT.⁵

In a climate of minimum expectations, student achievement fails to improve and often declines. An over-emphasis on test preparation to meet minimum standards often results in only small achievement gains, but ultimately disengages students. **Less supportive districts often are so focused on meeting**

[‡] The 2008 *HSTW* Assessment survey data for this district showed counter-intuitive results for high expectations: in 2008, only 23 percent of students reported evidence of what they considered to be high expectations. This is despite the fact that collectively they scored at the 85th percentile in reading, 84th percentile in math and 76th percentile in science on the 2008 *HSTW* Assessment. It is possible that high expectations have become normalized for students in the district.

minimum standards that they fail to articulate a vision of higher expectations and to provide strategic support for school leadership teams using a more balanced approach to improve the achievement and motivation of all students.

Highly supportive districts more often realize that the minimal standards represented by AYP requirements are not sufficient to prepare students for college or advanced training. Accordingly, they set high expectations that challenge students to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills they will need, SREB interviews showed. Supportive districts more often have a strategic vision of accelerated learning for all groups of students aimed at meeting higher-than-required standards, because too many students fail to graduate from high school and to prepare for college and career training.

Setting and maintaining high expectations sometimes means making tough decisions to remove employees who are not able or willing to perform at necessary levels because they lack expertise or beliefs that all groups of students can achieve at higher levels and meet college- and career-readiness standards. The superintendent in one of the highly supportive districts said that some school leaders had to be removed early in his tenure because they lacked the commitment and skill set needed to create a high-performing learning culture. He said that a sign the district had developed higher expectations for students and adults came when the teachers in a school approached their principal about an incompetent teacher and insisted that something be done. The superintendent in the other highly supportive district identified in this study emphasized his commitment to giving his principals the autonomy, flexibility and support necessary to lead their own schools. He indicates by word and action that he is doing everything he can to set them up for success, and to hold them accountable for good results.

The superintendent in Broad County told a story about an underperforming high school science department and his having to replace the entire department. Getting a commitment from school principals and teacher-leaders to teach all groups of students sometimes requires more than resources — it requires a willingness to make difficult decisions. At the same time, a necessary precondition for meaningful accountability is a district emphasis on building capacity and providing support to principals and their school leadership teams.



Getting a commitment from school principals and teacher-leaders to teach all groups of students beyond minimum expectations sometimes requires more than resources — it also requires a willingness to make difficult decisions.

Focus on Student Achievement

The challenge of focusing intently on student achievement is deceptively difficult for school district leaders, interviews showed. Day-to-day distractions of running a district or school can whittle away at the central focus on improving schools. As one assistant superintendent of a high-performing district observed: “... it’s all a matter of personal choice of what you focus on, anyhow. You can let menial tasks ... dominate much of your life, as much of your time as you want.”

Thus, the first job of the district should be helping principals focus their attention on improving student achievement and learning. A focus on motivating and engaging students in learning and achievement can become an individual mandate that all educators follow — from the superintendent to the classroom teacher.⁶ The focus on students’ intellectual and academic growth can become a matter of teachers’ self-regulation rather than a response to external pressure as the district establishes benchmarks to ensure that students are on track to graduate from high school prepared for college and careers.

Expect Hard Work

The superintendent in Abel County acknowledged that raising student achievement takes a great deal of work — with no shortcuts or magic solutions: “We have worked hard here ... and I’m talking about the administrators and the teachers and our board.” Another respondent in the district observed that when the test scores — which are usually good — come in, “there’s about 10 minutes of celebrating and then we get on to the next year.” The district recognizes that the challenge of educating all students to higher levels is continuous.

Engage in Strategic Planning

High expectations and a focus on student achievement are critical supports to expect from district leadership, but they are not enough by themselves. **Simply raising the bar every year does not constitute a strategic plan for improvement.** Districts that have demonstrated success can point to a strategic planning process that supports principals in their work. As one superintendent said, “I don’t think we can sit back and leave it up to the schools.”

The Archer County superintendent said that when he arrived, his district had failed to meet AYP in recent years because of low performance by English-language learners and special education students. Even when the problem had been clearly defined, the district had developed no strategic plan to address those shortcomings.

Under the superintendent’s leadership, the district contracted with an external consulting group to develop a comprehensive strategic plan. The development of the plan involved all stakeholders and began with an examination of underlying beliefs and goals, followed by the development of strategies to meet those goals. The process identified nine strategies for the district to implement, each of which was further broken out into a number of concrete actions.

District Improvement Strategies Identified by Archer County

- Strategy I:** We will design and create learning opportunities that will allow each student to reach his/her highest level of achievement.
- Strategy II:** We will expose all students to experiences and opportunities that will enable them to pursue limitless aspirations.
- Strategy III:** We will provide support systems for all students that enable them to achieve their highest potential.
- Strategy IV:** We will provide safe and orderly learning environments in order to enhance the potential of each student.
- Strategy V:** We will have safe and well-maintained facilities necessary to maximize teaching and learning.
- Strategy VI:** We will fully unify all stakeholders toward student success.
- Strategy VII:** We will embrace uniqueness and diversity in our community.
- Strategy VIII:** We will acquire necessary resources to accomplish our mission and objectives.
- Strategy IX:** We will provide the highest quality instructional, support, and administrative staff that will embrace, facilitate, and celebrate our mission and objectives.

Two of the most important outcomes of Archer County's process were the creation of a student services department in the district and a safety-net program. A new cabinet-level position was created to address cohesively the districts' gaps in advisement, counseling and student services. The safety-net program was developed to provide principals with resources to turn their schools around. (For more details, see the discussion of Strategy 6 later in the report.)

Archer County's strategic planning process provides a model for principals to emulate as they develop a strategic plan at the school level to address critical problems. The process used to create the district's strategic plan ensured that the plan would guide improvements in the district. The plan:

- was created in response to a clear need.
- was prepared with substantial community and school-based leaders' involvement.
- became the basis of school strategic planning.
- became the basis for expectations of and the evaluation of principals.
- resulted in significant changes in the central office organization.
- resulted in significant changes in resource allocation.
- continues to be monitored and evaluated quarterly and, if necessary, revised by the school board.

Unfortunately, many strategic plans fail to achieve the success of the Archer plan because they either become too rigid, restricting principals' ability to make changes, or exist only on paper and fail to guide any changes. A respondent from Archer who had worked in the district for 11 years said that earlier in his tenure, the strategic plans "went into a three-ring binder" and went unused; but more recently they had become "something everybody lives and works daily — and that's how we've achieved the success we've achieved."

Cultivate Effective School Boards

School boards usually are the elected leaders of education in each district. Members of school boards are not necessarily education experts, but the public has placed its confidence in board members and expects them to provide effective leadership. The school board must be involved in developing a strategic framework for school improvement, and the board must be focused on and supportive of implementation. The following extended comments from a board member of a highly supportive district provide a snapshot of a well-functioning school board:

“I think the best support we can provide as a board is to set clear goals and expectations for this system. If we don’t have clear goals and expectations for this system, then I think that negatively impacts the principal. ...”

“We cannot be a divided board. We may disagree; but when we go out into the community, we need to be of the same accord and sing the same song, because if people look at our board as a divided board, then that will negatively impact the principals.”

“We agree to disagree and we agree to support the majority. We may disagree with the majority, but once that disagreement is voted on, it’s over. ... I think that’s been part of our success.”

The board member in the preceding example described a culture that deliberately takes politics out of education. Taken alone, the above comments could give an impression that minority viewpoints are squashed or pushed to the side. However, when considered with comments from the interviews with district leaders, they suggest the board has devoted time and effort to achieve a common vision based upon consensus, and the leaders in the district refuse to let smaller groups with strong opinions hijack that common vision.

This school board records all of its meetings for review to make sure that more of its meeting time is spent on student achievement and academics and less on real-estate and personnel issues. This self-accountability on the part of the board sends an unambiguous message to the superintendent, the principals and classroom teachers about the districts’ priorities and values.

The unified culture and vision of this successful district — one with much demographic diversity — starkly contrasts to the responses from leaders in some of the minimally supportive districts, where central-office staff and school board members’ answers differed so greatly that they could have been describing different school systems.

Board members in the minimally supportive districts were less focused on student achievement, did not have confidence in central office personnel, and did not trust that they were being given all details of student and system performance. The school boards in these districts find themselves refereeing disputes, rather than focusing on effective school and classroom practices. **Board members in minimally supportive districts seem more focused on solving problems brought to their attention, rather than developing a strategic framework, mission, goals and effective practices that hold district and school leadership responsible for owning and solving the problems.**⁷ The following comments illustrate this lack of focus on district improvement:

- *“I hear no conversation of any kind, at any board meeting, on any agenda items that are directed at a better job of meeting the future.”*
- *“There is a shared vision, but I think different people see different pieces of the vision, as opposed to everybody seeing the whole vision ... and that is arguably what creates tension ... within the staff.”*

These comments reflect disengagement from the task of creating a strategic framework that the board, the district and schools can use to solve problems. **Interviews showed that principals are better supported when their school boards and superintendents share a common framework, guiding principles, mission, goals and values that enable them to work together to help more students from all groups achieve at higher levels.**

All of the interviews reinforced research on best school board practices that stress the superintendents' role in setting direction and creating a healthy climate for the district.⁸ Because the school board members are elected or appointed and may not have experience in education, the superintendent must bear the responsibility for providing the board with thoughtful, research-based recommendations for improving school curriculum and instruction, enabling the board to make good policy decisions. Furthermore, with instructional expertise and a single voice, a superintendent can communicate a unified vision for the district more easily than even the most team-oriented school board.⁹ While the board can and should be involved in defining the district's vision and setting policy, it is the superintendent who executes the plan. As one board member said, "I need to give [the superintendent] resources and support to get him where he needs to go. But he's the one responsible to get there, not the board. I don't want to take that from him."

In the highly supportive districts, board members were quick to give credit for positive movement to their district superintendents. Where school boards were functioning well, the superintendent often had provided training or other support for board members to help them with their work. Furthermore, the praise flowed both ways. In the highly and moderately supportive districts, eight of 17 central-office respondents (47 percent) said their systems received strong support from their school boards. In the minimally supportive districts, only one of 13 central-office respondents (8 percent) described strong support from the school boards.

Strategy 2: Organize and engage the school board and district office in support of each school.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Organize the central office — including human resources, finance, curriculum and instruction — to function cohesively to support principals and school leadership teams. The district hires a staff that fits the needs of school strategic plans, assists principals to remove ineffective teachers and, either through central-office staff or consultants, provides technical expertise to schools in implementing their own strategic improvement plans.
- Focus not on micro-managing schools, but on developing school principals' and staffs' capacity to implement their school's strategic improvement plan successfully.
- Establish a collaborative presence in the schools, focused on building the capacity of principals and teachers to own school problems and to implement proven solutions.

Focus the Central Office on Support



“We’re going to flip the pyramid in [Chicago Public Schools] this year. When I say flip the pyramid, I’m saying that the job of the central office is to support the schools, not manage them. Principals run schools and we’re here to make their job easier and help them succeed in the only place that matters — in the classroom.”

—*Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools (and current U.S. Secretary of Education), August 19, 2005*¹⁰

Interviews with effective districts identified a desire to better engage district staff in supporting school improvement. In a few cases, district personnel could point to specific changes their organizational structures adopted for the purpose of raising student achievement. **The most significant changes, however, involved changing the mindsets and job descriptions of central-office staff to focus more on curriculum, instruction and school support.** Less important were changes in job titles, hierarchy and district organization. The following responses emphasize the mission of the district office in supporting schools:

- *“Our philosophy in the curriculum division is, ‘We are here to support the schools.’ That is the reason that we’re here.”*
- *“... that’s the expectation from the teaching and learning department — that we are here to serve the schools, to serve the teachers and the principals.”*
- *“Central office should not be something that is done to you. It should be an agent that’s there to help you achieve your goals.”*

District support of schools requires staff to spend time in schools. One assistant superintendent in a medium-sized district, a former successful principal, described his work:

“I spend a lot of time with the high schools working on school reform [and] the forming of... true leadership teams in the school, so that the changes are owned by the people that are actually leading, down the hallways and the classrooms. So it’s been a very individualized approach. It has not been a top-down [approach], it’s been a combination of setting expectations and providing a support framework. ... I visit all the high schools every week.”

In the highly supportive districts, seven of 10 respondents indicated that central office staff spend a great deal of time in the schools; in the moderately and minimally supportive districts, only 11 of 25 respondents indicated that central-office staff spend a great deal of time in schools. This is consistent with *The District Leadership Challenge* study, which found that principals of most-improved high schools were more likely than principals of least-improved schools to report that the central office staff frequently and actively visited their schools.¹¹ As a respondent in this study said, district staff cannot be effective if they sit in a central office, “glued to a chair [and] waving a golden wand” to accomplish their work.[§]

[§] Meredith Honig and Michael Copland, in their Wallace Foundation-supported research into the transformation of central office work in Atlanta, New York City, and Oakland Unified School District, have found that all three of those districts have incorporated as a key component of their reform model 1:1 relationships between central office administrators and schools. (Meredith I. Honig, Michael A. Copland, Lydia Rainey, Juli Anna Lorton, and Morena Newton. *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*. Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, 2010.)

Tailor Central Office Organization to Raise Student Achievement

Interviews revealed no quick-fix solutions for organizing district offices to better support principals' work. **How central office staff members organize their time and work to support principals' work is more important than how the district office is organized.** However, a few of the districts did report changing in their organization to better support principals. Benson County eliminated an assistant superintendent position for athletics and created a position to support curriculum and instruction. The superintendent said that schools in the district were having difficulty meeting AYP and that academic performance was down. The school board and the public supported the change, and it reinforced a message that the district was focusing on raising academic achievement.

Respondents reported several other changes to district organization:

- **Supporting students:** A medium-sized district created a new division for student-support services to help its most challenged students.
- **Valuing professional development:** In a few districts, the staff member in charge of professional development has been elevated from a coordinator position to a higher-level director or cabinet-level position.
- **Building capacity to serve all grade levels:** Multiple districts reported a practice (sometimes unofficial) of pairing staff who had experience working in high schools with staff who had experience in elementary grades. For example, a superintendent with more experience in elementary schools went outside the district to hire a new assistant superintendent with strong high school credentials. In another district, the director of professional development, whose background was in high schools, hired a person with an elementary focus to balance the ability of her office to meet the needs of all schools in the district.

Highly supportive districts reported tearing down the walls separating different district functions and involving everyone — including business administrators — in the fundamental business of educating students. One school board member described his district some years ago as “little fiefdoms” that did not communicate with each other. This district has changed that culture and become a highly supportive district.

Engage the Business Office in Curriculum and Instruction

A hallmark of a district organized to support principals as instructional leaders is active involvement of the head of business operations in curriculum and instruction discussions. Efforts to improve achievement and graduation rates — such as before- and after-school programs, credit-recovery programs, and career-focused learning opportunities — require the active involvement of business and finance directors.

One assistant superintendent described his district's cabinet meetings this way:

“A superintendent, four assistant superintendents, the finance officer and the public relations director are included in those meetings. So there are seven of us in those meetings, and I would say probably 85 percent of what we talk about is curriculum- and instruction-driven: how to make the teaching better, how to improve the curriculum, how to improve advantages for students. So it's all centered around students.”

In the minimally supportive districts, the assistant superintendents in charge of finance and business often were disengaged from curriculum and instruction. Their focus was on budgets and building maintenance, and their interviews did not reveal a clear connection between their work and the business of creating effective teaching and learning.

Support Principals' Human Resources Needs

The most important asset of a school is its instructional staff, and one of the most important roles of a district is to provide schools with efficient and supportive human resources.¹² Supporting principals' ability to hire high-quality staff is indicative of overall levels of support. **Eight of 10 respondents in highly supportive districts reported that principals have authority to hire their own staff.** (See Table 4.) The superintendent of a highly supportive district explained why he allows principals discretion in hiring, saying that the central office does not tell principals whom to hire because the principals are the ones responsible for the teaching in the school.

In the moderately and minimally supportive districts, only 10 of 25 respondents reported that principals had an appropriate level of authority in hiring faculty. Respondents from three districts gave troubling reports that, for a variety of reasons, central offices were choosing teaching staff against the wishes of principals. Teachers are forced into schools because enrollment has fallen at another school and the district does not want to release them, or because they have connections in the central office, or because the district wants to release them but a prior principal was unable to document cause for dismissal. One respondent explained:

"Sometimes [principals] interview and sometimes they get to recommend, but ... sometimes they'll recommend their top two [choices] and they don't get either one of them. ... It might be, 'We thought you needed this, this, and this. So we picked this person for you.' Or it can be, 'This person needs a job,' or, 'We're really trying to place this person.'"

Table 4
Comments Indicating Principals Have Authority to Hire Staff

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Principals Have Authority	Total Number of Comments	Comments per Respondent
High	80%	19	1.90
Moderate	44	7	0.78
Minimal	38	8	0.50

Three districts mentioned screening job applicants to help principals narrow the field of potential candidates and actively recruiting the best available teachers on the market. Respondents in two districts specifically mentioned the human resources staff supporting principals in their efforts to remove ineffective teachers by helping with documentation, paperwork, and state and district policies and regulations on the termination of teachers.

Keep the Central Office Small

Another organizational strategy for supporting principals is to maintain a relatively small central-office staff — a strategy that several respondents advocated. **One school board chair observed that keeping the central office small encouraged staff members to work more closely with principals and teachers, since there were not enough central-office staff members to complete tasks and achieve goals alone.** The only way the central office staff could meet their goals was in collaboration with principals and teachers in the schools.

Make Support The Primary Mission of the Central Office

The key organizational action districts can take to support school improvement is to define the mission of the central office as *supporting principals to create the educational conditions that promote the climate, organization, instruction and practices that lead to students' success.*

Districts cannot hold principals accountable for improved student results if they fail to provide necessary resources, to give them the authority to select staff and remove unproductive staff, and provide technical assistance, professional development and coaching to address problems and implement proven practices. Rather, they must establish “reciprocal accountability,” holding principals accountable, but also holding themselves accountable for providing support.¹³

Strategy 3: Provide instructional coherence and support.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Provide a framework for aligning the curriculum from one grade level to the next and from one transition point to the next (such as middle grades to high school) and for instructional practices to engage students in learning and develop students' intellectual, analytical and problem-solving skills.
- Have a practice of preparing principals and district office staff to observe classrooms and conduct walkthroughs to ensure teachers' instruction and assessment is engaging, relevant, intellectually challenging and grade-level appropriate.
- Give principals more autonomy to adjust schedules and curriculum and instruction to help students succeed and stay on course to graduate.

Support Principals as Effective Instructional Leaders

In recent years, with greater local and national emphasis on improved student learning, expectations that principals act as highly effective instructional leaders have risen steeply in some districts and states. One respondent said: “It used to be that if [principals] could run a building, keep the kids behaving, keep the teachers happy, [they] could coast. It's not true anymore. They have to have a huge skill set.” To help principals raise student achievement, lead teachers to be better instructors and transform schools, districts must provide stronger support.

All of the districts in the study, and 27 of 35 respondents, described how their districts expect principals to be instructional leaders. (See Table 5.) However, the number of such comments per interview fell from the highly supportive districts, to moderately supportive districts, to minimally supportive districts. **District leaders in the highly supportive districts talked about their principals being “instructional leaders” almost three times as often as their counterparts in minimally supportive districts.** One of the strongest statements emphasizing instructional leadership came from a superintendent:

“I think the biggest thing in the way of communication from a superintendent has got to be around instruction. If it's around instruction, then it's important to the principals. If you talk about money, if finance is what's important, then that's what's important to the principals. So we really focus on instruction here.”

Table 5
Comments Indicating an Emphasis on Principals as Instructional Leaders

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Emphasis on Instructional Leadership	Total Number of Comments	Comments per Respondent
High	90%	28	2.8
Moderate	78	18	2.0
Minimal	69	16	1.0

Utilize Walkthroughs as a School Improvement Strategy

One of the most important tools a district office can use to help school leaders provide instructional coherence and support is training in strategic classroom walkthroughs. Walkthroughs provide a critical link between assessment data and instructional practices. Assessment data show *who* is succeeding and failing; strategic walkthroughs can help school leaders (including teachers) learn *why* students are failing and *how* to turn failure into success.

Many first-year principals do not learn in their education leadership preparation programs how to use walkthroughs effectively. One superintendent said that his district worked to “equip those principals to be able to go into those classrooms to look for evidence to the fact that teachers are truly teaching the standards.”

In many of the interviews, district staff failed to mention important “look-fors” beyond teaching to the standards — such as creating an engaging and fun learning environment; teaching the standards in material that is relevant, rigorous, and hands-on; showing students that teachers believe in them; and making sure every student is connected to at least one teacher who knows and looks out for him or her. **Teaching to standards alone will not improve achievement if classroom lessons and assignments are not sufficiently engaging to keep students from turning off and dropping out — and, in too many cases, that is what students are doing.** If schools in low-performing districts are to improve, district leaders must assist principals and teacher-leaders to move beyond test-prep instruction and understand instructional practices that motivate and engage all groups of students in learning that results in higher achievement.

Benson County was one of three districts in this study that identified walkthroughs as a critical component of support for principals. In separate interviews, both the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction and the professional development coordinator detailed the use of walkthroughs as a key district-improvement strategy. Principals in the county are trained in conducting walkthroughs. They are given clear expectations and regular feedback on the basis of the districts’ walkthrough findings. The districts’ philosophy is that walkthroughs are to be supportive rather than punitive, and it has incorporated walkthroughs into its capacity-building and succession-planning strategies by consistently involving assistant principals and teacher-leaders.¹⁴

The walkthroughs are part of a district strategy that weaves together curriculum, instruction and professional development. Benson County residents were not satisfied with the academic direction of the schools, and new leaders have begun working with schools to implement a set of comprehensive classroom changes to engage students in more challenging learning experiences. A district respondent, describing the role of walkthroughs, said, “We haven’t seen the level of change in teacher behaviors that needs to happen to implement higher levels of instruction,” but they are taking the first steps of visiting schools to identify the additional support teachers need to make the desired change.

Districts providing a minimum level of support need assistance to develop their capacity to effectively support schools to improve instruction. In *The District Leadership Challenge*, SREB reported on principals who did not have confidence in the instructional leadership expertise of the district staff. Some districts need to develop the instructional leadership capacities of their staff and hold them accountable for working effectively with principals and school leadership teams to advance quality learning experiences for students.

Best Practices in Using Walkthroughs to Support Instructional Leadership

- Train principals in conducting walkthroughs to help them identify when students are engaged intellectually and emotionally in learning and how to support teachers to provide engaging instruction.
- Tell principals in advance what the district wants them to look for during walkthroughs.
- Use walkthroughs to look for evidence that professional development is making a difference in classroom instruction.
- Require assistant principals to conduct walkthroughs in their schools to help them develop their capacity as instructional leaders.
- Talk with students during walkthroughs, asking them questions such as: “What are you doing?” “How are you doing on it?” “How do you know?”
- Ask teacher-leaders to accompany administrators on the walkthroughs.
- Let teachers know they can reschedule for a later visit if they are nervous or not at their best. Walkthroughs are for professional learning, not catching bad behavior.
- Follow up by using walkthroughs as the basis for conversations with teachers about instructional practices and identifying future professional learning needs for the school and district.

Give Principals Autonomy to Lead Schools

Creating, in the words of one respondent, “a system of schools, as opposed to individual schools” was a common theme in interviews with officials in minimally supportive districts. Respondents from one district emphasized the importance of alignment because that particular district had a high student mobility rate. One respondent said, “When children transfer from one place to another, we’ve got to make sure that we’re pretty much on the same page.”

Unfortunately, **district efforts to improve instruction and student achievement by making all schools alike are unlikely to succeed.**¹⁵ Ten of 16 respondents from the minimally supportive districts reflected an emphasis on alignment, with a total of 22 such comments recorded. (See Table 6.) Strict alignment can inhibit the creativity of capable educators and place ownership of challenges and solutions outside of schools. Such inflexibility can prevent principals and teachers from finding the solutions that will best meet the needs of their students. **Most district staff members need to improve their skills in facilitating the work of school principals and school leadership teams in taking ownership of solving their own problems and implementing proven solutions.** School principals and teachers under a trained coach will learn more if they work through problems themselves and will be more motivated to implement a solution they developed than one that was imposed. As Dennis Sparks of the National Staff Development Council has observed, “the solutions to most problems of teaching and learning require creation and invention rather than prescription or duplication.”¹⁶

In the highly and moderately supportive districts, only five of 19 respondents discussed the need to have uniformity in scheduling, curriculum and instruction across schools. The superintendent of a highly supportive district emphasized that “schools are empowered to set their paths. I think that’s key for us. It’s not a top-down approach. I know this whole reference of decentralizing ... is probably an old and tired reference, but I think it’s important.”

What this superintendent of a highly supportive district described fits the definition of “defined autonomy,” coined by Robert Marzano and Timothy Waters to describe building-level autonomy coupled with clearly defined district-level expectations.¹⁷ Through a meta-analysis of district leadership research, Marzano and Waters have found that defined autonomy is positively correlated with higher student achievement in a district.

Table 6
Comments Indicating a Focus on Aligning All Schools

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents Indicating a Focus on Alignment	Total Number of Comments	Comments per Respondent
High	30%	4	0.40
Moderate	22	3	0.33
Minimal	63	22	1.38

Encourage Flexibility to Raise Graduation Rates

Superintendents and district staff mentioned in interviews that raising graduation rates and providing credit-recovery options were major areas in which they support principals and schools. Seven of 10 respondents in highly supportive districts mentioned efforts to provide credit-recovery options, while only seven of 25 respondents in the moderately and minimally supportive districts discussed their strategies to promote credit recovery.

The Broad County school district offers an example of how districts can use flexible scheduling to provide students with every possible opportunity to graduate. The district:

- has adopted flexible scheduling for its high schools. About one-third of its students have elected to take classes during an extra period before the start of the school day. Other students, who might otherwise drop out in order to work, may attend school from 9:30 to 4:30 four days a week. Some students both start early and end late to earn eight credits per year, instead of the usual six.
- offers after-school and evening classes. Drama classes are taught from 4 to 6 p.m. two days a week. A marine biology class meets from 5 to 9 p.m. one day a week and includes a nine-day field experience over spring break.
- provides 0.5 credits to its marching band students, because they spend three weeks of summer vacation practicing.

These opportunities allow students to match their interests to educational requirements in a time frame that works best for them, rather than in a one-size-fits-all schedule that is more convenient for teachers and administrators.

Broad County also has decided to implement a 4x4 block schedule to provide students with even more opportunities to earn the credits they need to graduate. The superintendent, who was driving the change, explained:

“... right now, you have to have 23 credits to graduate. In a six-period day, you can earn 24 credits in four years. That leaves you very little wiggle room to mess up ... or to get recovered. We’ve found that if you’re behind at the end of nine weeks, you’re generally behind for the whole year. So what we want to do is go to where you can earn eight credits in a year, so now you can look at 32 credits. That gives you a lot more flexibility to earn your 23 credits.”

The district spent a full year planning and training for the transition from a traditional schedule to a block schedule to make sure that teachers, especially in areas such as AP classes and foreign languages, successfully adapted their instructional methods to the new class length.

Some of Broad County’s initiatives to raise graduation rates have come directly from the district office, but others, such as the flexible scheduling and after-school classes, were the result of principals finding creative solutions and receiving support from the district office. The district set clear goals, and the principals are expected to use their professional expertise to achieve them. Preliminary data indicate that recent changes and credit-recovery options have helped raise the district’s graduation rate from 62 percent in 2006 to 67 percent in 2008.

Provide Autonomy, Flexibility, Accountability and Support

Where there is support, districts can give principals autonomy and flexibility without sacrificing accountability. Three elements necessary for autonomy and flexibility to exist along with accountability in a school system are ownership, trust and vision.

The first element necessary for accountability and autonomy is *vision*. A district cannot hold a principal accountable if its leaders do not have a vision for highly engaging and high-performing high schools. In the absence of a strategic plan based on a shared vision, districts cannot lead schools toward success. District leaders too often are forced into a reactionary mode, responding to problems as they arise and in isolation from each other. Districts must have a long-term plan that includes a vision of effective schools, the intervening steps that schools need to take and the support schools need from the district. The vision and the strategic plan can establish the boundaries in which principals have discretion to operate. They also can enable districts to identify the skills and expertise that district staff, principals and teachers need in order to create effective schools.

Second, when the district has a clear vision of a high-performing school and a long-term plan for reaching it, then the school principal and teacher-leaders need to take *ownership* of school improvement. Principals can be held accountable to work with their teachers to identify the specific needs of their own students and to craft and implement strategies to meet those needs, and for identifying and solving problems in their own schools. They and their staff must have the ownership, motivation and passion to take the steps necessary to improve instruction throughout the school.¹⁸ Change cannot be mass-produced, but must be accomplished school by school. Districts must provide support and the tools for continuously building the capacity in each school so that its principal and teacher-leaders take ownership of problems.

In the absence of a strategic plan based on a shared vision, districts cannot lead schools toward success.



A third necessary element is *trust*, coupled with support, and a collaborative working relationship. The district must trust its principals to do the right thing, and principals must trust the district office to provide meaningful support and to make them a true partner in framing and achieving the district plan. Five of the 10 respondents from highly supportive districts mentioned the importance of creating a culture of trust, while only one of the other respondents in the study brought up the issue of trust.

As SREB reported in *The District Leadership Challenge*, some high school principals said that they did not trust that their district staff had the capacity to provide meaningful assistance in improving curriculum and instruction. Districts must respond to those concerns where they exist by increasing their own capacity and by challenging the district culture to focus more on support and collaborative working relationships with high schools.



In many low-performing districts, principals may be expected to fail, resulting in a high annual attrition rate. This occurs because a district has neither a plan to support and develop the principals it has, nor a plan to identify, recruit, develop and support future principals.

At the same time, districts need to know their principals are up to the challenge. In many low-performing districts, principals may be expected to fail, resulting in a high annual attrition rate. This occurs because a district has neither a plan to support and develop the principals it has, nor a plan to identify, recruit, develop and support future principals. Every district should ensure a pipeline of strong school leaders by developing a carefully crafted succession plan that includes preparing aspiring principals in collaboration with a university partner or another entity and provides future leaders with opportunities to engage in progressively challenging learning experiences. When the district knows a highly capable person is leading a school, it is more likely to support that principal rather than look for a replacement at the first sign of trouble. When principals know they are trusted, they are more open to expressing their needs and concerns and will be more confident, innovative, collaborative, and likely to create a highly engaging, high-performing school culture.

Make Literacy a Centerpiece of School Reform

In dysfunctional high schools, the school principal and teacher-leaders should be supported by the district office to make literacy the centerpiece of their school improvement effort. Achievement in all subjects is supported by and depends on one's ability to read and comprehend materials. A real focus must be on embedding reading and writing standards and literacy strategies in all courses and training all teachers to do this effectively.¹⁹

Somewhat surprisingly, none of the districts expressed a concern about or strategies to address the emerging national gender gap. Male students are falling behind in academic achievement, especially in the development of reading skills. Leonard Sax raised this issue in his 2007 book, *Boys Adrift*, and some educators are developing strategies to address gender differences in learning. When researchers began raising legitimate alarm several years ago over another gender gap — female students were underachieving in math and science because they were not receiving encouragement in those subjects — educational leaders began focusing efforts to attract more females to and support them in math and science courses. Today's schools face a new gender gap, and districts similarly need to use emerging research and practices to reverse a trend of academic underachievement and disengagement among male students.²⁰

Strategy 4: Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals, teacher-leaders and district staff.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Provide a balanced set of professional learning experiences at the district and school levels that are aligned with the district and school strategic plans, making it a priority to develop the capacity of principals, teachers and support staff to create rich, engaging experiences for students.
- Create active professional learning communities in which key district and school leaders have common learning experiences.
- Provide induction programs and mentoring for new principals and teachers.
- Provide time for professional development.
- Help school leaders develop a school culture based on the belief that students can succeed at high levels when they have a sense of belonging and support, can relate their learning activities to their goals and are supported to make greater effort to succeed.
- Have a professional learning plan that continuously increases the capacity of district staff to support principals and schools.

Elevate the Importance of Professional Learning

Providing school leaders with high-quality professional learning opportunities is a core responsibility of districts, and the highly supportive districts in this study made professional learning a top priority. One highly supportive district cited the adoption of a culture of professional learning as key to its success. (See “Educators Who Read Together Lead Together” on page 31.) Another superintendent made elevating the visibility and role of professional development one of her goals when she took on the challenge of turning the district around. The professional development director in that district explained: “Prior to my taking this role, there was no one in this position. They did not have a staff development director. ... We’re trying to get it up and running because, up until the current superintendent took over ... staff development was all over the place.”

Research has identified key characteristics of an effective professional learning system for schools and principals:²¹

- Provide common planning time for staff to meet and discuss their work.
- Expect and support teachers to improve instruction through training, practice, dialogue and coaching, and through access to high-quality learning activities and content knowledge “refreshers” linked to their teaching responsibilities.
- Use student performance results and student work to drive instructional decisions and to identify priorities for professional learning.
- Flexibly allocate available resources (time, people, money, facilities) for schools to help them meet students’ needs.
- Ensure collective responsibility for student outcomes within groups of teachers sharing students.
- Provide high-quality mentoring for principals throughout their first two years as school leaders, and provide struggling principals with mentoring as needed.

- Create induction programs for new principals and teachers.
- Give principals control over their professional learning budgets, but require that they link their professional learning plans to their school improvement plans, with a focus on implementing proven practices that engage and motivate students.
- Obtain feedback from participants, and use walkthroughs and student achievement data to analyze the effectiveness of professional learning.
- When possible, arrange for extended contracts or stipends to encourage teachers and leaders to participate in professional learning.
- Organize learning for principals in study groups involving the principal and a team of teacher-leaders, rather than in isolation.
- Provide professional development to address problems critical to high schools — low student motivation, low student engagement, low levels of student preparedness for college and advanced training, low reading achievement, etc. — by identifying root causes and formulating and implementing actions to address the problems.
- Provide professional development to assist principals and teachers to use authentic problems and projects as a way to engage and motivate students to master essential academic knowledge and skills.

Although advances have been made in moving beyond the old professional development model of disconnected, single-day workshops, none of the districts in this study were able to report progress on all of these professional learning goals. **Most of the districts in the study could improve their professional learning efforts by adopting an approach in which principals and teacher-leaders work on teams to address their most pressing problems.**

Provide Mentoring and Induction

One of the most important ways in which districts can support principals is to provide them with high-quality mentoring.²² While five out of 10 respondents in the highly supportive districts mentioned mentoring for principals as one of their district strategies to support schools, only eight of 25 respondents in the moderately and minimally supportive districts mentioned mentoring as a support strategy. (See Table 7.) One superintendent of a highly supportive district reported that when his state cut funding for a second full year of mentoring for new principals, he made sure that the district funded the second year itself.

Table 7
Comments Indicating Districts Support Mentoring for Principals

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents Indicating Mentoring Support	Total Number of Comments	Comments per Respondent
High	50%	7	0.70
Moderate	33	3	0.33
Minimal	31	5	0.31

Only three of the seven districts reported that they have formal induction programs for new principals. A highly supportive district that had an induction program for new principals also had an induction program for new teachers, led by master teachers and consisting of six modules that address typical problems for new teachers. Every new teacher in the district must go through the program, and teachers receive a stipend for their time.

Enable Principals to Select Professional Development Based on Schools' Needs

When asked specifically about principals' control over their professional development funds, educators in four of the seven districts reported that principals controlled at least some of the funds. **Responses indicate that in the seven districts studied, the majority of resources for professional development are controlled by the district, rather than the school.** For example, one of the districts managed its professional development funds from the central office and required its principals to file professional learning plans aligned with the district's strategic improvement plan in order to access those resources. While the effort to ensure professional learning resources were utilized in a strategic manner was commendable, that objective did not require centralized control over resources critical to school improvement.

Some district-wide staff development can support major district priorities, but without in-depth follow-up at the building level, in the context of school needs, its impact will be minimal. Districts cannot hold principals accountable for improved school and classroom practices and student learning unless they give principals the necessary tools to succeed, including the ability to direct professional learning for their faculty. The district can help principals develop their capacity to design and lead effective professional learning, but the principal and his or her team — not the district — should own professional development for the school.

One of the highly supportive districts in the study reported that it provided the majority of its professional development in-house using district resources and only goes outside the district if it cannot respond to a principal's request for professional development using internal talent. This professional learning model provides opportunities for teacher leadership, encourages ownership of professional learning within the community of teachers and administrators, requires constant identification and tracking of talent within the district to know who has the ability to lead training, and results in overall cost savings.



“The prime responsibility of all school leaders is to sustain learning. Leaders of learning put learning at the center of everything they do: student learning first, then everyone else's learning in support of it.”

– Alan M. Blankstein, *Failure Is Not an Option*²³

Make Professional Development Job-Embedded and Relevant

Several respondents reported that the focus of professional development in their districts has shifted toward more job-embedded professional development. One respondent provided this representative description of the change: “We try to move away from one-shot workshops and topics to more job-embedded professional learning communities where the information that the teachers gain, they continue to work with that within their work environment.” Another positive finding in regard to professional development is that four of the districts in the study, including both of the highly supportive districts, reported they were extending teacher contracts and providing stipends to enable teachers to take part in professional development.

Analyze Professional Development to Ensure It Works

Districts in this study recognize that to continually improve professional learning experiences, they must assess their efforts. One district is purchasing a data-management system to track the success of professional learning and to replace self-reported surveys. When asked how the district evaluated the efficacy of its professional development efforts, an assistant superintendent in one of the highly supportive districts responded: “I’d like to say we’re the best in the world at doing that, but I don’t think we do a good job with that. I don’t think we really go back and measure or link what we’ve taught them to what we’re seeing.” Each of the seven districts seems to be struggling with a process for evaluating professional learning. They lack the capacity to help schools recognize when professional development results in improved school and classroom practices and when it does not.²⁴ A director of professional learning explained the situation this way:

“Research-wise, it’s very difficult to say, ‘Okay, it was professional learning that made the difference.’ Truly, if you know anything about integrated school systems and about how things work, it probably wasn’t just professional learning. There were probably multiple factors. But we can say we concentrated on writing training and our writing scores increased. So we can at least say we feel like we’re going in the right direction. I feel like evaluation of professional learning is something that doesn’t get done to the maximum potential that it could be. ... When you evaluate it [professional development], are you evaluating: ‘Did I like it?’ ‘Was it helpful?’ ‘Did the time suit me?’ ‘Was the presenter interesting?’ That’s not what we really need to evaluate. What we need to evaluate is ... ‘Did it make a difference for the teacher in the classroom?’ ”

To monitor the effectiveness of professional learning, districts can survey students to discover whether they notice improvements in instructional practices and school climate. Effective professional development for principals and teachers should translate into more engaging, rigorous and relevant instruction, with more hands-on and team-centered learning and classroom experiences. The effects of those changes should be revealed in student perceptions and will be measurable on surveys earlier than in test results. Students often are an overlooked resource when schools and districts want to find out what works and does not work.²⁵

Develop the Skills, Knowledge and Capacity of District Staff

While the interviews with district staff focused on the professional learning opportunities they were providing to principals and teachers in their districts, it became apparent in the interviews that SREB conducted for *The District Leadership Challenge* that many principals did not believe the district staff could help them move beyond test preparation and meeting minimum state standards to create a high-performance, high-engagement learning environment for all students. Abel County clearly was doing more than most other districts in the study to make sure the central office staff had the capacity to lead high schools in creating a culture of high expectations for all groups of students. (See “Educators Who Read Together Lead Together” on the following page.)

Too often, there is little or no framework or expectation for holding district staff accountable for supporting schools to improve student learning. Professional standards for central office personnel, and the professional learning necessary to meet those standards, are critical unmet needs. States have professional standards for their teachers and principals, and in some cases superintendents; but, with few exceptions, states have not defined professional standards and expectations for district leaders. Iowa, with the leadership of School Administrators of Iowa (SAI), and Ohio, with the leadership of the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC),²⁶ are breaking new ground in setting standards for district leaders, higher expectations for district offices, and professional learning frameworks so that district staffs have the capacity to meet higher expectations. Iowa has adopted six standards for all school leaders, including principals, superintendents and district leaders. The first standard, for example, states “An educational leader promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.” Further descriptors for that standard are provided for both principals and superintendents. SAI has worked with central office administrators from across Iowa to develop a set of descriptors that will be useful for the evaluation of all central-office leaders under the superintendent, whether in curriculum and instruction or the business office, and whether they are an associate superintendent or a specialist. Standards and descriptors help in setting expectations for central-office personnel and formalize what they are accountable for.

Educators Who Read Together Lead Together: Lessons From a District Instructional Leadership Team

A strong focus on professional development is one reason that Abel County is a highly supportive district and a high-achieving district. All of the respondents repeatedly and easily cited current education literature in their comments, and clearly considered their own reading to be very important. The assistant superintendent of business operations for the district described the focus on professional reading and learning brought to the district by a new superintendent as a turning point for both the district and himself:

“Instruction was kind of out of my [focus]. ... It wasn’t expected of me. I didn’t know at that time that I needed to be a part of that. Then, when we changed leadership here, that all changed and we began book studies, we began to read, and I’ve become much more involved in the instructional side of it and the school side of it. ...

“I’ll have to tell you this about me: Probably six years ago, the extent of my reading for most of the time was two local newspapers and my Sunday school lesson most Sundays. Then we started to talk about research that was done. We started to read. That had been something I wasn’t familiar with. I had to read, too, if I was going to keep up, if somebody called on you and asked something, or somebody was talking about something. So I started to read and have become an avid reader.”

The assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction for the district described how the central office’s focus on professional reading has spread throughout the district:

“We read all the time, actually. [Principals] always have current literature in hand, and it drives much of what we do. If everybody can’t go to PD and get to see all the great leaders in the country, we think we can put the literature in their hands and accomplish much of the same thing. And we don’t just read. We process. We discuss. We see what implications there are for our district.”

The Abel County superintendent has formed a district instructional leadership team that includes teacher-leaders, principals, assistant principals and key district staff. The instructional

leadership team makes major decisions for the district and takes those decisions back to the schools for implementation. The superintendent works with the instructional leadership team to generate improved strategies and address challenges. To stay current on school and classroom practices, the instructional leadership team conducts three to four major book studies each year. Individual schools are encouraged to establish their own professional learning communities to replicate this.

Teacher-leaders participate on the instructional leadership team on a rotating basis so that new teacher-leaders join the team each year. This has allowed the district to develop a cadre of highly effective teachers who have leadership capacity. One respondent explained, “If half of our principals left today or if half of us in this central office left today, we wouldn’t miss a lick. We’d go right on because we have people out there [who] are trained, have been on a leadership team and think like we think.”

Strategy 5: Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices, and assist schools to use data effectively.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Continually ask why school conditions and achievement results have to continue as they are and what must be done to change them.
- Work with principals and school leadership teams to diagnose problems and implement a set of actions to improve the situation.
- Assist schools to move beyond examining only state test results by creating a “balanced scorecard” to examine progress on additional key indicators, such as the percentage of students meeting college- and career-readiness standards, attendance data, failure rates, discipline problems, readiness for the ninth grade and student engagement.
- Disseminate data and continuously engage principals in conversations about how to understand a broad array of data and how to use data to drive improvements.
- Provide schools with formative assessments and benchmark tests.
- Assess prospective principals on the basis of their ability to use data in diagnosing problems and taking action to address them.

Center School Improvement Efforts Around Data

Since the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, America’s education landscape has been flooded with data. Schools now have enough data to clearly define their strengths and weaknesses. **The challenge no longer is getting data. The challenge now is using data to improve school and classroom practices and to raise students’ achievement while they are in school, rather than allowing them to drop out or graduate without the academic skills they need for college and careers.** Current state assessment and accountability systems give schools end-of-the-year data, but schools need actionable data on an ongoing basis to help teachers know how to tailor instruction to prevent student failures.

Districts must help schools interpret and use data to inform school and classroom practices that raise achievement. The highly supportive districts in this study were more likely to offer evidence demonstrating use of data and to report that they use formative assessments and diagnostic data to identify and meet the needs of individual students. (See Table 8.)

Table 8
Comments Indicating Accountability and Data Support

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents	Total Number of Comments	Comments per Respondent
Comments Indicating Districts Have a Strong Understanding of Data			
High	70%	10	1.00
Moderate	56	5	0.56
Minimal	38	12	0.75
Comments Indicating District Support With Formative Assessments and Diagnostic Data			
High	50%	13	1.30
Moderate	56	14	1.56
Minimal	25	4	0.25

The disaggregation of data was a key indicator of support for schools. An assistant superintendent of a highly supportive district observed that “we know every child is not treated the same, so we disaggregate data constantly.” His district currently uses support provided by ThinkGate and previously worked with EduSoft for assistance with disaggregation, data analysis and benchmarking. Within the districts, disaggregation of data is quick and easy and shows results for individual students and classrooms, providing an important tool for principals to use.

That same district also has hired staff to develop psychometrically sound quarterly benchmark tests for the coming year. Other districts reported purchasing formative assessments from a variety of vendors, rather than developing their own assessments. **For the most part, however, the adoption of high-quality formative assessments is something districts plan to do in the future, rather than now.** The best practices of consistently disaggregating data and using formative assessments throughout the year require heavy investment in staff, technology and funds, but they have great potential to help schools modify instruction to raise student achievement.

At the same time, using data should only be a means to improved instruction, more engaged students, and higher-achieving students. The collection and interpretation of data must be part of a bigger effort to help school leaders understand different instructional modalities that will motivate and engage students in learning intellectually demanding material. **The disaggregation of data and the use of formative assessments must be coupled with classroom instruction that is more engaging and authentic.**

Go Beyond AYP and State Test Results

The root causes of many academic problems often can be found in data beyond state test results, such as attendance data, failure rates, suspension rates, students' readiness for the ninth grade, college-readiness data and indicators of student engagement. Of the districts in this study, Archer and Carlton — both in the same state — used the widest variety of data in their schools. Districts in this state have received extensive training and technical support in adapting “balanced scorecard” strategies from business management. A balanced scorecard takes into account many different quality indicators across a spectrum of activities related to student achievement and school operations. For example, the balanced scorecard for a school might include student attendance rates, teacher absenteeism and student suspension rates, along with state test data. Implementing a balanced scorecard strategy helps a district understand the contributing factors to the challenges it faces, especially those not immediately apparent in state test data.

But even the data on the balanced scorecards used by the districts in this study too often focus on minimums. When a district focuses entirely on minimum competency levels, it may quickly see its student achievement averages drop.²⁷ Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland (not one of the seven districts examined in this study) has had a remarkable record of success in raising achievement for all students during the last decade, and its superintendent, Jerry Weast, links much of the district's success to its focus on “raising the roof” for student achievement while also “raising the floor.” Montgomery County's vision is to ensure that 80 percent of its students graduate with some type of postsecondary education degree or credential within six years of high school graduation. That is an ambitious goal, but the type necessary for the nation to respond to author Thomas Friedman's warnings about workforce needs and to meet President Barack Obama's call for America to return to world leadership in the number of college graduates.²⁸

Collecting data on success or failure in meeting minimum state standards or passing low-level graduation exams is not a sufficient strategy for a district hoping to prepare its students for a prosperous future. Districts instead should measure the effectiveness of the school system in preparing students for college and careers by using a broader set of achievement indicators, including:

- Gains on the SAT and ACT
- Enrollment in International Baccalaureate (IB) programs and success on IB assessments
- Increases in numbers of students taking and passing AP exams
- Increases in numbers of students passing employer certification exams
- Increases in the percentage of students who proceed to college without needing remedial courses
- Higher percentages of ninth-graders graduating in four years
- Reduced failure rates in grades nine and 10

Districts can use student surveys to collect feedback on students' experiences, satisfaction and the school climate to better understand the root causes behind student achievement results. Unfortunately, districts and schools rarely tap these data resources. Schools in six of the seven districts in this study have adopted the *HSTW* school improvement model, which systematically collects and helps schools use student-survey data. Over the past 22 years, SREB has developed a number of questions on its student surveys that are highly predictive of a high school's ability to improve student achievement. For example, students are asked how frequently they experience these school and classroom practices:

- Teachers clearly indicate the amount and quality of work necessary to earn an A or a B.
- Students revise work to improve its quality.
- Teachers are available before, during or after school to help students with their studies.
- Students have to work hard to meet high standards.
- Students review with their parents and a guidance counselor the sequence of courses that they will take throughout high school.
- A teacher or counselor talks with students individually about their plans for a career or further education after high school.

Students perceptions of these experiences are an accurate barometer of what happens in schools.

Yet none of the district respondents described an emphasis on using student survey data to better understand student achievement or school and classroom practices.

Use Data to Set Clear Expectations

High-quality data can help districts set clear goals that address schools' specific challenges. Unfortunately, some key staff members in the districts studied by SREB were rarely involved in goal-setting discussions. When these discussions did take place, they were between superintendents and principals, without the involvement of the district staff most intimately familiar with the districts' data. One of the districts, however, did use its data to set clear expectations for principals. In this district, one respondent said that each school receives "a spreadsheet that has three years of what we call baseline data. And then we have a space for this coming year's data and then we have targets for three years. So ... we then look to see if we made our target this year ... so we can quickly see [in] what areas we're still suffering."

Make Data Accessible to Principals

SREB's study of principals' perceptions of district support revealed that many principals do not have ownership of accountability data.²⁹ Respondents in only two of the seven districts in this study — the two highly supportive districts — indicated a belief that schools do have ownership of their school data, saying:

- *"It's not being looked at at the county office and then passed down. We're all looking at it at the same time. It's real-time to everyone because of the software we use, and the reports are available to everyone at the same time."*
- *"I don't think it's me providing data. I think it's them [principals] holding and looking at the data that they already have. We don't create another diagnostic set of data for them other than what we just pass along. But they have data within their school. We encourage the use of that data. And I think many of their programs spring up not from just the state data, but from the data that's generated at that school."*

Such ownership of data at the school level was the exception rather than the rule in the districts studied. One district accountability director's description of data use was representative: The state tests were administered in early April, and the district was still waiting in July to receive reports and an unwieldy data-file of results from the state. Once the district had the file, a programmer in the district unpacked the state results before sending them to the schools. The district respondent observed, "It's all centralized at the district office, and not quick-to-fingertip at the school level." He said his district is

investing in a more modern system. In many states, a major factor in districts' inability to send high-stakes test data to schools quickly and in an accessible manner is districts' dependence on the state — choices of software, file formats and calendars for data releases are set by state accountability systems, and districts must work within these parameters.

Even within such top-down accountability systems, districts can serve schools better. One district still distributed data through “big data notebooks” given to each principal at the beginning of the year. A respondent from the district said, “My gut feeling is that, after that first day or so, the notebook’s not used.” This district could follow the example provided by another district:

“... Rather than giving the principals the [state test] scores, I brought them into a computer lab where everybody sat down and we worked out our percentages, showing strengths and weaknesses that day. That is how we spent our day. Everybody could do that, so that no principal was left out there trying to figure out, ‘How does this Excel program work?’ ”

Some principals in this district who were less technologically savvy or mathematically inclined brought assistant principals or teachers who had those skills to assist with the process. By the end of the day, the district had supported every principal in the system in becoming familiar with his or her school’s data and using data to address deficits in student achievement and school and classroom practices.

Constantly Use Data to Support Decisions

While many of the seven districts were struggling to provide principals with their data, some were able to cite examples of how they use school-level data to evaluate programs and improve instruction:

- A district abandoned an algebra curriculum that was based on students’ completion of modular units at their own pace when a review of data showed that students were taking the same units repeatedly and never mastering the content.
- One district worked with a principal to analyze data for the specific purpose of scheduling classes for and assigning students to initially licensed teachers in an effort to set those teachers up for success. First-year teachers were given smaller classes with students who were less likely to have discipline issues.
- That same district added manipulatives to its math instruction on the basis of its data analysis.

Today’s principals need to be able to analyze their data with teachers, rather than simply relying on undigested information from the state or district. Most respondents reported that principals receive regular training from the district on interpreting their data. In the districts included in this study, the superintendents typically have one or two meetings with their principals each month, and respondents reported that professional development with a focus on using data is common in those meetings. An assistant superintendent described the training on data use: “We look at data constantly, so they understand, and I train them ... [to] understand you don’t go by your gut feeling or what you perceive. You go by the actual pieces of data that you have on the table.” Indeed, data competency has become a non-negotiable job requirement for today’s principals. **One of the highly supportive districts has even incorporated data analysis into its job interviews for principals.** Candidates are given actual data for the school they are applying to lead and have two hours to analyze the data and prepare a PowerPoint presentation. They present it to the interview committee, discussing what they see in the data and how the data would affect their plans to lead the school.

A Success Story: Using Data to Identify Problems and Solutions

The following story, told by an assistant superintendent, is representative of effective data analysis leading to productive problem-solving discussions between districts and schools:

“We had one high school last year that didn’t make AYP. It was the most affluent of our high schools, but they ... all of a sudden ended up with [sub-groups] that had problems in math. ... So I went in, and the principal and I quickly figured out where our problems were, and he and I met with that leadership team ... maybe eight or 10 times. ... In that school’s case, there were two things they needed immediately if they were going to be able to get their safety net for those children in place. And so I dropped what I was doing and that’s what I did for the rest of that day and the next day — find the money, and fight to get those things in place, and get those things ordered and rushed in to them — you know, empowering them and letting them know they’re going to get the support they need.”

The process began with disaggregation of data to identify the problem and its causes. The district could have given this information to the principal and told him to fix it. Instead, the assistant superintendent held several meetings, not just with the principal but with the school leadership team and teacher-leaders in the school, to determine what the data meant, why some student groups were being left behind and what needed to be done. The assistant superintendent acted as an advocate for the school to make sure it had the appropriate resources. In this case, the district shared ownership of the problem with the school, and they solved it together.

Strategy 6: Optimize the use of resources to improve student learning.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Give schools greater autonomy and flexibility with the use of time, organizational structures, teacher assignments and alternative systems for delivering instruction in exchange for holding principals and faculty accountable for results.
- Involve principals in budget discussions by allowing them to present well-conceived plans, aligned with district and school improvement plans, for using district resources to improve schools.
- Strategically direct resources to address the district’s most pressing needs, most challenged schools and most at-risk students, rather than treating all schools the same, and use resources to support comprehensive middle grades and high school reform that can change impersonal, negative school climates to caring climates in which teachers, administrators and students believe academic success is possible and necessary for all students.
- Treat time as a critical resource — and perhaps the *most critical* resource — for districts, schools, principals, teachers and students.
- Encourage an entrepreneurial spirit among principals in seeking outside funds to support school improvement aligned with the strategic plan.

Find Ways to Allocate Discretionary Resources

Many districts have limited resources available for discretionary use in supporting improved learning, and as a consequence, schools and principals have limited resources to help them raise student achievement. After accounting for salaries, facilities maintenance, technology needs and transportation, resources that are left for schools and principals to use in addressing critical problems unique to the school, including achievement, promotion rates, graduation rates and school climate, are severely limited. The chief financial officer for one district estimated that schools in his district have discretionary control over only \$19 to \$20 per student. Some schools receive revenues from parking passes, athletics ticket sales, vending machines or other limited sources. In most cases, however, schools lack the resources needed for significant changes. Across the nation, according to one recent study led by management expert William Ouchi, principals control about 6 percent of their school's budget. The study found that systems that have decentralized, such as Chicago and New York City, have provided principals with discretion over 14 percent to 85 percent of their school's budget, and that schools under decentralized management were more likely to make decisions that would reduce the number of students each teacher works with.³⁰

Archer County has found innovative ways to allocate significant resources for schools to use for their greatest needs. The district has a system in which schools are assigned points based on the number of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches, student mobility and other factors indicative of a high-need school. For example, if 70 percent of a school's students qualified for free and reduced-price lunches, the school would receive two points for additional staff positions. One point earns a school one full-time-equivalent teaching position. **The principals have flexibility to use points to hire additional staff of their choice or to modify teacher contracts to provide time for program planning, professional development, mentoring and data analysis, as long as their decisions are consistent with their school improvement plans.**

Principals also have flexibility to decrease class sizes. Archer County's average class size is about 20 students, and the state cap for class size is 32. Principals can schedule some classes for the maximum size of 32 students, while decreasing class sizes for ninth-graders or at-risk students. **The district even has found a way to grant each of its high school teachers a second preparation period for common planning, observing other classrooms, and implementing instructional strategies that have been shown to improve student achievement.**

Archer County also has a safety-net program that allows schools to apply for money to address the needs of at-risk students. This budget item was created specifically to meet the needs of at-risk students and to provide schools with programs to help them meet AYP. The source of the safety-net funds is the Extended Day money for tutoring and student support services received from the state, plus about \$250,000 added by the school board. One respondent said the principals and their schools compete in an open budget process for those safety-net dollars. This process requires principals to consider carefully how they will use the funds and allows the district to allocate its resources for the greatest leverage. **From the beginning of his tenure, the superintendent has told his principals that he will hold them accountable for good results, but he also gives them the resources they need to be successful.** The system is committed to increasing resources, autonomy and expectations. An assistant superintendent in the county said that, with the safety-net program, "the message that is sent out is that we're expecting you to make progress on this and tell us what you need to make progress." The assistant superintendent added that this was the third system he had worked in, and he had "never seen a system or been in a system where the board and the superintendent are as willing to change and direct resources at the request of a principal."

Archer County is not particularly affluent. Its economically disadvantaged population approaches 50 percent, yet the district learned to better manage and allocate its resources to support schools. The points and safety-net programs provide principals with flexibility while also offering additional resources to schools with the greatest needs. The safety-net program costs an additional \$250,000, and the points program about \$3 million in the \$131 million annual budget. Despite the relatively modest funding, the superintendent and district leaders see these programs as critical in empowering principals and giving them the tools to meet their school improvement goals.

Some of the districts also tap large grants from the government and other organizations. For example, one of the districts in this study has received grants to organize its high schools into small learning communities. In this instance the grant was not successful because the district did not have a vision for organizing large high schools into effective small learning communities. The district lacked the necessary policies, the will and the expertise to support the schools in using these funds effectively. Thus, an opportunity was lost in creating more personalized and relevant high schools where teams of teachers and a school leader could take the ownership for more effectively addressing the needs of a smaller group of students within the high school. **Lack of resources is not always the issue holding schools back; in many cases, it is the absence of leadership, expertise and the will to use resources effectively.**

Benson County, a moderately supportive district of medium size, was the only one of the seven districts that appeared to be aggressively and strategically taking advantage of grant funding to support school improvement initiatives. The district reported it had a full-time grant writer and had garnered the support of prominent philanthropists in the region who provided grants to create an accelerated math academy.

Give Principals a Voice in Budget Decisions

Several highly and moderately supportive districts have implemented other practices to give principals a voice in setting district budgets, allocating additional resources to higher-need schools, and effectively using the time of principals, teachers and students.

Officials in three of the four highly and moderately supportive districts indicated that principals had a significant role in setting district budgets, whereas only one of the three minimally supportive districts indicated that principals had a voice in budget discussions. Two districts in different states described their approaches to involving principals in budget discussions similarly. An assistant superintendent described the process in his county as follows:

“Every year in January or February, we have budget hearings. ... Every principal is given the opportunity to come present. [They are asked] ‘Do you need additional teachers? Why do you need them? Do you need additional programs? Why do you need them? What would be the outcome?’ ... So they get to present all of that to the committee ... to prepare our budget. Unfortunately, we’re in a county that doesn’t get a lot of extra funding. I’ll give you an example: This year, we received \$1.9 million in new money. Of that, about \$1.1 million is mandatory items such as salary increases, benefit increases, utility increases. And whatever is left over, of course, then goes to [fund] whatever these new programs were. ... I think we had something like \$7 million worth of requests. So, lots of good ideas out there, but very little money.”

A superintendent who followed a similar process found that the district needed about \$2.2 million for the first round of requests for improvement initiatives. He sat down with his principals to define the greatest needs. Consensus was not reached in all cases, but even those principals whose requests were not approved had an opportunity to present their case and received an explanation for why their requests were denied.

A truly collaborative budget planning process improves district efficiency and culture by:

- enabling each principal to articulate his or her school's unique needs in the context of the district strategic plan.
- allowing for new and creative ideas to emerge from educators who are most familiar with the problems.
- providing a way for principals and district leaders to have ongoing dialogue on the district's vision and plan in the context of specific school problems.
- creating an environment of mutual understanding, respect and ownership.

A radical and promising model of giving schools control over their own budgets currently is being implemented in New York City's Empowerment Schools Organization. The Empowerment Schools are given a budget for specific district support services and can use those funds either to purchase services from the district, or to go outside the district and purchase them. This practice gives principals the opportunity to develop a thoughtful plan about what their school needs in order to better achieve district goals, and requires district staff to understand the schools' needs.³¹

Direct Resources to Schools and Grade Levels With the Highest Needs

Three of the four highly and moderately supportive districts reported that they allocated greater resources, both in funding and in staff, to struggling schools. The superintendent of Benson County explained:

"Schools that are considered more at risk receive extra teaching positions so they can have smaller class sizes. They are also given some extra funding, particularly for remediation and for materials and resources they might need. ... They have total flexibility. The only thing they cannot do is use [the extra funding] for administrative positions. It must be used for working with students. It could be remediation, it could be the lower class size, anything like that."

Several respondents explained that equal allocation was not always equitable and that resources should be allocated to meet the different challenges faced by each school's students.³² Between 2003 and 2008, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland cut achievement gaps in elementary math and reading in half, while doubling the number of black students passing AP exams. One of the keys to Montgomery County's success in closing gaps was increasing resources to its "Red Zone" schools (averaging 80 percent minority enrollment, 30 percent English-language learners and 51 percent low-income students) while holding resources steady at its "Green Zone" schools (averaging 43 percent minority enrollment, 10 percent English-language learners and 12 percent low-income students).³³

Many of the districts in this study have high ninth-grade failure rates, yet they maintain a higher student-teacher ratio in grade nine than in other grade levels and they continue to assign the least experienced teachers to ninth-grade classes. Through the establishment of measurable district goals to reduce ninth-grade failure rates — while raising student performance and achievement — districts can provide principals with the political cover and support they need to redirect their teaching resources to better serve ninth-grade students by placing more effective teachers into the ninth grade with smaller classes.³⁴ Districts also can provide resources that allow principals to extend the school day or the school week for students who are struggling to meet standards, especially as they prepare to transition from the middle grades to high school or from high school to college and careers.

Recognize Time as a Critical Resource

One of the biggest differences between highly supportive and moderately or minimally supportive districts was the frequency with which respondents volunteered comments recognizing time as a valuable resource. Principals frequently stress the importance of using all instructional time and teaching “from bell to bell.” Highly supportive districts seemed to be more aware of this need and, consequently, attached greater value to time and to ensuring that educators’ time is spent on high-quality instructional activities.

While half of the respondents from the two highly supportive districts made statements indicating their districts tried to protect principals’ and teachers’ time to focus on improving school and classroom practices, only three of 25 respondents in the moderately and minimally supportive districts volunteered such comments. (See Table 9.) A few respondents in the minimally supportive districts alleged that they saw a pattern of principals being called away from their schools for central office meetings without clear purposes, or that central office meetings with principals routinely started late or ran past scheduled ending times. Such practices disrespect principals’ time and create a culture in which principals can similarly disrespect their teachers’ time.

Table 9
Comments Indicating District Leaders View Time as a Critical Resource

District Level of Support	Percentage of Respondents Viewing Time as a Critical Resource	Total Number of Comments	Comments per Respondent
High	50%	8	0.80
Moderate	22	4	0.44
Minimal	6	1	0.06

Optimize Resources With Flexibility, Autonomy and Accountability

Highly supportive districts involve principals in developing budgets and give them flexibility in deciding how they use resources — including funds, personnel and time — while also holding them accountable for maintaining a focus on student learning. However, accountability works both ways. A district cannot hold school principals accountable when it does not have a high-quality staff to support the schools or when the role of district staff is so poorly and narrowly defined that it is not held accountable for providing the support services schools need. Where districts lack the expertise to assist schools, they need to establish procedures through which schools can obtain support from outside the district. **In pushing more decision-making to the school level, the district office must align the expertise and assignments of the district staff with the needs of the schools and hold the district staff accountable for enabling schools to develop and successfully implement plans for improving student learning.**



“Dollar bills do not educate children. Teachers with particular instructional approaches, principals capable of instructional leadership, schools with supportive climates, and many other resources do.”

—W. Norton Grubb, “Correcting the Money Myth: Rethinking School Resources”³⁵

In a Time of Scarcity, Make the Most of Resources

The current economic downturn and sharply decreased tax revenues at state and local levels necessitate maximizing the use of schools' limited resources. While money can make a difference in improving outcomes in education — higher teacher salaries improve the quality of candidates, higher teacher-student ratios allow for more personalized schools, guidance and advisement systems support every student — money alone will not improve schools or reduce achievement gaps. Changes in district and school culture can occur independent of, and are more important than, spending. Setting high expectations for all schools, teachers and students is far more important, as is placing a focus on doing what works and eliminating what doesn't. Waste continues in some school systems, and the strategic redirection of resources is a more likely and sensible approach than the infusion of new resources. Districts can take three steps to redirect resources toward school improvement:³⁶

1. Look for wasted time and resources. Teachers' time often is the most wasted commodity in a district. Another frequent source of waste is half-implemented initiatives or programs that are either started by a superintendent or principal and not finished after a leadership change or conceived as stand-alone solutions (e.g., lower class sizes, more technology) that are adopted without accompanying professional development or other necessary support.
2. Decentralize decision-making about resources so that principals and school councils — those closest to the classroom — can decide how best to leverage resources for school improvement.
3. Provide professional development to increase the capacity of principals and other school leaders to wisely use resources.

Strategy 7: Use open, credible processes to involve key school and community leaders in shaping a vision for improving schools.

Strategies of Highly Supportive Districts

- Involve community leaders in setting a common vision; developing the district and individual schools' strategic plans; and maintaining ongoing communication with, involvement of and feedback to key stakeholders.
- Communicate to the public the need to prepare students successfully for college, advanced career training and the workplace; the performance of the system and each school; and ways in which the community and parents can help improve results.

Engage the Community in Establishing District Values and Beliefs

Districts can support principals by involving teachers, parents and the community in making decisions and in setting the vision for the district and for individual schools. Districts also can help principals develop effective working relationships with parents, businesses and other stakeholders outside of schools, which can lead to richer and more authentic learning opportunities for students.

When Archer County developed its strategic plan, it took deliberate steps to engage principals and their communities. The strategic planning process was critical to the district's success, and the community was involved from the beginning. The superintendent gave this account of involving the community in establishing a strategic vision for the district:

“We spent a year on the front end before we even started implementation. That process, at the system level, was one that was inclusive of a microcosm of the entire school system community. ... It meant that faith-based groups, the clergy, law enforcement, business owners, parents, students [were involved]. ... I think that helped provide the foundation for the initial cover for principals as they make changes in their building. ... So I think the whole strategic planning process that we use really was one that helped provide a support mechanism for principals, because now, our whole process is transparent.

“... It’s kind of a different way to go about it when you’re on the front end during that first year, because you don’t know what you’re going to get. You have to have tough skin because you’re going to listen to what parents have to say and what students have to say. Everybody is coming together to talk about these issues.

“... When we developed our beliefs, they were really community beliefs, because ... those beliefs came from that 30-member planning team — the microcosm of the community that I mentioned that consisted of board members, students, teachers, community, and all of those. So you end up with community beliefs.”

SREB interviews with Archer County staff showed the intensive effort in establishing a consensus around the county’s core beliefs. Five of the six Archer County respondents talked about the importance of a “common vision” for the district. Part of this common vision was that schools should be supported by the district, but take ownership of their problems and solutions. Four of the six respondents referenced “empowering schools” and “decentralization” as key district improvement strategies. When the district had completed its community-centered strategic planning process, principals were required to follow a similar process to involve their own communities in developing school-level improvement plans. Archer County demonstrates that a strong, clear central vision for a district does not prevent schools from establishing, with advice from their communities, their own visions, plans and improvement strategies.

Involve the Community in Hiring Principals and Fundraising

Several of the districts in the study, including both of the highly supportive districts, reported involving the community in filling principal vacancies. One superintendent said: “If you’ve got some buy-in from the teachers and the parents in selecting the principal, then they’re going to help make that principal successful.”

That superintendent’s district has excellent community support. All schools in the district have corporate and community partners and active parent-teacher associations and booster clubs. The school board has encouraged community support by offering matching funds for public fundraisers, with higher matching formulas for schools serving less affluent populations.

Educate the Public

To provide principals with the community support they need to improve graduation rates and prepare more students for postsecondary study, work and citizenship, districts must communicate repeatedly to parents and community leaders the educational conditions that will promote the intellectual engagement of all students. Districts need to communicate to parents and communities that meeting today’s minimum graduation requirements is not sufficient preparation for college and careers — that a higher level of achievement is necessary for all students.

None of the respondents in this study mentioned district strategies or actions to educate the public about how schools can more effectively prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. According to a recent Center for Public Education analysis of international test results, the performance of U.S. students in math is “mediocre,” and high school students are below international

averages in science. Meanwhile, most states have set proficiency standards on their state tests below the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Proficient level, resulting in a considerable gap between what students must know to pass state assessments and what they must know to be ready for college and careers. Many low-income and minority students in this country enter school at an academic disadvantage, and as a whole, U.S. students tend to fall behind in the middle grades.³⁷ To prepare elementary students for the middle grades, to prepare middle grades students for college-preparatory high school courses, and to prepare high school students for college and careers, districts and schools must create educational conditions that will foster the motivation of all groups of students to learn at higher levels. Students, teachers, parents and principals must work together toward this goal.

Develop a Formal Structure of Community Partners

With the exception of the two highly supportive districts, having a formal system of community partners at the school and district level did not seem to be a factor in shaping the districts' vision and strategic plans or in gaining support and resources for reform efforts. Archer County created formal community partnerships to reach consensus on educational goals and a district strategy to meet them. Abel County is in a state that requires school councils, including teachers and parents, to work with principals in leading each school. Formal partnerships through which school and district leaders regularly seek input and feedback can improve efforts to address the needs of students being served, set district and school priorities and identify strategies for meeting them, and inform a broader audience about efforts to graduate responsible students prepared for their next step in life.

The challenges of improving America's schools are so great that it would be impossible to address them successfully without community and parent partners' being fully involved, supportive and understanding of how high schools can graduate more students and prepare graduates for further study, advanced training and responsible citizenship. Helping schools build that framework of support within the community — so that the school is supported by the district and the community, the teachers can support their principal, the principal can support the teachers, and everyone works together to support students in their learning — is the key to the seventh and final strategy districts can use to support their principals.

Actions States, Districts and Schools Should Take to Better Serve Students

The following matrix provides states, districts and schools with a set of actions necessary to achieve continuing and sustainable school improvement. As this report explains, districts must take strategic steps to improve their support of school improvement — but they cannot act alone. States must create structures and policies that allow districts to take ownership of school improvement, rather than bypassing the district to try to improve schools without a district framework of support. Because the ultimate objective is to improve student learning in schools, the optimal actions for schools, districts and states must be back-mapped from that objective. None of these levels can succeed on its own in creating a system that better serves students. The three columns of the matrix establish a system of support for school improvement, from the state level to the classroom — and central to this system is the school district office.

Strategy	State Actions	District Actions	School Actions
<p><i>Strategy 1: Establish a clear focus and a strategic framework of core beliefs, effective practices and goals for improving student achievement.</i></p>	<p>Provide outside facilitation to support districts in establishing a shared vision and goals among school board members, superintendents, schools and teacher-leaders and the community for improving school and classroom practices in ways that increase student motivation and raise student achievement.</p>	<p>Engage school and community leaders in developing and implementing a strategic vision and plan that: (1) goes beyond minimum expectations for students; (2) provides the support necessary for implementation; and (3) allows principals and faculty to customize goals and actions for their school.</p> <p>Hold principals accountable for creating a well-functioning leadership team at each school.</p>	<p>Engage teachers in creating a schoolwide strategic vision and plan aligned with the district's strategic framework.</p> <p>Create structures allowing the principal and school leadership teams to devote more time to leading improvement in curriculum and instructional practices.</p>
<p><i>Strategy 2: Organize and engage the school board and district office in support of each school.</i></p>	<p>Create a system of indicators and criteria for rating district offices on their effectiveness in creating policies, allocating resources, and providing expertise that improves the capacity of principals and their school teams to implement proven practices that advance all groups of students.</p> <p>Assist districts to restructure the role of principals to enable them to devote more time to improving instruction and creating a culture that will motivate students to succeed.</p>	<p>Develop a system to hold district personnel accountable for working collaboratively with school principals to implement the strategic plan.</p> <p>Define boundaries in which principals and their staff have greater autonomy and flexibility and receive district support to take ownership of school problems, develop and implement solutions with fidelity, and be held accountable for improving student learning.</p> <p>Create ways for schools to provide feedback to the central office about their needs and concerns and to ensure that their concerns are addressed.</p> <p>Help principals recruit talented educators and remove or improve the performance of unsuccessful teachers.</p> <p>Improve communication and collaboration across human resources, finance, and curriculum and instruction in providing support to school leaders.</p>	<p>Carefully evaluate strengths and weaknesses in the school and identify the supports necessary from the central office.</p> <p>Create teams of teachers who can take ownership of problems, search out proven solutions, and develop, implement and monitor a plan.</p> <p>Establish a school culture that motivates students by demonstrating high expectations for students to be prepared for a range of postsecondary options.</p>

Strategy	State Actions	District Actions	School Actions
<p><i>Strategy 3: Provide instructional coherence and support.</i></p>	<p>Provide schools and districts with access to exemplary practices and strategies that will result in schools creating an engaging learning environment that is relevant, is intellectually demanding, is personalized and gives students supports needed to succeed.</p>	<p>Restructure the role of the principal to emphasize instructional leadership, and provide time to conduct school walk-throughs to ensure that instruction is engaging, intellectually challenging and relevant.</p> <p>Hold schools accountable for: (1) identifying students who are failing to meet standards and developing a system of responsive interventions aimed at closing the gap; (2) supporting guidance and advisement programs that connect every student with a caring adult; and (3) leading the staff in aligning curriculum and instruction to college- and career-readiness standards.</p>	<p>Establish a leadership team to ensure delivery of a high-quality instruction that engages students intellectually, emotionally, behaviorally and socially in learning.</p> <p>Create opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively to develop and deliver relevant and rigorous instruction, and ensure that they maintain personal connections with students.</p> <p>Engage the faculty in offering a curriculum aligned to grade-level and college- and career-readiness standards, aligning classroom instruction and assessment to those standards, and providing students with the support necessary to succeed.</p> <p>Work with school counselors to identify students' interests, special talents and aptitudes and to assist them, with the support of their parents, to develop a goal beyond high school and a program of study that links a ready academic core and a career or academic focus area to their stated post-high school goals.</p>

Strategy	State Actions	District Actions	School Actions
<p><i>Strategy 4: Invest heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals, teacher-leaders and district staff.</i></p>	<p>Establish policies requiring districts with a high percentage of failing schools to form partnerships with a university or other providers to prepare principals who can improve teaching and learning and turn-around failing schools. Partnerships should be built around these effective practices in the preparation of future principals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selective recruitment identifies teachers with leadership potential, a track record of teaching all groups of students to high levels and a passion serving all students well. • A challenging curriculum focuses on instructional leadership, the ability to change the culture of the schools and improve the skills and effectiveness of teachers. • Student-centered instruction integrates theory into practice and uses problem-based learning to teach aspiring leaders to analyze school data and handle budget and personnel issues. • A well-designed administrative internship provides real opportunities for aspiring principals to experience leadership firsthand. • New school principals are supported by at least two years of mentoring and ongoing coaching, professional learning and feedback. 	<p>Develop a succession pipeline in collaboration with a university or an external vendor to select, prepare and support a new generation of school leaders to lead changes in struggling schools.</p> <p>Focus professional learning around the need to develop literacy skills as the key to making achievement gains across the curriculum.</p> <p>Provide principals with greater control over professional learning opportunities for their schools, aligned to school and district strategic plans.</p> <p>Ensure that school leaders have the training and the capacity to lead change and are not held accountable for doing things they have never been trained to do.</p>	<p>Strategically align professional learning with a school improvement plan.</p> <p>Ensure that teachers are actively implementing what they are learning in professional development.</p> <p>Consistently evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning.</p> <p>Embed ongoing, faculty-led professional learning into a culture of continuous improvement.</p>

Strategy	State Actions	District Actions	School Actions
<p><i>Strategy 5: Provide high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices, and assist schools to use data effectively.</i></p>	<p>Broaden accountability standards beyond a focus on meeting minimum academic standards.</p> <p>Broaden state assessments for middle grades and high schools to collect student survey data about the extent to which students perceive they have experienced proven school and classroom practices, and link students' perceptions to their performance on state exams as a way to discern if poor and minority students are experiencing rich learning experiences necessary to achieve at higher levels.</p>	<p>Ensure that schools receive a variety of data to identify challenges and determine root causes.</p> <p>Provide training to principals on the effective use of data and how to use data to identify school weakness, craft appropriate strategies to improve teaching and learning, and make decisions about resource allocation.</p>	<p>Analyze a variety of sources of data and work with the faculty to use that information to improve instruction for all groups of students.</p> <p>Use a range of data to identify students who are not achieving at grade-level standards or who are on a course for failing or dropping out, and develop tiered interventions to get students back on a trajectory for success.</p>
<p><i>Strategy 6: Optimize the use of resources to support learning improvement.</i></p>	<p>Assist districts to conduct "waste audits" in challenged schools in order to better direct resources to measures that will improve schools' results.</p> <p>Assist large school districts with multiple low-performing schools to identify the most underserved schools, and identify ways to mobilize greater district and community resources to address the needs of these schools.</p>	<p>Give schools greater autonomy and flexibility to use time, school organizational structures, teacher assignments and alternative systems for delivering instruction, in exchange for holding principals and faculty accountable to improve results.</p> <p>Pursue equitable resource allocation by giving schools facing greater challenges greater resources, enabling more students to achieve college and career readiness.</p> <p>Support principals in becoming entrepreneurial, making requests to the district for resources and seeking outside funding sources for programs.</p> <p>Assist low-performing schools to implement summer learning programs to reduce learning losses in reading and math achievement.</p> <p>Support principals to make staffing assignments based on what is best for students.</p>	<p>Utilize resources to: (1) make greater use of after-school and summer learning programs to engage students in authentic learning that matches their interests, goals and aspirations; and (2) develop multi-level intervention systems capable of providing intensive support to students at critical transition points in grade six, nine and 12.</p> <p>Create organizational structures through which teams of teachers can work together to increase the percentage of students making successful transitions from the middle grades to high school and then from high school to college or careers.</p>

Strategy	State Actions	District Actions	School Actions
<p><i>Strategy 7: Use open, credible processes to involve key school and community leaders in shaping a vision for improving schools.</i></p>	<p>Establish state policies and technical assistance to assist districts to work with schools to connect every student with an adviser/mentor who can assist students and their parents to set goals for beyond high school.</p>	<p>Promote strategies to involve parents in their children's education. Support principals to involve the business community in developing programs of study that combine the college-ready core with quality career/technical education.</p>	<p>Keep the community informed about the school's mission and plans in order to build community support for the school. Identify community partners to garner greater resources for the school. Ensure that all students are connected with a caring adult who can help them acquire the habits of success and help them make the connection between their studies and their goals and opportunities beyond school. Work with postsecondary partners to provide students with access to dual credit options, and work with the community to provide authentic community-based learning experiences.</p>

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