Standards-Based Reform in Corpus Christi Independent School District

Update Report

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with

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At the end of our January 1999 update report to CCISD, we turned to the question of pedagogy and how a renewed focus on pedagogy was necessary if students were to be able to produce high quality work. We based this conclusion on interviews with district consultants and other central office administrators who reiterated their concerns about the low quality of student work that could meet the standards. They suggested that some students fail standards in the first place because their teachers' repertoire of strategies is too limited and, in some cases, because their teachers are not sufficiently knowledgeable about the content they are teaching. Second, they suggested that the teaching strategies provided in tutoring sessions, Saturday school or summer school may be identical to those used in the original classroom. Therefore, they argued, the strategies were likely to be as unsuccessful the second time as they were the first. Consultants suggested that regular classroom and safety net strategies might be too heavily focused on breaking required student work into small, manageable pieces that lead students to produce passing products at low level of quality. All of the consultants with whom we spoke explained that it was important to help teachers expand their pedagogical skills.[1]

In our March 1999 visit to CCISD, we focused on classrooms and student work. We observed and then interviewed teachers at Grant, Driscoll, Browne and Martin.[2] Prior to our visit, we asked teachers to bring samples of student work to the interviews so that we could talk with them about the class we observed and the work that students in that class were producing. Teachers across the schools were gracious in granting us access to their classrooms and in sharing many samples of student work with us.

Our focus during the observations was on the extent to which students had access to high level content and were being taught with strategies that enabled them to have a genuine opportunity to be actively engaged in their own learning. We asked ourselves: What kind of teaching is taking place? How and with what effect are teachers enabling students to gain new knowledge? What kind of learning is occurring? We focused on the ways in which classes were teacher directed and/or student centered. We looked for examples of pedagogy in which students were expected to take responsibility for their learning with the teacher taking on the role of active facilitator. We focused on the work that students produced and the teachers' expectations for its quality.

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[1]Teachers told us that students have difficulty passing the standards because they are not motivated, are frequently absent and have problems with discipline. They did not often mention pedagogy as a reason for students to have difficulty with the work.

[2]In some cases, due to scheduling difficulties, we interviewed teachers prior to observing their classes. When that happened, we asked teachers to tell us about what we would see in the class, what they were trying to accomplish, and what might be difficult for students to understand in the particular lesson or in the content more generally.

Across all four schools, our findings were similar. Most classes we observed were heavily teacher directed. Students were asked to respond to the teacher and, only rarely, to one another. Teachers' questions were most likely to require short, factual answers. When we heard students ask questions that might have led to an in-depth discussion, they were dismissed. When we saw students grouped for work, most often they were completing individual work in a small group setting. We saw no example of students needing to work together to generate new learning. We saw classrooms in which, for the most part, students were well-behaved and teachers were prepared to teach the lessons they presented. Teachers and students remain focused on improving their TAAS achievement scores and passing the standards. Thus, there is coherence and a sense of common purpose to what we saw in classrooms. All of this is to the good. However, in our judgment, the range of pedagogical strategies in use is far too narrow to enable CCISD's middle school students to achieve at high standards, and the quality of work they are expected to produce is far too low.

In the rest of this report we elaborate on these points. We do this in an effort to help the district consider the pedagogical practices currently in use. We do this, also, to emphasize the points made by the curriculum consultants, by some central office administrators and by us in earlier reports. Teachers in CCISD's middle schools are working hard to implement standards and help students learn. They have taken standards reform to heart and are implementing it as the district suggests. They are concerned about the variation in acceptable quality for student work, but they have no organized forum in which to discuss such issues and work to develop a common set of acceptable standards of quality across the district. They face daily the challenge of wanting students to a) produce high quality work and, at the same time, b) pass the performance standards. Without access to knowledge about how to raise the quality of student work, it is not surprising that they lower their expectations about the level of work that meets the standards. Teachers face a genuine dilemma as they try to fulfill the demands of standards-based reform.

Without access to a wider range of pedagogical strategies and without clear standards of quality, teachers in CCISD are finding ways to organize curriculum so that they teach to the performance standards and provide students with opportunities to do work that will pass those standards. The result of their efforts is a set of strategies which, we conclude, demands too little of CCISD students. We think CCISD middle school teachers could improve their instruction and we think it is incumbent upon the district to provide professional development that will enable them to do so. We are not saying that teachers must give up all that they know and do. We are saying that they need to expand considerably their repertoire of strategies, perhaps eliminate those that are inappropriate to the achievement of high standards, and be provided with professional support that will enable them to effectively use new strategies. Our report is designed to lay out the problems with teaching and learning and encourage CCISD to provide teachers with new opportunities to learn what they need to know in order to fully implement standards-based reform.

In writing about teaching and student work, we made an explicit decision to exclude examples and quotes that would identify schools and teachers. Our purpose is not to fault or embarrass anyone. Therefore, this report has fewer quotes than others. However, we have done a careful analysis of the data that informed the report and know that our findings represent all four schools, all four content areas, and all three grade levels.

We begin with a discussion of the kind of teaching that we saw across classrooms and schools. In this section, we highlight the strategies that teachers use, noting that they fundamentally rely on teacher-focused instruction. We turn next to the question of how teachers are structuring student learning. Then we turn to the question what kind of learning is occurring in these classrooms in light of these practices and raise concerns about the uniformity and low level of student work that is deemed adequate for passing the standards. In the last section of the report, we review our concerns about what we have learned and consider the ways in which central office support might help teachers make appropriate changes in teaching and, therefore, in student learning. We consider how attention to assessment, one of the district's emphases, might encourage teachers to think differently about the kind and quality of work their students are producing.

What kind of teaching is occurring?

Standards have clearly become an integral part of classroom instruction and teaching practice. We observed many recommended organizational approaches to teaching –learning centers, integration of technology with classroom practice, cross- disciplinary projects, testing for understanding and reteaching as needed, integration of testing standards and academic standards, and project-based teaching — in classrooms at each of the four sample schools.

At one school, for example, a language arts teacher and a math teacher planned a unit around a reading assignment in the language arts class that extended into the math class as a study of proportion. The math teacher commented that "it seemed [to the students] that we [the two teachers] were doing the same thing." It did not seem to be an isolated incident at the school because she also observed that "if there's something that comes up with science, I'll run to the science teacher, 'Do the metric system because we're on the metric system'" (Teacher L). She quipped that "there's a lot of shareware in the seventh grade." In the same school, another teacher selected novels to use in her language arts class that coordinated to the eras or events being studied in history classes. At another school, one language arts teacher coordinated her class' reading of *The Black Pearl* with the science teacher's lesson on dissection of an oyster (Teacher C).

This spirit of interdisciplinary cooperation can also be seen in teaching that stresses writing across the disciplines. Many math teachers, for example, indicated that they regularly required written explanations of math problems and solutions. The two teachers mentioned above further coordinated their teaching through a compare/contrast paper based on the dissection of the oyster vs. one done earlier on fish. We found evidence of a growing learning community in research projects in language arts, history, and science classes that use the same writing and reference formats or share resources. At one school, the language arts and history teachers are working with the technology teacher on a research project that connects all these areas. The history teacher described this project as "all [of us] working together. So it's not going to be a project that I'm going to say here it is. They're going to be able to use some of the research for their English teacher" (Teacher J). At another school, two teachers, one from language arts and the other from history, designed a compare and contrast research project that drew from historical eras and events (Teacher Y). Another teacher at this school designed a joint project with the

science teacher and carefully included science terms in her assignment to reinforce learning in science (Teacher W). Working together across disciplinary boundaries, language arts and science teachers have also initiated research projects on science topics such as fossil fuels and animal life. This exchange is two-way, for several science and social studies teachers use the language arts formats in student writing projects to reinforce students' writing skills

One teacher summarizes this spirit of cooperation:

> We try to share different things that we see and talk about–be in conversation with each other. And most of the people aren't threatened by sharing. They used to–they wanted to keep it all to themselves because they want to be a better teacher than anyone else. That kind of idiotic thinking. We have a real sharing on this campus. I think we realize we can't all live by ourselves. (Teacher V)

Teachers have incorporated the instruments and language of standards reform into their classroom practices. In several of the classrooms we observed, teachers displayed performance standards, linked them to assignments, and referred to them in classroom discussions. In their interviews, many teachers described their practice as tied to academic standards and noted that they teach primarily to the academic standards since they are aligned with TAAS and TEKS guidelines (Teacher U, Teacher B, Teacher D). As we noted in our August 30, 1997, update, use of such language and the acceptance of standards as "given" are the precursors to actually changing learning environments and classroom instruction" (p. 6). Among many teachers with whom we spoke, there is a remarkable level of commitment to the reform and to students.

While the language of reform and the acceptance of standards are present and teachers are fully invested in these reform efforts, many seem to have hit a ceiling in their classroom practices with regard to reform. Teachers talk the talk of change, they embrace standards-based teaching, and they have sought out opportunities to learn innovative pedagogies in various professional development programs and university classes. Our teacher interviews and classroom observations suggest, however, that teachers are often without a deep understanding of the many components of standards-based reform, their complexity and interrelationships and their implications for implementing high-level standards-based reform. We turn next to areas in which we see gaps between what teachers need to do to implement standards-based reform and their current practices.

Most striking is the extent to which teachers are implementing standards while maintaining a teacher-centered perspective. **For example, we heard very little discussion or conversation around exploratory, student-centered questions such as "how" and "why."** Teachers spoke to students primarily to issue directives and instructions or to solicit responses from them. There was little exchange of ideas and little evidence of higher order thinking skills in the classrooms we observed. In one class, students rotated among several learning centers where they worked on their research project or on multiple choice worksheets related to reading, vocabulary, and listening skills. The teacher stood by the podium for most of the class period as the students worked silently (Teacher W). When students using the Internet asked for help, she directed them to appropriate sites. One student was compiling a list of questions to pursue for her research project and asked the teacher for one more question since she lacked the requisite

number. The teacher responded with a question and the exchange ended as the teacher moved back to her podium at the front of the class. In one higher level math class, the teacher turned off the lights, flipped on the overhead, and talked the students through a lesson on algebraic formulae with little student input. She periodically asked students short answer questions, and the students supplied brief answers. Occasionally, students closer to the teacher asked relatively simple, factual questions (for example, "What is an integer?") that the teacher then answered. When one student asked the teacher how she got the formula that was the basis for the quadratic equation ($ax^2 + bx + c = 0$), a question that could potentially have resulted in real discussion of mathematical concepts, the teacher dismissed the question and moved on, losing an opportunity for exchange of ideas and an enhancement of the students' interests. (Teacher K).[3] We regularly noted the quiet and silence of the classrooms. While quiet can indicate concentration and respect, it can also indicate lack of engagement or passivity on the part of students.

Standards-based reform emphasizes the importance of students' active participation in the process of learning. But, in many of the classrooms we observed, learning is construed as what the teacher gives to the student. In these teacher-centered work environments, teachers bear the brunt of the work with students responsible for little more than filling in the blanks of work that teachers have done. For example, at one sample school, a social studies teacher described a history lesson she gave students using the following phrases: "I found a graph...I put it up and we discussed it...I told them to do your y axis, your x axis...I told them to include these numbers...I presented them some information...I did the research for them....I presented it to them in class...I typed up the notes...I gave them to them...I said now the lesson is to pick one of these...." The same teacher explained that she "used the Internet lots" and went on to explain that she cut information from the Internet, copied it, and gave it to the class. Asked why she didn't allow students to use the computers, she explained that "if I told them, well, look this up [a Web site], they probably wouldn't even find it" (Teacher Q). In another class we observed, the teacher gave students a "cheat sheet" of mathematical formulae that she had prepared for class use so students would not have to memorize them (Teacher L). At another school, a teacher said that she gave students formula sheets to use with her tests: "I don't make them memorize area and volume formulas. Mainly, the reason I don't do that is anytime anybody needs one they go look it up anyway" (Teacher B). This teacher-centeredness exempts students from responsibility and often from the work of learning. It is also ironic, for many of the teachers point out students' lack of maturity and motivation as reasons for their inability to grasp difficult concepts while at the same time using strategies and instructional techniques that may very well encourage these traits.

For example, in describing the different techniques that she uses in her classroom practice, one social studies teacher noted that she stressed timelines in her class, requiring students merely to fill in the blank caption boxes on them with the text that she supplied. She noted that her goal was to make the students "feel successful," so she furnished "a lot of paper, writing paper." Not surprisingly, she also noted that the students did little writing and took few notes except those she provided (Teacher G).

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[3]In another school, a student asked a similar question. He wanted to know what Pythagoras was thinking about when he came up with his equation for finding the length of the hypotenuse of a right triangle. The teacher suggested he try to find out.

We have evidence that some teachers can and do engage in classroom practices that capture at least part of the spirit of standards-based reform. While not the sole example of such an effort, one science class characterizes the potential we found in many classrooms (Teacher I). In this class, all students participated actively in learning by working collaboratively with the teacher and each other. They asked questions of themselves and the teacher and, encouraged by the teacher, posed possible solutions to their questions. When the lesson was completed, the teacher engaged students in a conversation about their work. The result was an obvious sense of student ownership of knowledge and of the classroom in which they worked. And yet, in this potentially constructivist environment, the science content remained significantly below grade level, more appropriate for elementary level science. While the class and teacher did engage in a conversation around ideas, those ideas did not challenge students intellectually. While that conversation could have dealt with possibilities for further learning or additional questions, the teacher instead asked, "Can you give me some ideas about how this could have been easier?" This incident was not isolated – either in its content or its potential to produce something better.

The environment required for standards-based reform is clearly present in some classrooms in our sample, but as we have noted, teachers are often without a deeper understanding of the implications of implementing high level standards-based reform. And, when they understand the implications, they do not always know what high quality student work at their grade level should look like. Developing those understandings to enable teachers to move from creating a learning environment with the potential for such reform to making it a reality will require significant and ongoing support for teachers and for students.

It is important to note that we also saw classrooms that were farther away from implementing standards-based reform than those we have just described. We observed classes in which students were lethargic and uninvolved in the content being presented. They did not read when called on, did not volunteer to answer questions and, in some instances, did not seem to have the slightest interest in the content under consideration. We saw classes in which students were being asked to review materials that would be on the TAAS assessment and did not know even the basic facts of what they had learned.[4] In such classrooms, it will take a great deal of work to help teachers figure out how to teach important content in ways that engage students so that they have genuine opportunities to learn.

How and with what effect are teachers structuring students' opportunities to learn?

The idea of structuring student learning – that is, developing progressively more complex knowledge by building on prior learning – is an important part of curriculum development and alignment. It is an important part of standards-based reform. In the CCISD classrooms we observed, we found that teachers are indeed making efforts to structure students' learning so that

[4] In one social studies class, for example, students were reviewing the origins of the United States' independence and the basic features of the Bill of Rights. Students reported that Americans gained their independence from the French and that Uncle Sam was known as the father of the Constitution. Students were speechless when the teacher asked them to talk about the importance of the Constitution.

they move from less to more complex understanding, so that they can build new knowledge onto a strong foundation of prior knowledge and skill. Teachers are aware, for example, of building from how to write a paragraph to how to write a longer paper. However, our data indicate that, too often, teachers are building and rebuilding the same basic structure. Across the three middle school grades they stop their teaching at minimal academic levels rather than push to progressively higher levels of competence. And, in mathematics in particular, they often choose to skip over missing student knowledge and skill in an effort to cover the standards required by the grade level curriculum. The language arts research projects offer a striking example of the first strategy – building and rebuilding the same basic structure.

The language arts research project is built into the curriculum across all three middle school grade levels. In scaffolded learning, one would assume that teachers would move from teaching the process of research toward processing and analyzing information to create an original product. For example, teachers in grade six could focus classroom practice on teaching the process of research and production of a small report. Building on that knowledge, teachers in grades seven and eight would review the process and extend it to include building higher order thinking skills with respect to the content and writing of a more complex report.

Instead, teachers on all grade levels continue to focus on teaching the process with little attention to inclusion of higher order thinking, analytical, or writing skills. Adhering to teacher-centered practice, teachers often select topics and provide models – what one sixth grade language arts teacher described as "modeling, the scaffolding, the holding your hand thing—like okay, this is what we need to do" (Teacher H). When asked what she wanted her students to be able to pull from the research project, one seventh grade language arts teacher responded that she wanted students to attain "a knowledge of the process, of how to do research. I want them not to be afraid of the research" (Teacher F). At another school, the eighth grade language arts teacher noted that the most challenging thing she teaches is the writing process, especially the structure of a research paper, largely because students haven't mastered it. She told us that she describes the research paper to her students as follows:

> It's just a pattern. It's pattern writing. Once you know the process you can go to high school, to college, and it's the same process. That's the most difficult thing to get through to them. I take them through the outline: The first paragraph is this, the second paragraph, you know. As long as they learn that [pattern], hopefully they can write any paper in any classroom. (Teacher A)

Accordingly, she focuses instruction on structure and finding sources. These are the very same skills targeted at the seventh grade level, where writing is also taught as pattern. The seventh grade teacher noted that she teaches the writing process "step-by-step," stressing uniformity, giving her students both topic and outline and stating the order and requirements of each paragraph. Her interview revealed a very structure-oriented teaching of the research writing process that should have prepared students for more advanced work in later grades. She used an elaborate assessment system to determine the presence or absence of all these stages and elements. We observed this same learning pattern in other language arts classrooms across the grade levels.

Given this finding, the question becomes: When are the higher level skills related to content and analysis taught if minimal or introductory knowledge is repeated and repeated? The answer seems to be: Not in middle school, given this eighth grade teacher's description of the eighth grade version of the research paper.

> We're starting our research process and we're doing the one topic, splitting it up into groups. We've pulled all the research. And the students are going to be doing it together. On the one hand that's okay because we're still working on the process. But on the other, a lot of kids that I have are going to be in honors class next year. I'm not sure they're getting everything that they need. . . . Some teachers say by the time they get to be a junior in high school, they're burnt out doing research papers. But [here in eighth grade] they're not doing it completely by themselves and doing their own research and selecting their own topics. I'm not sure they're going to have as big a buy-in as they would if they could choose and do it on their own. (Teacher R)

Essentially, teachers seem to be laying the foundation for more advanced knowledge, only to lay that foundation again and again. In the next section of this update report, we will discuss the price of this practice when we examine the quality of learning that is occurring in such middle school classrooms.

In contrast to the situation in which teachers teach a basic approach over and over again, in mathematics we found teachers talking about having to move on despite the fact that students lacked basic skills and understanding. We heard such comments most often from teachers involved with the Algebra for All program. In this program, teachers teach concrete algebraic work with the intent of moving from concrete algebra to more abstract concepts. However, they often do so with students who often have not mastered essential computational skills such as multiplication and division. These students thus do not have a solid mathematical foundation from which to scaffold to higher level skills. In analyzing what mathematical concepts were difficult for her students to grasp, one sixth grade teacher remarked:

> It's just that they've never learned those kinds of skills. And so they may be real weak in [multiplication and division]. You know, give them a calculator and they can do fine. But if you expected them to do that test and do all their multiplication and division of all their decimals and everything else completely correct, then that may not happen. (Teacher U)

She suggests that, as a result, these students often do not understand fractions, largely because of their problems with division. As she noted, "Somewhere along the way, they just didn't learn it." However, she told us that "you know, they have to be able to do that stuff." The question is: When and how will students gain this ability? The lack of conceptual foundation seems to follow the students, through middle school, for an eighth grade teacher at the same school noted that many students who struggle with algebraic concepts may be "weak in their basic math skills. And, you know, sometimes it takes them longer. They have to relearn things before they move on" (Teacher AA). However, if eighth graders are moving from concrete algebra skills to

abstract ones, there seems little space in which to "relearn," much less learn, those basic multiplication and division facts and understandings.

This ongoing conflict between remediation and acceleration is not limited to one school. At another school, a sixth grade teacher noted that her students did not understand division and therefore did not grasp fractions. Unresolved, that same problem was defined by the eighth grade teacher as a"stumbling block" for her students. When asked whether students' lack of basic computational skills was a problem in her eighth grade algebra class, she said that it would have been "if it hadn't have been for the TI-83s [calculators] being available to these kids." Faced with a choice between the two, she made a decision for acceleration:

> I knew they did not have the background in fractions [at all]. But since they're able to use a calculator in all math classes, it's just not a concern for me. I could choose to teach those fractions if I want, but why? They've gone this long and they've got those calculators. I'm an algebra teacher and that's what I choose to teach. But it is a stumbling block. (Teacher P)

At another school, a math teacher experienced the same conflict. In explaining a product that involved setting up proportions and showing ratios, she said:

> The majority of them didn't have any problem setting up the proportions, showing the ratio. They know what two items were being compared or the quantity. They had no trouble with that. But they did have trouble with multiplication and division. (Teacher BB)

Teachers all over face the dilemma of how and how often to re-teach knowledge that students need but find difficult to learn. At some point, teachers make decisions to move forward; they hope that somewhere along the way students will pick up the missing knowledge. Before algebra was an eighth grade goal for all students, teachers often spent that year shoring up students understanding of, among other things, ratios, decimals, fractions, proportions and their relationship to one another. Now, given the need to use these math concepts in eighth grade, teachers find themselves without the time needed for such review. While we understand their predicament, we worry that it is not merely the multiplication and division facts that students do not know, but rather the underlying concepts of these mathematical operations. Memorizing a procedure and using a calculator can get students to the right answer some of the time. However, if reliance on the calculator leads teachers to stress algorithms rather than understanding, then one of the basic premises of standards-based reform – teaching for deep understanding – is being undermined by the practice. We would hope that this level of understanding might be fostered within the Algebra for All Context.

Without an understanding of the implications of implementing high-level standards-based reform and its underlying concepts, many teachers have translated standards-based reform into teaching that requires students to focus on highly routinized processes that ensure that most students can complete their work. This is not surprising, also, given that the district helped guide teachers' work by providing performance standards and scoring guidelines that pushed in this direction. Such strategies, however, lead to learning that represents quite low performance levels. We have

provided an example of this strategy in discussing the language arts research paper. We also described how mathematics teachers, in an effort to enable students to keep up with the content they must pass, have come to rely on technology – in this case calculators – to bypass the teaching and learning of important content in light of their need to have students pass required standards. Teachers make these accommodations in an effort to deal with the need to have students pass appropriate grade level standards. They can make these accommodations because, as yet, there are no agreed upon standards of quality work within the district. We turn next to a more detailed discussion of the kind of work students produce when teachers employ these and other strategies designed to help students meet and pass the required performance standards.

What kind of learning is occurring?

The reform paradigm that CCISD schools are trying to implement emphasizes production of student work that demonstrates students' mastery of an idea, concept, or skill as evidenced by his or her ability to use that knowledge to produce original, high quality work. Reflecting this aspect of reform, teachers referred frequently to student products and their relationship to the standards. Contrary to the spirit of reform which emphasizes students' creation of work through the synthesis of ideas and information, however, many of the products we saw were remarkably similar to one another and reflected the reproduction of discrete pieces of knowledge rather than the production of original pieces of work.

We found the most telling data on knowledge reproduction in looking at students' written work across the disciplines. Often, students' work seemed uniformly minimal with respect to the teachers' expectations as detailed in the assignment requirements and in the scoring of finished work. For example, students are frequently asked to write compare/contrast essays as part of a performance standard assessment in eighth grade language arts classes. We examined such student work in several classes and present the following example. Students who wrote compare/contrast essays in this class had previously written two other compare/contrast papers:

> Having athletic talent can be the best thing in the world. However, being an athlete does have its downside. There are numerous advantages and disadvantages to being an athlete. Having this talent has several advantages for an athlete, such as an opportunity for a good future, developing healthier habits, and having a sense of achievement. First, being provided with a good future is what an athlete is given. For example, having an involvement in high school sports is recorded on your high school record and counts highly in your college transcripts. Statistics in *Education Weekly* suggest that 89% of college students were accepted because of their athletic ability.

This student then completed what the teacher referred to as the writing "pattern" with the remaining two points – developing healthier habits and having a sense of achievement. This pattern is remarkably similar to the one used for TAAS writing. The next paragraphs shifted to the contrast portion of the essay and opened with a topic sentence that listed three ways in which being an athlete was a disadvantage:

> On the contrary, being an athlete does have its disadvantages like having a high rate of injury, not having enough time to spend with family, and having no extra time outside of sports. (Teacher A)

As in the previous paragraph, the student then explained the three points listed in the topic sentence, a reason for each of the three points, and an example to support it. The student then added a conclusion that restated the thesis statement: "In conclusion, being an athlete can be a benefit or burden to anyone and everyone."

Two other essays that we saw from this class opened with nearly identical statements and repeated the pattern seen in the one above. One student whose product did not meet the standards was assigned another topic. The result was as follows:

> There are good things and bad things about being famous. I think there are many advantages to being famous. However, there are bad points as well. There are several good, for example, signing autographs, having fans, and being in magazines and books. Numerous famous people like signing autographs when their movie opens. They also get extra money from fans paying money for autographs.

This essay then completed the pattern laid out in the other examples, and the student passed the performance standard. As the teacher noted, "See, that's the pattern. So, they learn the pattern." In our view, there is nothing wrong with providing students with information about options to use in structuring a compare/contrast essay. However, the pattern taught in the classes we observed is the only one present. It may dominate because of the demands of TAAS writing, but, even if that is the case, limiting students in this way seems inappropriate. In addition, in our view, the quality of work demonstrated at the eighth grade level as passing the standard seems quite low. It suggests the need for the district to come to some agreement about both the range of writing that can meet the standard and the quality of work that is expected throughout and at the end of middle school.

In a math class at another school, a teacher showed us student tests that revealed the use of patterns that students were to learn in order to meet the standards in this content area. She explained the similarities among the test items as follows:

> I kind of give them the setup – you're going to do this, you're going to do this. Because they get real comfortable with knowing exactly where everything's going to go. This was the format [pattern] I'd been using throughout the time we were doing problem solving and then this [pointing to the new problems] was the standard review. And basically it was the five type problems they were going to get on the test. Not the same problems, but examples of the problems. (Teacher U)

Nothing that the teacher required on the performance standard test called for the application of knowledge to a new situation or to a different formulation of a problem. We found a similar approach to learning in science and social studies classes.

Much of the similarity of this written work stems from excessive modeling through which students copy teacher- or student-generated models and, in effect, reproduce that work. The result is practically identical student work across disciplines, classrooms, and schools. For example, one teacher "modeled" a compare/contrast paper for her students. When the researcher asked if the students took phrases from the model, the teacher noted, "Yes. I tell them it's okay. That's what people do, you know. They just borrow" (Teacher A). The student work we observed in that class suggested a great deal of borrowing. In a sixth grade language arts class at another school, we read an excellent book report given to us as a piece of student work. When we looked at other student writing samples from the assignment, they were identical. The teacher explained that "we all read the book. We kind of did this one together, globally." The purpose of the identical written essay was, she noted, "to show them how." (Teacher S). The only variation in a set of social studies papers in one class came from students' misspellings.

From such misuse of the strategy of "modeling," it is not very hard to move students to the strategy of copying, especially with the help of technology and the Internet. Another teacher offered the following as a rationale for the blatant copying of text and pictures from the Internet:

> Now let me tell you the reason I'm doing the short-cutting. If they're sitting there and typing, some kids type with one finger. And if I had them type, it would take forever and ever. They've already had the experience of typing with the research paper. Here, my goal was two things. [1]To teach them how to import graphics and text from the computer, put it into the Microsoft document, and [2]create a product. (Teacher V)

We saw many examples of student work on display in the hallways and on classroom walls that included large chunks of text imported from the Internet. The source of this text was not identified; the implication, if one did not look closely at the quality of writing, was that students had produced the prose. We remain skeptical that products created in this way give students an opportunity to learn content at high levels and produce work that demonstrates their mastery of it.

We raise concerns about such uses of the Internet as a warning. CCISD is proud of the integration of technology into its schools and curriculum. Certainly, it can be an invaluable resource to teachers and students. However, as we have seen students using it to create products, we think it is counterproductive to the production of high quality student learning. Although much professional development on computers has been made available in CCISD and many teachers have taken these courses, such work seldom explores the implications and underlying concepts of technology's use or how students can be taught to process, synthesize, and make the information they find their own.

While we recognize that teachers are working hard to structure learning opportunities in light of students' need to produce work that will pass the required standards, we think that most of their strategies are leading to cookie-cutter student work that demonstrates little student engagement or learning. Our interviews with many central office administrators reveal that they have the same concerns. They have told us of speaking to students about completed science fair products, for example, where it is clear that the student has learned almost nothing from the process or

content of the product. They have told us of their chagrin at seeing student writing across the curriculum that is identical from student to student. But, as yet, we have seen no serious discussion of why teachers are employing these strategies and how the district could organize its professional development efforts to help teachers figure out how to help students pass the standards with more high quality and varied student work.

What might happen next?

We know that CCISD wants to address the question of quality student work and move in a direction that will enable all students to achieve at high levels. We know that the district is justifiably pleased with its success in helping many more students each year achieve passing scores on TAAS, but that it recognizes that this test, while important, does not represent the range and quality of work that students should be able to do. As a result, the district has been considering various ways to move forward with the critical issue of quality. We think that continuing and intensifying such work could go a long way toward addressing the problematic issues of teaching and learning that we have identified in this update report. In particular, we think that attending to alternative assessment strategies, seriously implementing school-based looking at student work sessions[5] (LASW) with expert facilitation support, and providing curriculum-oriented professional development could go a long way toward changing teaching and learning in CCISD.

With respect to assessment, CCISD has begun to consider seriously the kind of assessment that needs to be in place in a standards-based district. As we wrote in our August 1998 report, central office administrators as well as teachers and principals are aware that they need to attend to the quality of student work across classrooms and schools. CCISD's strategy for moving in this direction has been to consider adopting new, more appropriate assessment strategies. Toward that end, the district focused part of its August 1998 Superintendent's Leadership Conference on issues of assessment. And, during the 1998-1999 school year, CCISD personnel engaged in work with the Center of Learning, Assessment, and School Structure (CLASS), Education Trust, and Millennium. These professional development opportunities left participants with new understandings about assessment and its multiple uses for informing instruction as well as evaluating student learning. The new understandings highlighted some of the discrepancies between these ideas about assessment and the district's current approaches to assessment, evaluation and the determination of report card grades as these two comments indicate.

> It [CLASS training] was quite profound. Quite profound. We all came back with a renewed sense of, what are we doing and why are we doing it? And where are we going? And if we're doing something that's not going to get us to where we need to go, then we need to stop that and get about the business of where we need to go. (Administrator A)

[5] In our references to LASW, we are thinking of it with the following purpose in mind: to stimulate instructional improvement by using discoveries made when looking at work to plan instruction, choose professional development, and establish goals for improvement (Mitchell, 1996). LASW also has the benefit of helping teachers come to consensus on levels of quality.

> [We learned that] these one shot events [performance standards] are inconsistent with what we learned at CLASS. Right now, we have grading guidelines [that are] very inconsistent with giving multiple opportunities and looking at assessment as a feedback, continuous improvement process... We have a grading guideline that says that the monitoring grades are 25 percent, the major grades are 25 percent, and the academic standards are 50 percent. Well, that communicates the philosophy of the performance standard assessment is an event. (Administrator B)

> [We learned] our grading guidelines are in direct opposition to what we're saying over here with using rubrics. They just don't go like this. But we are held by our public to give grades in terms of numerical grades. So at this point, we're not ready for that [the rubrics]... We still have a lot of training to get from that mindset to this. We're closer because we have done some training. But it's very complicated to explain. (Administrator C)

As these quotes suggest, central office staff became increasingly aware of the implications of digging deeper into standards-based reform and that some of these implications conflict with the district's current approach to the implementation of standards-based reform. This realization has made some central office administrators anxious, but it has, more importantly, made them aware of the work that must be done. For example, central office staff recognize that more training will be necessary to push to the next level, to move towards a truly standards-based system that includes appropriate assessments that are both a) embedded in the instructional process, and b) appropriate for assigning students levels of achievement based on the quality of their work.

LASW is integral to assessment designed to forward standards-based reform. It provides teachers with opportunities to consider a) the quality of work that students are producing, b) the ways in which the work might be improved through alternative teaching strategies, and c) how the quality of the work is tied to the structure of the assignment itself. LASW can also be a strategy for coming to consensus on acceptable quality for student work and scoring that work. But this is just one use of the process. LASW, done in the company of others, enables teachers to support one another as peers and develop a culture of shared responsibility for high quality teaching and learning. We know that the LASW aspect of standards-based reform has been threatening to central office administrators and some teachers. We have written about this in previous reports. However, we have also written that some teachers are trying LASW strategies and finding them quite helpful.

We heard from a variety of sources that LASW became a regular part of principal, chairperson, and feedback committee meetings during the 1998-99 academic year. In our interviews with central office staff, we learned about participants' positive reactions to seeing work that was produced at other schools. People seemed to particularly like getting ideas about assignments and assessment tools.

Sometimes via the principal and sometimes via a chairperson, LASW was also introduced at the campus level. Where this occurred, these conversations seemed to take place most often among teachers within a department. And, they often focused on coming to consensus on scoring —

one of the goals of LASW. We learned about the challenges involved in initiating these conversations from principals and central office administrators.

> They've had a little bit of dialog, but what's happened is they didn't have a structure for it. And so it was kind of free for all and random. And maybe you have to go through that, I don't know. (Administrator B)

> They're uneasy with it. Because the teachers are bringing in materials and products and it's like a criticism. "Oh, well, that doesn't meet the standard." But yet, some kids were getting credit. (Administrator C)

> It's difficult to bring something that one of your students has done that you see or perceive to be quality, and have other teachers say it's not. I'm not saying it can't be done. We're not there yet, though. [What happens is] informal discussion ensues. They say, "Gosh, your kids can really do that well. How are they able to do that so well?" And then the teacher who has what's perceived to be an A product says, "Well, first we did this." They walk them through, but it's informal. It's not formal. And that's OK for now. At least they're talking. (Administrator D)

> We don't have a formal process that takes sort of that impersonal, what would you call it, that risk, taking out that personal risk, making it more objective. (Administrator E)

We are not surprised by these difficulties. Based on our experiences in other districts, we know that understanding the purpose of LASW and developing the comfort and trust to share student work with colleagues is a slow process. We also know that engaging in conversations around student work is new to most, if not all, teachers, principals, and central office administrators in CCISD. In light of these realities, it is not surprising that LASW in the district has not yet led to productive conversations that are geared toward improving instructional practice. Our data indicate that — up to this point — most LASW sessions have suffered from a lack of ongoing support from sufficiently trained facilitators. The purpose of using LASW as a way to reflect on instruction will have to be conveyed through sessions that are carefully guided by ongoing, school-based support from well-trained facilitators.

Finally, we think that the district could improve teaching and learning by implementing coherent, on-going professional development that links attention to content with attention to assessment and LASW. Such professional development would enable teachers to learn how to teach their content in light of the standards and associated assessment strategies. It would enable teachers whose content knowledge is weak, to strengthen that knowledge while learning new pedagogical strategies. To some extent, Algebra for All training might be such a professional development vehicle. However, since the algebra classes we observed tended to be fully teacher directed, we are not sure that it provides teachers with such opportunities. Such professional development would involve making connections between instruction, assessment, and content. It would enable teachers to use the LASW process as a window through which to collectively monitor the overall quality of student work as well as the progress of individual students. The

monitoring process would, in turn, inform decisions about where further professional development is needed to improve instruction and raise the level of student achievement.

Taken together, attention to assessment, LASW and curriculum-based professional development could help move the district toward high level teaching and learning. If the district decides to move in this direction, we offer a note of caution. Central office is about to grapple with a very important and difficult set of issues. The outcome of their work will depend on the quality of professional development available to teachers and administrators. We are concerned that the district leadership does not have clear, well thought out ideas about how to design and implement such professional development opportunities. For example, while the professional development model described below is thoughtful in the sense that it involves defining informal school-based work as professional development, it falls short in terms of a plan to initiate and support such work.

> I think staff development funds could be redirected, to give those teachers time on their campuses in their collegial planning to do some of that stuff, but not for the purpose of getting the job done, but for the purpose of educating themselves... It's an idea of using some of those things in their professional development seminar. So we could, like, we always try to set up something that they have to experience it to go back to their campus. And so if we wanted to help teachers know what collegial planning or collegial staff development looked like, we could experience it with the tuning protocol... Well see, once the principals do it day one, then their leadership team comes in day two, and the expectation is they go back and do it day three on their campus, schoolwide. (Administrator B)

This train-the-trainer approach seriously under-estimates the challenge of translating common planning time into productive professional development. The model described above, simply put, will not work. In contrast, the central office administrator quoted below recognizes the need for a more in-depth investment in ongoing professional development for teachers in the work is to have a sustained effect.

> If we are going to help teachers with the assessment, with rubrics, we can't depend on just the principal being the leader, the instructional leader. We have to develop teachers doing that to develop continuity... [It needs to be geared toward] professional growth, not just staff development, not just another workshop, another in-service; an education, continuing. (Administrator E)

Our interviews at the schools and central office suggest that there is a consensus about the need to move forward with a new vision for professional development that will support standards-based reform. We are concerned, however, that this vision lacks a set of strong strategies that reflect what is known about high quality professional development. We know that CCISD has the will to put in place the kind of professional development necessary to the task if it chooses to do so. Thinking through the actual requirements of such an effort, perhaps in collaboration with knowledgeable professionals who work in the field, could truly advance the progress of teaching and learning in CCISD's middle schools.