Standards-Based Reform: Baseline Report

Corpus Christi Independent School District

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Table of Contents

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I. INTRODUCTION

Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD) is one of six urban school districts, supported in part by The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement, to establish and sustain standards-based middle level reform. The reform emphasizes the development and implementation of academic standards that will enable grade 8 students to achieve high standards by the year 2000.

In the interest of documenting systemic middle school reform, the Foundation awarded a grant to Education Matters, Inc. to evaluate the process, content, and quality of standards-based middle school reform within and across school districts. In order to chart and understand the progress of standards-based middle school reform, we will follow four middle schools and about 36 middle school teachers over the course of the Foundation's grant to Corpus Christi.

Based on our visits during the past year, we believe that CCISD's implementation process is well-organized and thorough. The district demonstrates a strong commitment to implementing standards in middle schools across the district. Without exception, building-based administrators and central office staff view standards as the center of reform and increasingly use them as a way to guide other programs and initiatives. They also see themselves as accountable for advancing the standards agenda.

Across the district, depending on capacities and need, schools use a variety of approaches to implement standards. Increasingly, teachers are learning the new language associated with standards and new forms of pedagogy: they have adopted some of the language of performance standards and tasks, scoring guidelines, higher thinking skills, and real-life applications. This is a necessary first step for reforming instruction and assessment; it is a precursor to actually changing learning environments and classroom practice.

Teachers, in general, view standards as potentially useful for guiding their classrooms. The biggest impact is in the area of performance standards, particularly for traditional teachers who have been wedded to didactic teaching and teacher-centered instruction. All the teachers we interviewed are trying some new strategies (projects, presentations, etc.) to determine if students can meet the standards. However, the teachers' focus, as one would expect in the early stages of implementation, is largely on the organization and routines of setting up and monitoring these tasks. This is another necessary first step.

CCISD struggles to make good decisions about scoring guides and grading guidelines. These are complicated issues and deserve time and the best thinking of practitioners and researchers. These may be issues for future collaboration and problem-solving with other Foundation-supported middle schools. The district also faces the challenge of implementing standards while increasing students' test scores on the statewide test, Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). We saw much

evidence of teachers engaged in a balancing act: promoting innovative performance tasks while preparing students, through drill and practice, for TAAS. This is an ongoing pressure for teachers and administrators.

This report describes what standards-based reform looks like from an outsider's perspective. We have tried to stay true to the voices of the teachers and administrators we interviewed and to limit our analysis of their views and our observations.

II. METHODOLOGY

This report represents baseline information for the evaluation of standards-based reform in Corpus Christi. Evaluators collected information during two visits to the school district in school year 1995-1996. In the fall, Barbara Brauner Berns spent four days on site gathering information about the district and individual schools, learning more about the district's culture and vision, becoming familiar with the district's development and implementation of standards, and selecting schools for the evaluation. She interviewed central office personnel, attended a principals' meeting, and visited six middle schools identified by the district as possible evaluation sites. At each campus, she met with site-based teams and teacher groups, spoke with the principal and other key administrators, toured school buildings, and briefly visited academic and exploratory classrooms. The six schools represented the range of middle school types in the district and shared one common element: a school leadership or culture that suggested promise for implementing standards-based reform.

From the information collected during this visit, the evaluator—in consultation with Mrs. Roseanna Garza, Director of Academics—selected Tom Browne Middle School (a borderline school), Cullen Place Middle School, Elliott Grant Middle School, and Wynn Seale Academy of Fine Arts (a focus school) as study sites. While none of the schools had experience with external evaluators, all four principals expressed a willingness to participate in the evaluation. They believed their faculties would benefit from an opportunity to describe what they were thinking and doing in terms of standards implementation.

In the winter of 1996, the evaluation team expanded to include Neva Wilcox and Susan Markowitz, two evaluators with extensive middle school teaching experience and backgrounds in curriculum and instruction. In April the three-person team conducted a second, more extensive visit to Corpus Christi. In consultation with the principals, they identified ten to fifteen teachers at each site who represented the four core academic subject areas, three middle school grades, and an openness to reform. From these, the evaluators and principals will select nine from each school to participate in the evaluation.

At each campus, we learned about teachers' and others' perspectives on standards-based reform, middle school children's academic and social needs, academic goals for students, and current teaching practice, curriculum content, and approaches to assessment. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews that focused, in part, on understanding and using the standards and, in part, on curriculum development and alignment in light of the standards. We also observed teaching and learning opportunities and attended relevant meetings. We spent at least one day in each school, observing classrooms for 20-30 minutes each and interviewing almost 60 teachers. In addition, we collected and analyzed written materials related to the implementation of middle school reform.

Interviews with central office administrators, curriculum consultants, and a member of the school board and observations of an all-day principals' meeting were also important to the evaluation. We examined the knowledge and skills that administrators developed about academic standards and the support and guidance they provided to schools and teachers. We also learned about their attitudes toward middle school reform and the challenges they face in promoting academic and performance standards in the district.

The CCISD community welcomed us into their district and schools and responded candidly and eloquently to our questions. We greatly appreciated their positive response, particularly in light of the fact that external evaluation, specifically qualitative evaluation and the concept of "critical friend," is unfamiliar to many district educators.

Our visit occurred three weeks before administration of TAAS, the statewide student assessment program in reading and mathematics for grades 3-8, and social studies and science in grade 8. Because of the pressure to improve test scores, many teachers were drilling students for TAAS, and administrators knew that we would see many uninspiring classrooms. This caused many in our sample of educators to feel uneasy during the visit.

III. Background on Standards-Based Reform

According to CCISD public information materials, Corpus Christi has the best performance of the state's urban school districts. While pleased with this status, they want more for their students and community. The district's student population is 41,844, with grade 6-8 students totaling 10,300, divided among 12 middle schools. The breakdown by race is 68% Hispanic, 25% White, 6% African American, and 1% other. According to the first quarterly report to the Foundation on April 15, 1996:

> Failure rates of 38% pour forth with predictable regularity at the end of each grading period. Mathematics achievement levels remain unacceptably low. The achievement gap between minority and Anglo students remains unacceptably wide. In many classrooms... children daydream through the process, unable to complete the required standards; they wait for the opportunity to drop out. Above all, the sword of the Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) looms over all middle schools.

This situation led the district to develop and begin implementing a standards-based reform agenda. The K-12 reform effort began several years ago and, according to Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra, is beginning to show results. He, therefore, shares the education community's delight over the May 1996, news that the district's spring TAAS scores rose substantially, showing "the best across-the-board-ever improvement." The district's percentage of students passing the test increased in every area tested. For the middle schools, the results were the best in the six years of TAAS, with the most noticeable improvements in math, with the passing rate rising 19 points for grade 6, 11 points for grade 7, and 14 points for grade 8. The percentage of students passing the TAAS reading section also increased. No middle school campuses in the district were designated by the state as low performing schools.

While test results are only one indicator of progress, Dr. Saavedra believes the improved test scores are due to restructuring the instructional program at the middle school level, particularly the attention to mathematics and the initial implementation of academic standards. Concerning

standards, his view is, "The academic standards program is really the core of... improvement. It clearly defines the specifics students are supposed to learn. It makes teachers, students, and parents more accountable."

Board member Dorothy Adkins, a past middle school principal, thinks that increases may also have to do with the fact that "everyone is trying to do well on TAAS testing on the campuses." She is sanguine about it and adds, "I do think we get so caught up in this field of testing, that testing sort of drives us. But I'm not sure there's any other way to play with the state's expectations and mandates. I hope we're stressing math, reading and writing in everything we do."

IV. State Influence on Standards-Based Reform

Ms. Adkins' remarks about testing illustrate the state's influence on CCISD's educational programs, policies, and practices. The state's visible and strong presence in education sometimes is an advantage and sometimes presents barriers to reform. On the positive side, Texas participated in the Carnegie Middle School State Policy Initiative and provided opportunities for technical assistance, networking, and resource materials. Likewise, in particular subject areas such as science, math, and social studies, teachers told us that the education service centers, satellites of the state department of education, frequently offer excellent professional development and technical assistance to selected teachers.

Another statewide effort that may advance CCISD's current agenda is the newly developing curriculum standards work. Although timelines are vague due to the state's extensive feedback process, science and algebra standards may be ready this winter or in the spring of 1997. The state is trying to time the standards to coincide with textbook adoptions. Several central office staff members, on the basis of information provided at statewide meetings, expect that the state standards will be somewhat similar to the CCISD standards.

In terms of TAAS, however, the state presents challenges for the reform effort. Most educators we spoke with did not expect that TAAS would ever disappear, although they did believe it might change. The district is currently bound to TAAS for grades 3 through 8 and 10 in reading and mathematics, and reading, math, and writing in grades 4 and 10. When developing the standards, the district committee tried to ensure that the state's new draft's essential elements (called Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, TEKS), which will form the basis for TAAS, were incorporated. However, many principals and teachers are not yet comfortable that alignment between the two is adequate, and they continue to spend weeks before TAAS preparing students with TAAS-formatted materials, often at the expense of other types of instruction that the district requires for students to meet the academic and performance standards. This tension presents problems at some of the campuses in our sample. We are unclear whether the district will attribute the improved test scores to teaching to the standards or to the strong drilling that occurs across the district.

The district uses an accountability system that has its roots in TAAS. Again, most of those we interviewed said they did not see accountability going away because the legislature cannot back off politically. There is one positive change at the state level: downsizing and decentralization. Smaller numbers of staff cannot aggressively enforce regulations, resulting in a decrease in the number of requirements. In fact, one administrator suggested that eventually the state department of education might become no more than a testing monitor and a data collector.

V. STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

The Planning Stage

CCISD's standards-based reform began in October 1993, when district leaders put together a community task force to identify community and business expectations for Corpus Christi students. The task force held forums, attended by over 1500 individuals, to solicit input from the larger community and identify skills that will be important for students in the 21st century. This interchange provided a foundation for building a new agenda for the school district and developing academic standards.

By February, 1994, impressed by the community input process, the school board identified the establishment of academic standards at each grade level as one of five major priorities for the district. Curriculum consultants identified teams of middle school teachers to define what sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students should be able to know and do in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. According to meetings with curriculum consultants during both site visits, this process was thoughtful and comprehensive and resulted in over 500 middle school teachers offering suggestions and feedback.

In June of 1994, the district-wide committees prepared the first draft of the standards, and a second draft in the spring of 1995. In August 1995, Corpus Christi approved and disseminated academic and performance standards in language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science for grades pre-K-12 for use in the 1995-1996 school year.

Everyone we met in the Corpus Christi educational community knows about the standards and takes them seriously. As this report describes, at central office and on campuses throughout the district, administrators and teachers are establishing approaches for implementing and scoring the standards.

The Standards

Called Real-World Academic Standards, the district's explicit goal, as stated in the official document, is to "ensure a sequential plan for learning for all students, while allowing teachers instructional flexibility and the ability to meet the needs of individual students." The need for this approach resulted largely from teachers' frustrations that students often arrived in each grade without having mastered the prior grade's materials and skills. The lack of equalization and standardization among the individual campuses in the district also was a major concern, particularly given the high mobility rates in some of the city's neighborhoods. The district believes that the new standards will, in fact, help make expectations explicit, eliminate "grade-level gaps in learning," and ensure consistency among schools. Likewise, the district intends to better prepare students for the next phase of their education or post-secondary life. Because the standards emerged from such broad discussions within the community, they were widely accepted.

Content standards are curriculum goals that identify what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. An example of Content Standard 1 for language arts, grade 8, is:

> Content Standard 1: Develop techniques for effective oral communication and interpretation.

Performance standards, on the other hand, define what students will do to achieve content standards. They allow for immediate translation into student assignments or classroom activities. The performance standard for the above content standard is:

> A. After listening to an oral presentation, respond by summarizing the speaker's main points. B. Drawing from observation, experience, and/or teacher-assigned topics, give two oral presentations, one as an individual (three minutes) and one as a member of a group (ten minutes). Presentations will include the following: 1. content appropriate to audience and purpose; 2. clearly-developed organization and development; 3. visual aids; 4. eye contact with the audience; 5. formal posture; 6. natural gestures/ expressions; 7. clear and well-paced voice; and 8. audible volume, intonation, and expression.

Groups of teachers and curriculum staff members developed "draft" scoring guidelines to accompany the standards. Here is a sample for one part of the standards:

> Listening process:
>
> 100-90: List the speaker's main points with supporting details and speaker's purpose in informal written and oral format.
>
> 89-80: List the speaker's main points with supporting details in informal written or oral format.
>
> 79-70: List the speaker's main points in informal written or oral format.

Implementation

The early stages of implementing standards in CCISD were characterized by the desire to "make the standards a living document" and bring them into the schools and classrooms. Launching into the implementation phase, the CCISD central office developed a video, supplemented with worksheets, so every campus could give teachers the same message. (The video received mixed reviews.) Curriculum consultants met with principals and modeled options for introducing the standards (through the video, etc.) to teachers. Apart from this effort, teachers began "using" standards without benefit of intensive professional development.

The district established a three-phase approach to implement the standards:

- Use of academic standards on all campuses and piloting of scoring guidelines on selected campuses
- Refinement of scoring guidelines for use on all campuses
- Development of a more comprehensive accountability system.

The 1995-1996 school year characterized Phase 1. One principal described the first phase:

> In Phase 1 we wanted to create an awareness of what academic standards are. We wanted to create an awareness of the scoring guidelines. We wanted to create an awareness for the kids and the parents... and at the same time, participate so we [building-based administrators and teachers] can be at the forefront of the academic standards.

During Phase 1, campuses used the content standards to build a common language and mindset

among teachers and students. Teachers used the standards to plan instructional units and had uniformed pacing forms to document every student's achievement of performance standards. The district provided response forms on which teachers could cite standards that were confusing and, if appropriate, rewrite or add standards or make suggestions. They then gave response forms to department chairs or standards committee representatives from their buildings.

The early stages of standards-based reform in CCISD revealed that many educators thought the district should develop new criteria for assessing student performance. This stimulated a two-pronged approach. First, the district had to develop new grading guidelines that took into account the academic standards and conveyed the importance of the standards by giving a "heavy" weight to student performance on standards in relation to other work. Second, the district had to develop scoring criteria for the standards themselves.

During Phase 1, selected campuses piloted the scoring and grading guidelines and participated in the review and revision process. Half of the schools agreed to pilot both the standards and scoring/grading guidelines. In these sites, during each grading period (every six weeks), teachers would record grades for each student's progress in learning the prerequisite skills and knowledge to achieve the performance standard. (They referred to these as "progress reports.") This grade was the average of grades assigned for different daily activities, quizzes, projects, homework, etc. Many people commented that "this was the traditional way of grading." The average grade made up 50% of the student's overall score.

The remaining 50% was the grade the student received on the performance standard(s) during that grading period. To make scoring easier, a district-wide committee drafted a standard-specific scoring guideline for teachers to use. We found that even in schools that did not formally pilot the scoring guidelines, teachers tried them out. They explained that since all schools will use them next year (with some revisions), they wanted to get a "head start."

A review process continued throughout the piloting. Teachers addressed confusing guidelines, offered suggestions, and/or identified revisions or changes that would improve their effective use. As a result, the principals' meeting during our spring visit focused on possible changes. Two options proposed for district-wide committees discussion included (1) changing the grade ratio from 50/50 to 1/3 for "progress grades" and 2/3 for academic performance and (2) using pass/fail for each grading period based on progress grades. However, the most recent decision about the grading method is that it should be made at the individual campuses.

During the summer of 1996, committees reviewed teachers' comments about specific standards. It is our understanding that the most controversy surrounded the social studies standards. This is not surprising, given the difficulty in coming to consensus nationally in this area. Comments revealed that resource materials, including textbooks, are outdated. In language arts, English and reading teachers could not agree; to quote one of those whom we interviewed, "To this day, they have their boxing gloves on!" Some of the other standards refinements were more limited.

The scoring guidelines that teachers use to measure achievement of academic performance standards were an area of great debate. Teachers believed that the guidelines were not user friendly and needed clarification. Hence, the group that met over the summer developed a different format, with more definitive criteria, so that teachers will know exactly what to look for when scoring standards-based

assignments. Most importantly, the group had access to actual student work during their deliberations, something that was missing during the original development period. According to Mary Kelly, who is spearheading the standards effort, "scoring guides are now more like rubrics." When the district disseminates these new guides, they will be a part of a packet that includes sample assessments (exemplars).

Ongoing communication is part of the implementation strategy, and curriculum consultants, working with standards committees, continuously receive feedback about standards and scoring guidelines. The district's monitoring process also includes academic standards progress charts, campus action plans (revised to include specific attention to standards), and principals who meet in vertical teams as a way to align curriculum and instruction among elementary, middle, and high schools. The district also operates a standards hotline for teachers to call when they need assistance or have information to share. All professional development opportunities use the standards as a focal point.

One of the curriculum consultants provided a snapshot of the status of reform in the district:

> We're all in our infancy stage of learning just what this process is. Although we've produced a document, it's only now that we're trying it out...that we can look back and say oh, wait a minute; this isn't quite right. We're at the refinement stage right now. And some of them have almost totally been rewritten; some of them have not had a lot of changes. But we're at the stage where I think we're coming to a point where we can bring some kind of closure.

District Leadership and School-Wide Ownership of Standards-Based Reform

The standards belong to everyone in the school district. From the school board and the superintendent "downtown" to the students in the classroom, everyone has a role to play with standards-based reform:

- The school board strongly supports standards. According to member Dorothy Adkins, "We've moved kind of like a freight train on these standards."

- Superintendent Saavedra started the 1995-1996 school year with standards as the focus of his annual leadership conference and continues to emphasize a standards-based reform agenda.

- Dr. Sandra Lanier-Lerma, assistant superintendent for instruction and operations, and her staff view standards as the core of district and school-specific inservice education. Standards set the stage for all summer workshops, principals' monthly meetings, and inservice by in-house educators as well as external consultants and training groups.

- Directors of school operations increasingly give attention to implementing the standards. Their roles are slowly changing from ombudsmen to supervisors and instructional leaders vis-à-vis the K-12 principals in each of their areas. The expectation is that they will facilitate change, providing support to the schools and principals in implementing middle school reform.

- The subject-area school service consultants (curriculum specialists) live and breathe

standards, and chair monthly meetings which serve as a forum for building-based department chairs to collaborate on ways to better support teachers in implementing standards and piloting scoring guidelines.

- Principals, according to the school board and district office, are the key change agents in standards implementation. While detailed information often resides in the hands of the department chairs, principals are responsible for working with site-based leadership teams and campus committees around issues related to the standards and securing the necessary resources and support to ensure that implementation occurs.

- Department chairs represent the schools in all discussions about standards, in particular, content areas. They link the schools and the central office and provide information and support for subject matter standards via department level meetings and faculty meetings in their own buildings.

- Teachers must translate written standards into classroom practice through instruction and assessment that relates to the individual standards. This requires close collaboration with other grade level teachers, as well as subject matter colleagues throughout the building.

- Students are the reason the standards exist. Because the standards are designed to improve student performance, students have to understand the expectations, implications, and consequences of different levels of accomplishment.

- Families need to support the schools as they implement standards, and the students as they strive to achieve at higher levels. Therefore, parents have a critical role to play in standards-based reform.

We saw evidence of the central office's commitment to standards-based reform. However, attention to other areas of middle school reform was less evident. For instance, we did not see incentives or policies at the district level to encourage new organizational features of schools (teams, advisories, flexible scheduling) or to focus specifically on school-wide issues (student grouping patterns, parent participation, community involvement) as strategies for improving student performance.

Building-Based Leadership

Based on our observations in four schools, the success of standards adoption in the schools seems to depend, in large part, on the leadership of the principal. The superintendent, with support from the board, charged principals with introducing support for the use of standards. District office staff believe that the principals are empowered and "some of them are great, but for others, it is a brand new role." The view of one curriculum consultant is shared by her colleagues:

> It takes not only our [consultants'] leadership, but it really takes campus leadership and without it, we have a lot of fear and it's mainly fear of the unknown... Principals who brought their teachers in and had their own campus staff development days devoted to academic standards—they're a lot farther along than most of them... Whether or not a campus thinks that the standards were thrown at them may depend on how much their principals were really

devoted to introducing the idea of standards.

Mrs. Roseana Garza, Director of Academics and coordinator of the Foundation initiative, believes that certain middle school campuses are at different levels of understanding and implementation. However, she states optimistically, "They're miles and miles further along than the road than they were in September. I think it will come together for different people at different times. But, so much has happened in two years. We've come such a long way."

As a group, middle school principals appear cohesive and energetic. They meet regularly to discuss issues and strategies that work. The opportunity to meet as a middle school group is only part of the meetings with their vertical teams or K-12 group. To an outsider, sharing seems more commonplace than turf wars. There is a history of working together that serves them well.

At each school a leadership team, working with the building administrator, establishes goals for the year's campus action plan. Plans differ depending on the school's culture and goals, but each tackles the issue of standards responsibly. Some examples include: (a) refining block schedules so that departments have greater time for collaborative planning and evaluating effectiveness of instructional strategies; (b) developing interdisciplinary units with student products correlated to academic standards; and (c) offering professional development on topics such as authentic approaches and multiple intelligences.

The principals at all four sites assume their responsibilities with focus and determination. While their schools are starting at different places, each seems to know where he or she is going. Building-level administrators appear anxious to implement standards to promote high student achievement; however, as one individual pointed out, standards alone will not make the difference. He was articulate in his caution:

> I think standards are an important part of reform, but I keep hearing that the Foundation is about middle school reform. I sense that our push with academic standards in the district seems to be all we're doing... but the standards alone are not going to solve anything. I understand that we are going to probably utilize the grant for staff development so we can look at how teachers teach and that is important too. But once again, I think the whole issue of reform goes way beyond standards and the way teachers teach.... We have to look at how schools are organized.

VI. Discussion of Phase I: Implementation of Standards and Pilot of Scoring Guidelines at the School Level

The focus of the Foundation's support to CCISD is the implementation of standards. Developed through the comprehensive approach described above, we wanted to see what standards implementation looked like at the school level.

Four schools provided the sample for our evaluation. (See Appendix A for snapshots of the four schools.) The schools differed demographically and culturally. In two schools, faculty were primarily CCISD teachers who interviewed for positions in middle schools that were established to promote high levels of student achievement through reform. (One of these schools also recruited a number of former curriculum consultants from the district.) One of the schools opened in an

attractive new facility conducive to active learning and collaborative planning by teachers. The second school had previously been "disestablished" by the state. It is housed in an older building in a less thriving neighborhood, but reopened with a new theme, new leadership, and teachers with a passion to succeed. While these new campuses faced the challenges associated with start-up, they did not have to break old habits, relationships, or attitudes. The other campuses have new leadership and a corps of enthusiastic and experienced teachers; however, they also have visible resistance to changing middle school philosophies and structures as well as new forms of pedagogy and assessment.

These four schools, like others in CCISD, operate with considerable autonomy, and their campus action plans vary greatly. Strategies for improving student performance are tailored to each campus and reflect leadership, vision, teacher background, and attitudes about student learning and behavior, resources, organization/schedule, culture, and community. Further, while there is no consistency among the schools we visited, the district requires schools to address such issues as discipline, math achievements, TAAS preparation, and SAS (Success for all Students) in their campus action plans.

For this baseline report, we will not discuss the individual schools. We will use anecdotes, interviews, and classroom observations to describe how the standards-based reform process translates into school-wide implementation and classroom practice. Our observations are based on almost 60 teacher interviews and meetings with site-based teams, administrators, and curriculum consultants. Teachers from across the campuses had the following reactions to standards-based reform. While the issues appear sequentially, in reality, they overlap.

- Initially, the teachers found it difficult to get on board.
- Teachers who participated in the development and revision process had the potential to influence the final district standards.
- A majority of teachers perceive the standards as a "help."
- They see early impacts on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- They express mixed reviews about their impact on student learning.
- They feel less isolated and are increasingly collaborating with peers.
- They emphasize the logistics and routines of standards implementation, often to the exclusion of discussions about how students learn.
- They report common problems emerging from the standards implementation.
- They express reservations about piloting the scoring guides and grading guidelines.
- They perceive a tension between the new standards and TAAS.
- They are largely responsible for standards implementation, with specialists and support personnel frequently "out of the loop."

(1) Initially, teachers found it difficult to get on board.

CCISD teachers are familiar with teaching objectives and skills related to TAAS, but the move toward standards-based instruction seems "worlds apart" for both veteran and new teachers. One teacher, who had a part in the standards writing committee, shared her initial thoughts with us:

> At the beginning we felt like we wished there had been more staff development. And the teachers were very frustrated because they felt overwhelmed by the amount of models... the things that the kids are going to have to make. An incredible amount of work that the kids were

> going have to do. It's just the performance standards were overwhelming us. Just having these kids to complete all these products when we weren't sure about them ourselves.

To a new teacher, in the beginning, "it was a lot of pressure:"

> The pressure came because it was new and I didn't really understand all of it. But through working with it and really implementing it, while working with three other dynamic teachers, we all knew a little bit about it. And actually taking the standards and referring to them in the classroom to the kids: these are your content standards. And this is what I have to teach you. That reinforced it for me. And I've seen—I guess this is going to sound kind of corny—but I'm not afraid of them anymore.

A more seasoned teacher discussed her initial negativism, and how she overcame it. Others related similar struggles:

> I thought, oh no, here we go, another thing...But once you really learn to use the information that they've given to us, now I feel it's a great asset to have. It really helps me plan. It really helps me see where I'm going, what I've done, what I'm lacking, what else the kids need to know to get out of eighth grade and go on to high school. Also, to prepare them to look at the ninth grade and make them aware that what they did this year is going to tie into what they're going to do next year. They won't feel like we're wasting their time.

Not everyone has been converted to the value of standards or the implications for better teaching and learning. Their views are equally important: "I still don't feel comfortable because I still feel that it's going to be a lot of work for me... they expect us to have something written and more paperwork... I'm going to have to do more reading or preparation. I just don't think that it's going to make that much of a difference."

Teachers believe that intensive professional development would have been of great benefit during the early stages of implementation. They also mentioned the need for exemplars of high quality student work. To compensate for the absence of such products or projects, some principals began collecting and sharing student work from across subject areas, grades, and performance standards. They anticipated this was a small way of meeting teachers' needs.

(2) Teachers who participated in the development and revision process had the potential to influence the final district standards.

We wanted to understand how teachers generally perceived the standards development and refinement process. Many teachers were unclear about how teachers were selected for the standards committees, but they almost always could identify who represented their building. Most teachers reported that they had made suggestions about their subject areas and seemed confident that they "would probably be listened to." They are waiting to see how much influence they will have on the final revisions. Those who did not personally participate early in the development of standards did not display much ownership of the standards. In these cases, we frequently heard about standards coming from central office.

Those who sat on the standards committees generally saw it as "a good experience" although

frustrating. To quote one committee member:

> I loved being on the writing committee. I think that every teacher ought to be involved in something like that because I feel as if I own them. And they are still in the process of being changed and it's a living document. We're working with it to change it and to see what is good and what is not good. To me, it has been a very good experience.

Committee members said it was difficult to balance the enormous amount of input from teachers across the district. Numerous process and content issues emerged, and they were often hard to resolve. For example, "Some may agree that perhaps we need to trim some of the standards and have fewer. But they're not in agreement about which to trim. So that is a problem."

Many members of the writing and review committees reported that they began to reflect more on issues of teaching and learning. Due to their involvement in the process, they feel a sense of ownership far stronger than those teachers who only had an opportunity to review and comment. It was surprising to hear, however, that on some committees, they paid little attention to the national standards. One teacher talked about the science standards in this light:

> Things that they focus on nationally I don't see us focusing on. They use a lot of processing skills...That's the big push, especially in middle school, giving them the skills they need to be able to do well in high school and college. Our standards focus more on content rather than process skills...As far as the district is concerned, they don't even touch on that.

This teacher said she thought she could still use the national standards as a way to teach the content covered in the district's science standards. She was unique, however, in her knowledge about the national standards movement. Except for mathematics and the fine arts, most teachers displayed limited information about the subject matter standards developed by their professional associations and national committees.

(3) A majority of teachers perceive standards as a "help."

We found that three quarters into the school year, a high percentage of teachers could see the benefit of the standards to teaching and learning, notwithstanding the difficulties they may have had in understanding and implementing them. Experienced teachers referred to standards as "potentially a nice package," a "guide," and a "compass." This choice of words indicates that they understand that standards "are not a dictate." In fact, one interviewee said, "I think standards in and of themselves are not only good, they're necessary."

One teacher gave colleagues this advice:

> For those of you who might feel threatened, I would simply say it's a road map to your curriculum. Or it's a lesson plan. And then I think a lot of folks would probably feel much less threatened by it. It's an accountability issue for the teacher and the student, but I see it also, since it went home to their parents, as positive proof that there is something going on in the schools. The parents, I think, are going to become better educated on what they need to know to help their youngsters.

Newer teachers often saw the standards differently. For example, a three-year teacher considers the standards like a Bible because it serves as a checklist. She thinks they have caused students to see school in a more serious way and are a good tool in conferences with parents. Another new teacher confided, "The standards saved me. I know exactly what I have to teach... And more importantly, the kids know where they're going and what they need. If we're right here, we still have all this to go. So, it helps them and me. It's realistic." This commentary on the benefit of the structure provided by the standards—the way they "push" to a higher level, their ability to promote consistency in the district, and the degree to which they encourage professionalism among teachers—was repeated frequently by new and veteran teachers alike.

A veteran teacher also appreciated the way the standards served as a guide. These comments were revealing: "Every time you're doing something, whether it be with the students or in your planning, you always have the standards in the back of your mind. ÿI like to be able to stop and say, 'How does this, what we're doing, how can I justify it?' If I can't, then I have to take a second look at what I'm doing."

Others like them because they push the students harder. A veteran teacher shared this experience:

> It's a change for us to have academic standards... For some students, they are used to doing a little bit. All they had to do was write a few sentences or copy a few words, and they're finished. Having this new kind of assignment goes beyond that... For example, we did a persuasive paper. That was a standard. They had to do an outline. They had to do pre-writing, they had to do a first draft, and a second draft. See, they're not used to that. But it has improved them tremendously, and at every point you point this out to them... Hey, I've gotten so much work from you! And you do this continuously to where now they're getting used to it, and I'm getting used to it, and things are better.

Another teacher put it simply: "I think it's like the district as a whole is saying that we're not going to accept mediocrity and we're going to say that we want these students to be held to a higher standard. The thing that I really like about the standards is that it mentions so much real-world stuff and it's not just multiply x times x and that's it. But tell us why."

According to some we interviewed, standards will be beneficial in helping students arrive at each grade level with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful. The key seems to be consistency, whether it is among schools or, as many teachers said, "going from grade to grade within one school." Likewise, they see standards as providing articulation among elementary, middle, and high schools in the district, and equal opportunity for students on all the campuses.

Lastly, we heard from others who feel the standards give them a greater sense of professionalism. A new teacher makes this point: "I understand them. It's made me feel more professional as a teacher. And I think it's really neat because the standards are broken down into content and performance, because the students have half of the responsibility and I have the other half."

Some teachers felt they had to give up flexibility in their curriculum now that content areas were specifically identified. They can no longer assign popular projects and areas of study that students had enjoyed in previous years because of time.

(4) A majority of teachers believe the focus on standards has already impacted curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

One teacher spoke for others when he said, "The standards turned curriculum on its head; you can't continue to teach in the same way." He noted that some traditional teachers had "to throw away their lesson plan from 13 years ago!" This, in his opinion, was because the district is pushing for more student-centered learning, which includes higher order thinking and more autonomy, to implement performance standards.

Many teachers believe that implementation of standards has begun to alter the instructional strategies of a large number of teachers. A language arts teacher told us: "It made me focus upon the learning and not the materials—upon the children and what I want to present to them—then I look for materials." One of her colleagues talked about the changes she had already observed in her own classroom:

> I think you see more student-centered learning. I've done that for this six weeks and it's been a joy, where students are allowed to take materials and analyze them, given certain goals, but given some autonomy on how to reach those goals. And their creativity has kicked in. I've learned so much from my students. It's been a fun six weeks, and I want to do that more often, where students are more in control and I'm more of a facilitator.

She, like many of her peers, talked about breaking away from the textbook and using other resources such as novels and non-fiction works. She now concentrates less on individual basic reading skills and instead, lets literature "come alive" in her classroom. She enjoys teaching writing more than ever before and uses holistic grading, allowing students to grade papers occasionally so that they will understand the process. Others shared this experience. Another teacher said she is beginning to see that skills are not in textbooks. To illustrate, she says that because of standards, students will learn how to write letters that communicate effectively, as opposed to listing adjectives and nouns and pronouns, what she might have done in the past. A science teacher talks about using the textbook only as a resource, emphasizing that "we don't read the whole book, just parts." He brings in much of his own material and teaches chemistry without ever opening the books.

Not only are standards moving teachers away from reliance on the textbook, but also from constant testing. To quote a social science teacher: "It was a good way to try to get some teachers away from the 'let's give a test every time we want to assess how the students are performing.' And that's good. It is helping to reform us in that way, I do believe. We teachers are usually so test-oriented, rather than product-oriented."

A good number of teachers report that they have shifted instruction from the traditional lecture to more varied activities, to more cooperative groups, and to the use of more manipulatives. Their classrooms require oral presentations, and assignments, as well as performance tasks, and are more product-oriented.

We interviewed several science teachers who had not changed much of their instructional style, but felt they were using new assessment strategies. One remarked, "I've changed the way I do assessment. It puts more of the burden on the student, actually, than the teacher, which is the way it should be. That's how you learn. You get in there and get your hands dirty."

In at least some classes in all schools, interdisciplinary curriculum is becoming common. The reasons are straightforward, as one teacher noted: "As an individual teacher at the middle school, you cannot reach all the academic standards all by yourself in your classroom. It's going to force you to collegiality and to work together as team members if you really want to reach children correctly." Planning for interdisciplinary units is sometimes difficult, although many of the schools have schedules that encourage it. Those with a more traditional schedule often have very committed and enthusiastic teachers who meet before and after school to develop such initiatives. Teachers who participated in the training in the Curry-Samara curriculum model (see p.20) have had considerable assistance in developing these units.

For example, one school had a major unit on the Olympics which involved math, science, language arts, social studies, and physical education. Using the Curry-Samara model, the unit covered knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, creative thinking, and critical thinking. Topics included timing and rates in events; metric conversions; environmental impact on athletes; Greek mythology and languages of participants; travel maps and Olympic traditions; and Olympic events and preventive training. Activities included such assignments as predicting winning times based on last times and world records and justifying the result in an essay; taking part in a mock event to qualify for the Olympics; constructing the layout of a new Olympic event specific to Texas; and discovering the weight in kilograms of several shotputs.

Although we did not observe any performance tasks during our visit (and, in fact, saw very traditional instruction), teachers told us about their attempts at new types of instruction and assessment:

- Students spent three weeks on a research project and oral presentation that required them to go out to a ditch and identify, label, and classify plants in lieu of a multiple choice test.

- Students had to write a persuasive paragraph as well as work with propaganda and authors' bias. To combine all these standards, they created pamphlets on China and had to persuade an outsider to come to China. As part of the assignment, they had to use some of the propaganda techniques they learned in class.

- Students developed their own equations. They had to solve the equations, giving reasons why they performed every step in the problem-solving process.

- Students in Texas History studied Spanish architecture, learned about music indigenous to early Tejanos, and examined folk art, creating an interdisciplinary unit that meets the standards.

- Students selected a significant African American individual to research. They selected books as part of a social studies class, and did the pre-writing and editing as part of a language arts class. The products were extensive research papers followed by an oral report.

- Students made mousetrap vehicles from Styrofoam and/or parts of toys. Each vehicle held a ping pong ball which was propelled by a force generated by the speed of the vehicle. The project culminated in a contest to see which vehicle could toss the ping pong ball the farthest.

A small number of teachers feel that the standards fit in with what they were already doing. Their teaching styles have not changed; rather "it's getting down things that good teachers have always done."

(5) Teachers express mixed reviews of the impact of standards on student learning.

The jury is divided on whether students are doing better or worse as a result of standards. Some teachers believe that "students on the top are working harder, and are doing a lot better." Specifically, some teachers mentioned that special education students, with the proper modifications, seem to perform much better. Other teachers are afraid special education students are losing out and cannot keep up. They also see another group of students experiencing success. According to one teacher, "These [who are doing well] are the tough kids who are competitive, who have this thing about always doing their best. I think some of them are really working to do their best and even better."

Numerous anecdotes focused on the fact that the standards approach helps students to learn because, at least in the pilot year, they could redo performance tasks until they succeeded. Students were able to make up work and "get a second chance." Many teachers believed this was a big change for CCISD:

> The district is telling teachers that there is no time line on students meeting standards, so they are given ample opportunity to reach mastery level. One teacher told me, "If you give them every chance in the world to complete the performance standards, and you give them instructional time for tutoring [in school], we're not going to have anybody fail!" Wouldn't that be great?

The biggest help is that students now know what to expect. One of the ESL teachers addressed this issue:

> For one thing, they know exactly where they are going. Up until now, it's been a mystery. What do I have to know? Well, you have to talk. That's all they had to know. And they really didn't know what it meant. It just meant numbers to them. If my number is up, I get my diploma... Now, it's very specific. Every student in the district and parent in the district, hundreds of thousands of community people have these standards and everybody is becoming very aware. It's going to take some time to internalize it.

Related to clear expectations for students is an emphasis on higher expectations. We heard variations of this in different schools: "I think the faculty as a whole has very high expectations for students here. Maybe that wasn't happening in the past... Maybe it's a while since the students were challenged as much as they are now."

Teachers reported other early impacts of the standards on student learning. One of the teachers talked about learning (specifically performance evaluations) in terms of memorable, big "events." Data about student perceptions of such events will soon be available to the Foundation through Boston College's recent survey in which students describe their perceptions and actual experiences.

There seems to be agreement among many teachers that as a result of standards, students do different

types of assignments (first research paper for many) and frequently find them more difficult, yet more creative, than past assignments. Some teachers found that students' analytical reasoning skills are better and cited evidence that they are performing better on TAAS questions that require higher-level thinking. In addition, they learned to critique each other because they have observed teachers doing so in a constructive way. An interesting illustration appears below:

> They had to give an oral presentation [on a cultural issue] and they had to have a visual aid and there were all sorts of things they had to do and we taped them. At the beginning of last week, I showed them the videotape, and... the comments as they were watching each other's presentations weren't bad. They were giving good critiques. They were going: "Look. You're not holding your head up...you don't have good eye contact... you're reading too much... you're doing this, you're doing that." It was really good and that's why I wanted them to see their own tapes.

Many teachers who believe students are doing better point to the fact that students know that the performance standards count 50%, and they want to perfect their skills so they can get the best score possible. For example, science teachers had students who struggled until they could solve the performance standard correctly:

> Several students came in and they were miserably bad at solving the problem, but they came back a second time, and had attacked the whole thing in a different manner. They were more successful. A lot of them saw other examples and said, "Oh, oh..." I think they analyzed what they did and said, "Well, that didn't work, I'll try this." And a whole lot of them come in with stories to relate about doing it [at home] and "this happened, and that happened." I think that's the nuts and bolts of the whole thing. Try it out, see what happens, and try it again and see what happens.

From others, we heard that students are doing worse. Across campuses, teachers let us know that many students are not turning in performance standards, particularly if they have to complete them outside of school. These are often students, according to several teachers, who "don't see a future for themselves " or who "just don't take it serious yet." In addition, a large number of students who are failing are those who have high rates of absenteeism, often because of responsibilities at home.

An increasing number of teachers are now using class time for students to work on their assignments. As a result, more students are completing their performance standards. One teacher provided an example on research papers. In a language arts class, she allowed students to complete the vast majority of the work at school. Only seven out of 88 students did not complete the project. On the other hand, her colleague did not allow much class time for a similar project. Only forty percent of those students completed the project.

The use of standards and the results of projects keyed to performance standards have affected teachers' views about students' abilities. In the experiences of teachers we interviewed, they were often positive impacts; teachers saw students perform at higher levels than they anticipated.

(6) Teachers report less isolation than before; collaboration with peers is on the rise.

Everyone is implementing standards for the first time, so they struggle together to make sense of

how standards can enhance their teaching and students' learning. Different schools, depending on schedules and teaming strategies, provide times for teachers to meet as grade level or subject matter groups. While in the past these meetings often focused on logistical or behavior issues, they increasingly center on standards, strategies for instruction, ways to use professional development activities, and opportunities for interdisciplinary units. In at least three of the schools we visited, attempts are underway to develop a community of learners among the professionals in the building.

On the newer campus, the layout of the facility and state-of-the-art technology encourage productive collaboration. In some of the older facilities, just finding an adequate space to meet can be difficult.

In implementing the standards, teachers usually turn to five places for support: to colleagues; to building-based administrators; to the department chair; to an internal curriculum consultant; or to outside consultants under contract to the district. Most frequently, they talked about collaboration at the school site. Examples are plentiful, and this observation captures the spirit of many of the teachers we interviewed:

> What the other eighth grade teacher and I have done is we've gone through the standards... and we made a long range plan. And we sat down and we saw what academic content standards and performance standards we needed to cover by the end of the year. And we separated them between the six weeks. Then we said during this six weeks we're going to cover these; during the next six weeks we're going to cover those. And that's how we're working now... We did two different projects, but both of them still fulfilling our performance standard, just in different ways.

Teachers who engage in joint planning find it rewarding. While some talked about higher quality projects for students, others stated simply, "It's easier and more fun!" One teacher pointed out that working with colleagues can be more spontaneous than working with consultants, and therefore, "you don't lose your spark."

In some cases, teachers consider building-based administrators as sources for support and assistance. Some teachers thought the administrators were great for "bouncing ideas off" and, of course, for securing resources. Others noted their principal's support merely included a review of lesson plans during regular teacher evaluations.

The department chair role varies among schools. Sometimes they play a mentor role, providing ideas about implementation and suggesting resource materials and teaching strategies. In other cases they act as messengers, relating teachers' suggestions to subject matter consultants. In the role of liaison, chairs hold regular meetings and are supposed to distribute information from the central office. However, CCISD's quarterly report to the Foundation identified communication as a problem that plagued some schools during this first year of implementation.

Teachers frequently talk about how busy curriculum consultants from the central office are, moving from school to school and attending a lot of meetings. They understand that consultants are assigned to give priority to specific campuses. All in all, teachers seem to feel that "we see them more than we used to." In the case of a specific initiative or a pilot, a consultant may spend substantial time at a site.

In terms of instructional support, many teachers talked about the value of working with consultant John Samara. His in-service program, supported largely by the Foundation grant to CCISD, provides teachers with a model to ensure the integration of academic standards into each lesson plan and unit. Bloom's taxonomy of higher-order thinking provides the basis for the program, which hones teachers' skills in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Teachers spend six days field testing, critiquing, presenting to each other, and publishing a unit to be included in an instructional unit bank. (There is little quality control of the units.) There are many possible spin-offs from this training in areas of supervision, evaluation, teaming, and interdisciplinary instruction.

The system has also provided some teachers with the opportunity to participate in Dimensions of Learning, the Quality School training, Woodrow Wilson Torch (Teachers Outreach) Institutes, and the National Leadership Program for Teachers. It is our understanding that each of these efforts takes into consideration the district's academic standards. We did not hear too much about them from teachers, largely, we suspect, because the latter three did not occur until this summer.

Considerable inservice education also takes place at the site level on issues of importance to the individual school community. In addition, consultants are available to work with teachers as a result of particular, specialized initiatives such as Algebra for All. Teachers believe these to be extremely valuable.

(7) Teachers emphasize the logistics and routines of standards implementation, often to the exclusion of discussions about how students learn.

Teachers talked with us frequently about the performance standards they tried during the year. However, conversations focused primarily on the routines and mechanics of the projects, with rare mention of student learning issues. Teachers talked about spending a lot of time discussing standards with students so they understand what is expected of them, know how to gauge their own performance, and have a sense of what happens if they demonstrate poor performance. They lamented the fact that they did not yet have any excellent samples of student work to use as models.

They think both they and the students are getting used to the routines associated with standards implementation, particularly how and when performance standards are carried out. A large number of teachers also talked about the "language of standards." As a case in point: "It's just amazing. You get to where you use the same language in our classes to where the kids automatically pick up on that. 'Is this a performance task?' they ask... So it's new, but you're getting the teachers more on target, you're getting the parents more on target, the kids on target as to what they're headed for in all their classes."

Teachers identified numerous important impediments, often of a logistical or organizational nature. It is important for the district to tackle these, because, left unattended, they could halt the progress that has been made to date. Most frequently mentioned are:

- Resources required, but not supplied, to carry out performance standards

- Substantial costs incurred by teachers because students could not afford materials for projects

- Lack of clarity on whether students should do performance standards in school, at home, or in

both places, raising issues such as (a) Will some parents help at home? (b) Will some students get more encouragement than others? © Will students have more distractions at home? (d) Is there a greater chance students will lose projects? (e) At school, will projects take up too much time? (f) Is there enough space for projects in older facilities?

- No agreement on the number of opportunities students should have for "redo's" and where and when they should occur

- Whether teachers should integrate multiple academic standards into one particular performance task

During the first year of implementation, so much emphasis on logistical concerns was no surprise. Teachers had to figure out how to organize their classrooms and how to smoothly change classroom practices. Hopefully, by the upcoming school year, they will have resolved some of these issues and focus more on student learning issues and the quality of their students' performances.

(8) Teachers report common problems emerging from standards implementation.

We wanted to learn what teachers perceived as the stumbling blocks in standards implementation. Given the background, experience, and "risk-taking" spirit of individuals, they provided a range of responses. Some teachers were emphatic that standards have too much detail and specificity and are too prescriptive in particular subject areas. Those who hold these views think that standards eliminate some of their creativity and flexibility and don't allow for sufficient depth. A science teacher focused on this issue:

> I don't think the standards are broad enough... I teach more than they encompass. The standards are pretty bare-bones, right down to the absolute minimal knowledge as far as I'm concerned. In fact, by using them, my class has actually become easier for some of the students. I just think they should be broadened to include more things in my subject especially.

Others feel strongly that the standards are broad enough to allow (in fact, require) students to acquire a deeper knowledge in a smaller number of topics.

Other teachers fear that "selectively teaching" may be in conflict with the state, which has adopted a textbook with many more topics for middle school students. One teacher is plagued because "this is the only time kids will get geology in their lifetime unless they're a geologist or something like that." This was a common concern among teachers who are coverage-oriented.

Some teachers complained about the lack of clarity and inconsistency in the standards. For example, classifications or definition papers may not mean the same thing to all teachers. Another concern for a small group of teachers was that the language in some standards is too difficult for many students, requiring teachers to translate so students can understand what they must know and be able to do. Another small group raised questions about the appropriateness of the sequencing of standards in some areas.

Related to these issues is an obstacle about which there is almost complete consensus: time. Teachers with this concern have different viewpoints: it takes too much time to cover all the

standards, too much time to plan for teaching them, and too much time to find all the different resources you need for students to do the performance standards. Because of this issue, one teacher told us he has become "choosier about what they do during the time they have." Others had similar responses.

(9) Teachers expressed reservations about the piloting of scoring guides and grading guidelines.

Two of the schools in our sample formally participated in the piloting of scoring guidelines. Their experiences varied, and, as is frequently the case with standards, we found wide discrepancy among the views of teachers across and within subject areas, grades, and schools. Several categories of concern about implementation were apparent:

- Inconsistency in the ways high schools and middle schools score and grade
- Inconsistency in interpreting what particular grades mean; does an A mean different things for similar performance standards/projects?
- Lack of tie-in with report cards
- How to reward motivation (as well as actual student work) as a way to encourage improvement and effort

Teachers gave all kinds of examples about the difficulty in using the scoring guides. One teacher's comments illustrate the frustration of many:

> The scoring guidelines are there but one, they are so broad... One example is the only difference between an A and B on one of them is neatness. We just felt that was inappropriate. I don't grade on neatness. Besides, some kids just don't have good handwriting. The scoring guide for content standard 1 might be problematic. I was grading some of my academic standards in the planning room and I took off 2 points for something and another teacher said, "I would have taken off 5 or possibly 10 for that."

Some teachers have anxiety about scoring and grading standards because "it is so formulaic." They are afraid the formula will decrease their flexibility for working with students who aren't driven to do school work. One teacher expressed concern that this formula will cause a lot of students to fail and eventually drop out. He trusted the district enough, however, to suggest that he has "guarded optimism that slowly things will change for the better."

Teachers who are not in pilot schools are anxious about what they will have to do next year. One teacher conveyed his uneasiness: "There's a general lack of understanding as to exactly how we're supposed to grade those standards, and what weight to give to them. I think personally it causes me to spin my wheels... I have to grade in a certain way, but I want to weigh the grades in a way to maximize the possibility that more students will pass."

During the summer planning effort, teachers reviewed comments on the scoring guidelines from those who had participated in the pilot schools. Conversation revolved around what the results of their input would be, and they are anxious to see the revised guidelines in the fall.

Some of these problems may be the result of initially developing the scoring criteria in a vacuum,

i.e., without actual student work. Our understanding is that CCISD changed its approach this summer, and started looking at student work (representing a range of student ability) in order to develop scoring guidelines, possibly for each performance standard. This becomes cumbersome and time-consuming and is costly if teachers receive compensation for scoring projects/papers. The trade-off is an experience that generates teacher learning through thinking and reflecting, as well as general consensus as to what grades mean. It is this approach that the assessment community advocates.

(10) The most consistent concern of teachers is the perceived tension between the new standards and TAAS.

Many teachers questioned whether teaching to the standards will improve student performance on TAAS. This uncertain position creates tension for teachers spending considerable time on a performance standard or considering the use of new forms of authentic pedagogy to advance student performance. One teacher provides a concrete example of her dilemma:

> In one of our first performance standards we dealt with galaxies. The students had to come up with models of the different types of galaxies and do written descriptions, which is fine because that also addresses the curriculum [the essential elements of TAAS.] But the time it took us in class to actually do that, and something they don't usually come across on TAAS, were days that we could have spent doing more curriculum.

In contrast, several curriculum consultants and teachers who participated in standards committees think that TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills), now in draft stage, was a point of reference for the district's standards. From this perspective, CCISD standards include what the state thinks is important, but goes further. In their view, the standards are "higher than the state's elements." One of the teachers talked about it in this way:

> The standards are written directly towards TAAS and they are written from a critical thinking view. However, you have to be really self-motivated because there are more choices involved. And the students, we don't want them to regurgitate information to us any longer. We want them to actually have learned and be able to bring their own viewpoint to whatever they are learning now.

Some teachers believe there is a 100% correlation between the standards and TAAS; if a teacher is working towards achieving the academic and performance standards, he or she is automatically covering the TAAS requirements. In fact, in mathematics, the district developed a grid that shows the alignment by standards and TEKS. Others disagree 100%. In science, for example, teachers have considerable concerns, such as:

> One thing I don't really like about the academic standards is that quite a few of them don't really address TAAS. Our curriculum really does meet TAAS objectives. And we're teaching curriculum with the academic standards. Yet you have to kind of diverge into a more creative type... In science they put a lot of focus on things that you don't really pick up in TAAS.

Those who are concerned about TAAS alignment also worry about the relationship between standards and textbooks. Believing that the state wants them to cover all information in the

textbooks, they feel uncomfortable focusing on the standards, which might preclude covering all the chapters in the textbook. In reality, the state mandates that teachers use, at a minimum, the current essential elements.

Many teachers are unclear which reflects the "real" curriculum: standards or TEKS, standards or textbooks. We see evidence that, when in doubt, they come down on the TEKS and textbook end of the equation. The majority of classes we visited in three of the schools focused on TAAS preparation. (As mentioned previously, the test was scheduled for three weeks from our visit.) Some of the classes prepared students for the test format, because teachers thought it, not content, was a problem for their students. Students engaged in very traditional teacher-directed lessons with individual seat work, often exemplified by multiple choice worksheets or "sponge" activities. We also observed the use of a new computer program that helps students specifically on TAAS-like items and gives immediate feedback about performance. In many cases, teachers assigned only students with poor past scores to use this program.

Schools also hosted special TAAS tutorials on Saturdays, after school, or in the morning. Teachers often conducted these sessions. With respect to standards, teachers often made extra time before and after school for students to work on failed performance standards. The entire summer school this year focused on standards, giving students the opportunity to redo performance standards that they did not pass during the school year.

(11) Classroom teachers are largely responsible for the standards implementation, with specialists and support personnel frequently "out of the loop."

We spoke to exploratory teachers (e.g., art, music) at all campuses and asked them about standards and middle school reform in general. Often we found them to be "out of the loop," unfamiliar with the standards in different content areas and, therefore, less likely to reinforce students' learning in their classes or be proactive about offering help to classroom teachers working with students on performance standards. In the words of one principal:

> They [the exploratory teachers] are almost totally detached from the rest of the faculty and the school program. We've got to get them more involved... They could be reinforcing a lot of what we're trying to do. And I think as many times as kids see it reinforced, or the same emphasis in another classroom, then they pick up that it's important to learn it and it's going to take place everywhere.

A lack of participation by support staff and exploratory teachers from areas such as arts, physical education, and health limits the potential of standards-reform to become school-wide. In addition, exploratory teachers often have considerable experience with the performance aspect of student learning and could become a good resource for classroom teachers, particularly those who practice traditional teaching and assessment.

Since one of our sites has an arts theme, its situation is different, at least in terms of arts integration. However, even they have to be purposeful about collaboration and ensure that they maintain the integrity of their own subject matter:

> Within our specialized classes, we first teach our subject area, but we try to interweave what's

going on in the classrooms within what our goals are [for the particular area]...We just finished a unit on Pueblo pottery...and in the social studies class they focus on Texas, but with a big unit on Indians...So, as I start a clay unit we study Maria Martinez and Lucy Lewis, and look at specific techniques that Pueblo Indians use for developing pottery.

We believe the limited amount of involvement generally by specialists and exploratory teachers is reversible, but needs attention as the district moves into Phase 2.

VII. SCHOOLS' RESPONSES TO TEACHERS' CONCERNS ABOUT STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

Schools are poised to take immediate notice of the challenges faced in implementing both the standards and scoring guidelines. Principals—individually and as a group—try to provide support and recognition to teachers, develop programs to support students, and involve parents and community in the standards effort. Some examples include:

Teacher Support/Recognition

- At all campuses, principals and site-based teams are trying to respond to the need for teachers to work together. Some principals have limited the number of required staff meetings so that teachers have more time to work with teams and departments on standards implementation.

- At the end of the first six weeks, one principal required teachers to submit a performance product from one of their classes. The principal grouped them by subject matter and shared them, as well as standards-based student work from other schools, with staff. Another principal collected performance products from all the middle schools in order to show teachers what others have done. He also posted some of this student work. At other sites, student projects are posted in full view of the rest of the classes. This provides a way to demonstrate what high quality work looks like.

- At one campus, teachers have to submit standards that they will be testing in the coming week to their department chair. They also send home forms to parents showing what students will be doing in the coming six-week cycle.

- Consultant John Samara visits selected campuses to observe classrooms, and mathematics consultants provide training to teachers piloting rigorous mathematics programs. Emphasis on issues such as multiple intelligences helps teachers identify students' learning styles, so they "switch gears" when working with particular students.

- Schools keep standards on the "front burner" through various means, including, but not limited to, weekly newsletters.

- Plans are underway in September 1996 for a middle school-focused day of learning about how the various schools are implementing standards.

- Teachers are generally working very hard because the standards-based instruction is so

difficult for many of them. While principals know that self-motivation is key, they also recognize and support these individuals through gift certificates, dinners out, social events, and notices in the schools' papers.

Student Support

- Before and after school students can redo assignments related to performance standards. We often heard, "Kids know they cannot get away without doing their work and are given every chance to succeed." This is one indication of a changing culture. Some confusion exists about how long they have to redo standards, since projects often are completed over the long term, outside of school.

- Some schools have peer tutoring programs. In some cases, the principal or teacher immediately contacts parents if students fail. At many sites, tutoring for standards is available. In one school, the schedule allows for "tutorial enrichment," which is actually a reteaching experience for students who need assistance.

- Enrichment activities focus on history, science, and reading fairs based on the academic standards.

- At some schools, technology is a high priority, as teachers use computers to develop lesson plans and students have access and support for doing research, projects, and products. A district-wide group is developing a technology plan to support standards across the system.

- The district restructured summer school this year, with standards as the foundation; it geared the curriculum to helping students achieve standards they had failed during the school year.

Parent Engagement

- The district mailed the standards home to all parents during the first summer and gave them booklets during the school year.

- One school in our sample tested the idea of student-led conferences. The goal was to showcase students' work; at this point, it did not serve as an assessment instrument. Students invited parents to school and talked about their best work, what they did not do well in, and how they could improve. It was a good reflection for the students and was done for the first period class of every teacher. Over 700 parents attended.

- Students produced infomercials and bulletins boards to highlight the standards for parents and the larger community, and showcased student products at PTA meetings, open houses, adopt-a-school businesses, and campus displays.

- Plans are underway to engage parents and students in developing rubrics in one site.

VIII. STANDARDS IN THE CLASSROOM

Over the course of a week, we visited four schools and 55 classrooms, including language arts, math, social studies, science, art, and ESL. Our approach was holistic, and we looked for evidence that teachers and students paid attention to academic and performance standards. Because this is the beginning phase of standards implementation, we expected to see a mix of instructional strategies. For teachers who had greater understanding of standards and were more comfortable with implementing them, we expected to see greater use of instructional strategies that fall under the rubric of "authentic pedagogy:" higher order thinking, substantive conversation, deep knowledge, and connections to the world beyond the classroom (Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran, 1995). Knowing what we did about CCISD's emphasis on performance standards, which frequently take the form of extended projects that require synthesis of many different types of information, we were particularly interested in student work. From conversations with the principals, we also knew that teachers would be preparing students for TAAS.

In the classes we observed, half focused on TAAS preparation, primarily through drill and practice exercises such as paper-and-pencil assignments in study guides or the use of a computer program that matches the TAAS objectives. In a few classes, teachers used more engaging strategies such as a competition between boys and girls or games and puzzles. Students worked individually, in pairs, or in small groups. All of these classes were teacher-directed. In non-TAAS centered classes we saw a range of instructional strategies. (This report provides only baseline information for the district; therefore, we include only snapshots of classes we visited. In future reports we will highlight individual schools.) For purposes of summary, we have divided the classes by subject area.

- **Language Arts:**. In more than half of the language arts classes, teachers prepared students for TAAS. The setting, in general, was teacher-centered, and students focused on producing the correct short answers. In the remaining classes, instructional strategies ranged from silent reading, to the use of Channel 1 (watching, but not discussing, the news), to whole class discussions usually relating to homework assignments or passages read aloud in class, to small group teacher-guided activities. In a few of the whole group discussions, students responded to teachers' prompts and questions about the poems or novels they read. Literature seemed to be of good quality and culturally sensitive. The classrooms were generally lively, and students, in most cases, seemed engaged. We also observed classrooms where students worked individually on writing assignments doing quick writes, prepositional poems, descriptive writing and word pictures. In a reading improvement class for students with low test scores, students met in small student-directed groups where they answered critical questions about a reading they had completed and did character analyses from the novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.

- **Mathematics:** We observed math classes of different levels of difficulty, and most focused on TAAS preparation. Students worked from worksheets on content ranging from fractions, decimals, and graphs to algebraic equations and probability. With few exceptions, the predominant mode of instruction was the teacher reviewing answers at the overhead projector in the front of the room. Generally, communication was limited to quick teacher-student interactions. In non-TAAS centered classrooms, students used a variety of manipulatives such as algebra tiles, toothpicks, cups, beans, calculators, fraction bars, and

fraction kits. Students worked individually, in pairs, and in small groups to solve problems. Generally, the environment was lively. In only a few classes did students actually talk in the language of mathematics.

- **Social Studies:** Few social studies classes seemed to be focused on TAAS preparation. Lessons took the form of lectures and groups working on short-answer items. In the remaining classes, teachers used strategies such as guest presentations (DARE police officer), whole group discussions, cooperative grouping, and lectures. Topics ranged from China to the Ku Klux Klan to the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Some classes used textbooks, but there was a comparable amount of Xeroxed articles, library books, and trade books. In one class, geography was emphasized; in another, activities required critical thinking skills.

- **Science:** In the ten science classes we observed, hands-on activities were the major instructional method. Topics included weather, measuring the ocean floor, air pressure, life cycles, and formation. Students worked on dissections and used teacher-developed or commercial kits as well as textbooks. They generally worked in small groups, and teachers moved from group to group to offer assistance. In about half of the classrooms, there was a lot of activity but limited substantive discussion, investigation or inquiry. Classrooms seemed to have a variety resources and displayed interesting student work, often including student writing.

In terms of curriculum materials, we saw textbooks everywhere. In some classes, they were the main source of instruction with students doing end-of-chapter questions or reading aloud. In other classes, teachers were clearly moving away from the text, making it one of several sources of information for students' work.

Display of student work was spotty in CCISD, with only two of the four schools exhibiting much work in the hallways or classrooms. It is possible, however, that some work had been removed due to the upcoming TAAS administration.

IX. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Standards-based reform to improve student performance in Corpus Christi is one serious matter! It is both a top-down and bottom up effort. The board and central office demonstrate a solid commitment to implementing standards, and individual middle schools try very hard to translate the written documents into classroom practice. In Phase I of implementation, teachers started to view the standards as a guide for students and an impetus for changing their own teaching strategies. Pilots with scoring guides and grading guidelines helped to define what works and what needs revision, and there seems to be an openness to feedback and suggestions for change.

The use of performance tasks to assess achievement of academic standards has opened the doors to different strategies of instruction and assessment. The actual performance standards rest on an assumption of higher expectations for all students and require synthesis of information from several subject areas and the use of multiple curriculum sources. The district is moving in a positive direction.

However, there are obstacles, the greatest of which is related to the state's primary reliance on TAAS, the state testing program. TAAS seems to supersede every reform effort in the district. While educators endorse the standards and admit their many strengths, we observed many teachers' reluctance to decrease the emphasis on rigorous preparation of students for TAAS. In concrete terms, this means a lot of drill and practice in the classroom, often at the expense of newer forms of research-effective instructional practices.

The dilemma of the standards versus TAAS on a daily basis results in classrooms that can be considered "schizophrenic." For weeks students have very traditional instruction, and then are expected to be actively engaged in extended projects or complex assignments. Then, when they complete their performance tasks, they return to less active instruction that is geared away from problem-solving and critical thinking. This is not the case in every school or in every classroom. But it is prevalent enough to concern us about a dual way of "doing business."

The district has a plan for implementation and is off to a good start. We expect that in the next year teachers' attention to organizational issues will have decreased and that they will be devoting more attention to issues related to student learning. We will examine teachers' thinking and conversation about the ways in which students process information and learn, strategies for providing information and thinking skills in challenging ways, as well as discussions related to specific student work and how to evaluate it. This type of discourse will be essential as the district moves into the next phase of implementation.

In addition, we hope that the district will begin to focus standards within the bigger piece of systemic change that is necessary if schools are going to support students to perform at higher levels.

Appendix A

Snapshots of the Four Schools

Tom Browne Middle School) Borderline School

Corpus Christi considers Browne one of its borderline schools; with a few more students with poorer test scores, it would have been designated a focus school. The district appointed a new principal and has high expectations for progress. The principal believes that he can encourage authentic instructional strategies while at the same time raise their student TAAS scores.

Browne's population is 864, with 55.9% Hispanic students, 36% white students, and 6.8% African American students. The principal already seems to be a visible and thoughtful presence in the school. Teachers varied in their levels of participation in the standards development process, but department chairs seem to be familiar with the standards in their respective areas. Subject areas will need differential attention, with mathematics mentioned as a challenging area.

Turmoil marked Browne during the past year, and a priority is to calm down the environment for students. Teachers believe there is progress in this area, and want to focus more on academics. They seem willing (although a little vague) about tackling new instructional strategies that will advance student performance. Several teachers talked with us about ways that standards can encourage different forms of teaching and learning (e.g., extended projects, more writing, thematic units).

Browne offers, among other programs, an accelerated reading program, peer tutoring programs, Odyssey of the Mind, subject matter fairs, and art performances. There are real life applications in many classrooms, and an increasing use of manipulatives and cooperative grouping.

Browne provides site-based professional development for teachers and offers them opportunities sponsored by the district. Local talent and expertise are tapped as appropriate. The school has a commitment to inclusion, and offers after-school clubs and activities for all students. Parent and community involvement is of high priority to the school.

Cullen Place Middle School (Non-Focus School)

Cullen was one of the last schools to transition from a junior high school to a middle school. It houses 579 students of whom 52% are white, 44.6% are Hispanic, 2.6% are African American, and 0.9% are either American Indian or Asian/Pacific Islander. It is the smallest school in our Corpus Christi sample, but one whose community has provided strong support for academic achievement. The school plan addresses the need to expand students' higher order thinking skills, improve citizenship skills and self-esteem, and encourage healthy life styles.

The school has a core of strong teachers, some of whom are willing to examine new instructional strategies and others who are satisfied with their classrooms. They vary in their experience and understanding of standards and the implications for instruction and assessment. Some faculty members develop thematic units and integrate lessons across academic discipline areas.

TAAS preparation is important to the school because until recently, their scores were at the top. The students are holding their own but they are not gaining. Discrepancies exist between different student groups. As a result of this situation, the school is increasing the writing that students do and

is
offering a series of seven Saturday tutorials to target eighth grade students who have not mastered certain TAAS objectives, particularly in writing. Other tutorials focus on math and reading.

Cullen recently implemented a block schedule which allows for twice as much time in math at all levels, and an integrated language arts block in grades six and seven. Implementation occurred with the understanding that revisions in the schedule would made as necessary. In terms of grade level teams, teachers do not share the same planning periods.

Professional development is available to teachers at Cullen, and some have taken advantage of district-wide offerings.

Elliot Grant Middle School (Non-Focus School)

Grant is the most recent middle school built in Corpus Christi. The school has 981 students who represent the following groups: 47.9% Hispanic, 45.8% white, 4.7% African American, 1% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 0.6% other. Students from several existing middle schools were assigned to Grant, and other students requested placement. Hence, the school now is in its second year and serves students from across the school system.

The principal held several administrative positions in the district, and acquired a reputation as an innovative middle school educator. With two assistant principals and an instructional council, the school gives high priority to issues of teaching and learning. In particular, there is an emphasis on implementation of academic standards in a way that promotes constructivist learning and active engagement of students.

As in other Corpus Christi schools, mathematics is an area needing additional work. Grant, together with representatives from grades five and nine in its attendance area, has focused on strategies to prepare students for algebra courses. With the assistance of the district math consultant, they adopted the national program *Algebra for All*. While they still have a distance to go, teachers and administrators believe that they are off to a good start. In fact, the school plans to offer geometry next year. The curriculum in language arts and social studies requires integrating activities, thematic units, and independent research projects. In general, teachers try to move away from textbooks through the use of supplemental curriculum resources.

Professional development is one key to the school's perceived effectiveness. Teachers meet in study groups to investigate such topics as standards, scoring guidelines, instructional practices, transitional activities, and integrated curriculum units. A group of teachers also participates in *The Curriculum Project*.

Grant struggles to ensure that organizational structures will enhance student performance. The school has 90 minute classes, and planning time for teachers is concentrated on developing ways to stimulate students to apply what they learn, think critically and creatively, and be comfortable with analysis of information from across the academic disciplines. The school has a commitment to heterogeneous grouping and advocates high expectations, high content, and high support for all students.

Wynn Seale Academy of Fine Arts (Focus School)

Wynn Seale was disestablished in May 1994 and opened as an academy for fine arts in August 1994. The district hired a thoughtful and innovative principal, and all teachers applied or reapplied for teaching positions there. The student population is currently 911 with the following groups: 85.7% Hispanic, 7.4% white, 6.1% African American, and 0.8% American Indian. Approximately 80% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. During the school's first year the school-based leadership team and staff focused on building a positive school climate and a safe environment for students.

Wynn Seale is home to a performing arts concentration in addition to the regular school. Within the regular school, however, there is a single track program. It has a house concept which allows grouping 60 students with two teachers and large blocks of time for the academic disciplines. Each student takes two fine arts electives, participates in a technology program, and experiences fine arts as a common element in all classes. The curriculum includes interdisciplinary units on topics of global significance, and classrooms have at least three computer work stations. Community organizations provide support to the academic program through such programs as adopt-a-school partnerships, museum collaborations, and cultural institution exchanges. In addition, outreach to universities' faculty and other critical friends is becoming a norm.

Professional development through many different approaches is central to the school's functioning. A group of teachers participate in *The Curriculum Project* to enhance their knowledge of interdisciplinary units, and the entire faculty improves its familiarity with curriculum standards through school-based faculty meetings. Academic standards are also the focus of monthly department meetings.