

Standards-Based Reform in Corpus Christi Independent School District
Update Report

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with

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I. INTRODUCTION

Standards remain front and center of everything that Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD) does to increase middle school reform and student achievement. The district's administrators and teachers continue to tackle all aspects of the reform by a) revising the content standards, as needed, b) trying to increase the complexity and thinking skills required for performance tasks, c) stressing the connections between standards and TAAS, d) developing alternative uses of time to create better opportunities for student learning within the school day, e) developing new approaches to scoring and reporting students' academic progress, and f) encouraging dialogue focused on instruction among teachers and principals. Teachers continue to report about the ways in which they work with colleagues to create performance tasks that cross disciplinary lines. Principals increasingly talk about the ways in which they are focused on increasing the quality of student work produced in their schools. Unlike those in other urban districts, teachers and principals in CCISD maintain that they can make a significant difference in student achievement. Their rising TAAS scores provide them with evidence that they are correct. The district works hard and has accomplished a great deal. We have detailed much of the hard work and progress in previous reports. And, we have discussed issues with which the district continues to grapple.

Our baseline report (Berns and Markowitz, August 1996) described how CCISD began implementing standards-based reform. It depicted the impact of the reform on teachers and the ways in which they were thinking about using standards to improve their 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. ...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. ...CCISD struggles to make good decisions about scoring guides and grading guidelines. ...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. (pp. 1-2)

The mid-year report described teachers' continuing efforts to implement standards with new teaching practices and with assessment based on performance standards. The report reviewed teachers' concerns about the initial design of the district scoring criteria and guidelines, and described the productive process that the CCISD had used to refine them. That process, according to Rosaena Garza, provided participating teachers with a powerful opportunity to look at student work in order to determine what the standards mean in actual practice. She and others explained that the guidelines were developed to help teachers reflect on student work and determine its quality. The guidelines were also designed to bring much-desired consistency to the scoring criteria. (Berns, February 1997, p. 5)

CCISD was in the forefront of tackling the issue of how to assess and report student progress in terms of standards and so it was in the forefront of finding out how difficult this task can be. Some administrators and teachers reported that, despite their hard work, the guides were better at achieving consistency than at measuring quality. Dr. Sandra Lanier-Lerma agreed, noting that the district's next step would be "to move towards really trying to help teachers define quality; what's exceptional quality." She suggested that this would not be easy to do, that it would likely lead to the use of rubrics rather than scoring guides and that it would take time to get all of these ideas accepted in the district (Berns, February 1997, p. 5).

The mid-year report also described CCISD's progress with developing new report cards that indicated students' progress with respect to specific standards. The district, with continuing input from teachers, was grappling with how to assign weights to standards, tests, quizzes and homework, for example, when computing students report card grades. Some schools used standards for half of a student's report card grade; others used standards for a smaller portion of the grade. Everyone seemed to agree that if the district were to become fully standards-based, then it had to develop consensus on grading and weighting practices.

Finally, the report described CCISD's development of safety net strategies to help students who had not achieved all of the required standards. It discussed the new summer school program that was designed to enable students to work on the standards that they had not achieved during the school year. Overall, the report described the continuing commitment the district had to implementing all components of standards-based reform and the strategies it was using to include broad teacher participation in its standards-related work.

Six months later, the August 1997 update report (Berns) focused on the use of standards at the school level based on the views and practices of our sample of 36 teachers and four principals. These teachers and principals had been implementing content and performance standards for an entire school year and felt more comfortable with aspects of the reform. They had learned that their standards-based work for the district meshed well with requirements from the state as represented by TAAS. However, due to their increased experience, they also raised questions about how to genuinely teach the numerous standards. Berns (August 1997, p. 13) wrote:

While those who advocate the development of standards think of them as a way to provide depth rather than breadth, this is not the reality in the district's early implementation phase. Teachers express increasing concern about coverage, suggesting that in many subject areas, there are more standards than they can teach well in one year. (About half of the science teachers emphasized this problem.) Several teachers responded to this situation by intentionally integrating standards from different disciplines, thereby decreasing the need for every teacher to teach every standard in his or her discipline. This has the added benefit of linking the standards in a way that demonstrates to students the connectedness of the various subject areas.

Still, despite their efforts to integrate the standards, teachers worried about how they could teach so many standards. They wanted to know how to balance the time it takes to do a thoughtful,

extended project with the demand to cover all the standards in one school year. They also wanted to know, for example, how to create equitable systems for “re-doing” performance standards that students had failed, whether it was equitable for students to do the standards at home where some had parents who could help and others had distractions that would stand in the way of producing passing work. And, many reported that they were still dissatisfied with the district’s scoring guides and with the process of reporting student progress to parents. Teachers and principals felt that the scoring and reporting systems were not yet similar from classroom to classroom and school to school.

At the end of the August 1997 report, Berns summarized the evaluation findings, and stressed the need for CCISD to tackle directly two significant issues:

...the quality of students’ daily work and products to meet performance standards, and teachers’ ongoing confusion and ambivalence about current assessment practices. In terms of the latter, we trust that current efforts to improve scoring guidelines and grading practices will alleviate teachers’ concerns and anxiety and help them to assess student growth and progress toward meeting standards in a meaningful way.

Berns suggested a strategy for addressing the issues of quality and consistency:

To address these issues, we suggest that campuses develop plans and formalized processes for giving teachers the opportunity to develop new visions of exemplary standards-based instruction and student work. We think that by examining student work with professional colleagues, teachers will be able to match assignments more closely with standards, learn from other teachers’ perspectives, and begin to come to some consensus about the qualities of outstanding standards-based work. In looking at student work in a focused way, we also expect that teachers will begin to understand more about students’ thinking and, in doing so, learn what they can do to help students meet performance standards in the various subject areas. We cannot underestimate the effort required to examine student work; it will require a lot of reflection about teachers’ own content knowledge and instructional strategies, as well as their knowledge of adolescent development and learning styles.

We cite these conclusions from the August 1997 report because a) CCISD is still grappling with issues of quality and consistency, b) the August 1998 Superintendent’s Leadership Conference was intended to provide administrators and teachers with ways to consider assessment and strategies for reflecting on teachers’ and students’ work, and c) we think the district would benefit from moving in the direction described above by Berns.

Therefore, in this August 1998 report to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and CCISD, we emphasize the issues of quality and consistency in assessing student work. We present the concerns and issues that teachers raise as they try to assess the quality of student work. In addition, we consider the district’s latest approaches to providing “safety nets” for students who

are not making sufficient progress toward passing performance standards or who have failed them. These safety net strategies are a component of supporting high quality student work. They will become even more important as the district raises the bar for student achievement. Finally, we briefly review the focus of the Superintendent's Leadership Conference as an opportunity to reflect on standards-based reform and spark an initial effort to enhance teachers' and principals' ideas about assessment.

It is important to remember that we highlight these issues in a context in which the district continues to make progress with its reform efforts: aligning standards with the new Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements, encouraging teachers to work with colleagues to integrate the teaching of standards, and moving forward with higher quality curriculum in some content areas. CCISD is not standing still or resting on its substantial accomplishments. It continues to try to implement all aspects of standards-based reform. We write this report with the district's successes in mind and with the desire to further strengthen its on-going efforts to enable students to achieve high academic standards.

Update on the Design and Implementation of the Evaluation Study

Education Matters staff members visited CCISD twice during the 1997-98 school year. Barbara Berns and Barbara Neufeld traveled to Corpus Christi in the Fall of 1997 to conduct interviews with the principals at Browne, Cullen, Grant, and Wynn Seale, as well as with Dr. Sandra Lanier-Lerma, Mrs. Rosaena Garza, Mrs. Phyllis Lyons, Mrs. Mary Kelly, Dr. Mary Ann Wilkinson, Dr. Ken Kyle, Mr. George Wetzel, and Dr. Joseph Lopez, administrators at the central office. Neufeld and Berns' Fall 1997 visit led to a change in the sample of schools participating in the evaluation. In collaboration with the principals and district administrators, we replaced Wynn Seale with Driscoll. Since Wynn Seale was no longer a focus school, the change was appropriate. This visit marked the conclusion of Barbara Berns' work in Corpus Christi. Dr. Neufeld now leads the research team; she is joined by Margaret Eisenband-McConchie and Katie Woodworth.

Neufeld and Woodworth visited Corpus Christi in the Spring of 1998 and conducted interviews with teachers and administrators at Browne, Cullen, Grant, and Driscoll, as well as with the Superintendent, Dr. Abelardo Saavedra and the central office administrators mentioned above with the exception of Dr. Lanier-Lerma and Dr. Ken Kyle.

Woodworth returned to Corpus Christi to attend the July 21st, 1998, training session that prepared principals for the Superintendent's Leadership Conference. Neufeld and Eisenband-McConchie visited Corpus Christi the following week to observe the two day Superintendent's Leadership Conference on July 27th and 28th, 1998. They also interviewed central office administrators Dr. Sandra Lanier-Lerma, Dr. Katherine Conoly, Mr. Jaime Arredondo, and Rheba Jones, principal of Martin Middle School, on the day following the conference.

These interviews led to another change in our sample of schools. Together with CCISD administrators and the principal, we decided to add Martin Middle School to our sample. Martin

is a focus school. Our sample now includes two focus and three non-focus schools. We are currently examining achievement data from Grant, Cullen and Brown to determine which two schools should remain in our evaluation sample so that we maintain a sample of four middle schools. We will make this decision in light of the data and in consultation with district and school administrators.

II. QUALITY AND CONSISTENCY: TWO ASPECTS OF STANDARDS REFORM

CCISD teachers and administrators have been struggling with the question of how to insure quality and consistency in the scoring and reporting of student achievement since beginning the implementation of standards reform. Teachers and administrators know that an A in one class need not represent the same quality of work as an A in another class. With the advent of performance standards and the high stakes attached to passing them, teachers and administrators worry that different conceptions of quality diminish the meaning and value of “standards.” They are puzzled about how a standards-based system can operate with such varying conceptions of quality.

During the past year, the district focused on bringing consistency to the process of scoring and reporting on student work. This consistency is demonstrated by the district’s new grading guidelines that suggest a system for weighting the ways in which different kinds of work contribute to report card grades.¹ We know from attending the Superintendent’s Leadership Conference that teachers and principals welcome these guidelines. However, problems still remain in regards to the performance standards and scoring guidelines. In our view, and in the view of some teachers with whom we spoke, the scoring guidelines do not address quality. Rather, they address narrow components of required work more than its content. In addition, the criteria for quality can vary by teacher, department and/or school.

In the discussion that follows, we report teachers’, administrators’ and our concerns about quality. We do not suggest by this discussion that teachers never demand high quality work from their students in CCISD. This would not be true. However, we know that the district has not yet tackled the question of “how good is good enough” with respect to the work that enables students to pass a standard. This report is designed to a) report the concerns that teachers and others raise about the quality issue and b) demonstrate that the time is ripe to engage them in productive conversations that can lead to consensus about “how good is good enough” for Corpus Christi’s students.

What Are the Quality Issues that Remain to Be Addressed?

Administrators talk about issues of quality in two ways. First, they are concerned that they do not have a clear idea of what kind of work a student should have to produce to pass the standard. They do not necessarily want to have uniform quality standards, but most recognize that not having any quality standards is a problem.

You’re really intent on defining the quality product which, hopefully, is a product of quality teaching. ...You see a lot of products around. I still don’t think they’re quality products yet. Which is interesting, I guess, because I’m not one to say whether it is quality or not. It’s just that you go into some classrooms you see

¹ We are referring here to the decision to weight monitoring and major grades each as 25 percent of a report card grade and performance standards as 50 percent of the report card grade.

that the products now are better than the ones that you saw before, so that's something. We need to address quality issues. Our folks need to develop sound matrices; they need to be able to say, "This is a quality product and this isn't." (Principal A)

Second, administrators talk about the ways in which fairly low quality work is considered to be high quality because the standard for quality is derived from work within each school. In a school where most children produce low quality work, children who produce the best work may be considered to be producing high quality work.

And I'm really concerned about the quality of student work that we produce. If we measure our work against us, then it looks pretty good. I don't think there's a lot of district-wide evaluation of what's the appropriate standard. And I think that's an area we need to work on. (Principal B)

It's like we're in a little world unto ourselves here, and that because there have been no models of quality, or not a competitive standard is what I'm trying to say, that it's like comparing something that's low level to something that's low level, and one is just a little bit better, and so you say, "Ooh. Isn't this good!" That concerns me. (Administrator A)

Teachers speak about the ways in which implementing the performance standards and scoring them leads to questions about quality. For example, the teacher quoted next was troubled when she found out that successful achievement of a standard required only a 70 percent score. This was not her original idea of what it would mean to achieve a standard.²

My first interpretation, until it was redefined for me, was that the standard meant if they could, it meant, I thought of mastery or I thought that they would make a 100. They had to make a 100 on the performance to pass it. Okay? Because to me if you were going to lay out all these indicators and, you know, stipulations, then they had to be able to do it. It wasn't a matter of how well did they do it, they can do it or not. But I was told to change, that I had to reassess the way I was doing it. And now I consider what's [passing] the standard to be a 70. And that's how I grade. (Teacher A)

Other teachers talked about the lack of clarity about the assessments themselves, not only about the pass score. They want to know about the characteristics of a good assessment task as well as about the quality of work required for passing the standard.

I would say I'm not sure that [performance standards] are necessarily easy. But like for instance, here are four of ours for science and you can see that there are

²As a convention, in this report we refer to all teachers as "she."

scores that they have suggested for each one. But I can do anything with this that I want. ...The teacher could just give a test on the body systems. See, there's no consistency on what the product is. And I understand that they're putting that in there to leave it up to the teachers for creativity and for what they're good at. But, nevertheless, then how can it be a standard? (Teacher B)

And there's a whole lot of discussion in the district about what should be accepted as a standard. Because we have no real-- there are no real tests. Like they don't send us out the tests for performance standard one. We make our own test. And there has been a lot of discussion about that. Like, well, this isn't a real standard unless you have a test. And some schools we feel accept a lot more inferior work. Some teachers think it's okay to let them draw a poster of some stuff and that counts. As opposed to paper/pencil. You know, different kinds of products. And there are people that are very staunch paper/pencil and there are people that are very staunch not paper/pencil type activities. But there is never any meeting of the minds and consensus. And it has purposely been left up to each school to decide how they're going to do it... (Teacher C)

As we said in our May 1998 memo, the fact that questions about quality continue to be raised reflects well on the district's implementation process. Quality comes up because administrators and teachers understand some of the basics of standards-based reform, are trying to use alternative assessments to determine students' knowledge and skill, and are working collegially more than ever before. In the next part of this section, we review how a) using the scoring guidelines, b) using alternative assessment, c) using tests to assess achievement of standards, and, d) trying to assess for student growth in the context of assessing for achievement of standards both support the implementation of standards and raise important questions about insuring quality.

Using the Scoring Guidelines. The teachers and administrators who developed the scoring guidelines several years ago, intended for them to bring consistency to the assessment of student work. (See Appendix A for examples of scoring guidelines.) The district does not mandate their use, but in our four sample schools teachers use them to determine whether students have accomplished performance standards. In our view, as we wrote above, the scoring guidelines do not sufficiently address the quality of student work that demonstrates achievement of standards.

Sometimes I think it's like too easy, you know. The way they have the scores. Where they can still pass, because of the way they're broken up. Because look: Organizes presentation; 30 points. Shows evidence of overall planning by each member, follows logical-- This is like almost it's going to be there. Good transitions, speaks approximately ten minutes. That's worth 30 points. I mean, unless they have hardly anything, maybe you take off five points, you know. ...And everybody has to have a visual. So once they have their visual and they cover this, I mean, that's going to show evidence of planning. And then they had

to present the story also. I mean, 20 points. I don't think anybody's going to fail!
(Teacher E)

The structure of the work forms the basis for scoring it. The scoring guidelines, in other words, enable teachers to minimize, if they wish, the importance of the content and quality of the work. The teachers we cite below describe how this happens and their concern about it. Note that their emphases are on the ways in which the scoring guidelines stress the components of a product rather than its content.

I hear from a lot of teachers that they give them the topic, they give them the outline, they give them the thesis. They give them, you know... And tell them-- fill in the blanks basically, okay? And I did not do that. We started off with their having their topic and then narrowing down their topic through research. What do you want to find out? Just write these five questions down. So we wrote five questions. And from there, they needed to go back and look. Well, they found out that there were answers to some questions, but not answers to others. They had to regroup. It was a long, long process, you know, of organizing where did you have the most of your information, where did you not have the most of your information. You know, what was it mostly about. They had to write their own outline coming, you know, together with the factual information that they found. They had to organize it from strength, you know, to weaker. I mean, it was just a long process for them to come up with their own unique paper. Nobody else had the same paper like it. And it's hard. It's hard. (Teacher F)

I'm not going to let a student pass with that. Whereas, somebody else might say, "Well, that meets the criteria. They've got transition, it's got a thesis statement, it's according to those guidelines right there." Okay? So you might have some teachers that are looking at the bare bones minimum. You might have some teachers that say, "I want more meat here. You'll never make it in college with this paper." (Teacher G)

There are teachers in our sample who like the scoring guides and who do not raise the concerns cited above. Some laud the value of the scoring guides for giving them and students clear information about how a product will be assessed.

I have a format with all the criteria that they have to meet and it counts so much percent each one. And I go through and I check off. And each item I do worth 10 percent... I looked for certain things in there and I would check off. Every item that was there, I would check it off and it was worth 10 percent. And when you added all the criteria, everything that they need to meet, it averaged out to a 100 percent. ...And part of it, 10 percent was also neatness and [if] they had everything the way it should be and all that. So that's the way I would grade.
(Teacher H)

It [the scoring guideline] would tell me this is worth two points, this is worth three points, this is worth five points, this is worth ten points, and it breaks it down. And like on, not this one, but the previous performance standard where they have to come up with their own graph and their own scale, it would tell me exactly how many points to give to that part. (Teacher I)

I feel like the scoring guidelines make it more equal throughout the district for grades, distributions and things. If I have my research paper, I know that, say, another school is going to grade this particular way and that gives me a way that I can grade my 6th graders that would be fair to them and like they were being graded at [another school]. I can use them as a guideline sometimes, but there may be something extra that I add or delete or something that I don't know that's right or wrong. That's what I've been doing. But it is a good place to start. I think it's great for a new teacher. A new teacher who's not real sure about how to grade or how many points to take off or add. (Teacher J)

Some teachers like the scoring guidelines because they specify what it is important for students to know at the district and state levels. In this way, the scoring guidelines serve as a sort of curriculum guide that is more specific than the content standards.

I think it [the scoring guideline] focuses on what universally is considered to be the things that need to be known for both the TEKS and the TAAS. (Teacher K)

I use it as a guide to make sure that I've covered the things that are designated there, that are specified there. Whatever that guide asks is all the things that I cover. And the things that I tell the students. These are the things, you know, we want to focus on and these are the things that we want to learn. (Teacher L)

Teachers also comment on the clarity the guidelines provide when describing the parameters of assignments to students.

I show the students what I'm looking for. I can just show them, "This is what I'm going to grade you on." And that helps many of them know how much to do and what to do and what I'm going to be looking for so they can dwell on it. So I think that helps. It's not vague. They know 30 points is going to be taken off if you don't do so and so or ten points because you don't do this other thing. I think it helps the kids know what to produce. (Teacher J)

When I'm grading their oral presentations, I do a speech for them. And then that way when they're writing, they know what I expect. And I had them take out the scoring guideline. And I go over each part with them and say, "This is what I'm looking for when you get up there to do your speech." And you just let them know all the time. And I try to explain in easy laymen's terms. Okay, that's just a

big word for this. That's all this means. And they're like, "Oh, okay." So, you know, that's it. (Teacher G)

Scoring guides also enable teachers to explain the grading process to parents.

While the teachers cite many useful elements of the scoring guidelines, it is essential to note that they do not directly address the quality of the work that students produce. The scoring guidelines provide a point system for assessment that, too often we think, focuses teachers and students on the presence of components rather than on their quality. Scoring guidelines are not rubrics. They do not describe what work of different quality looks like and the level of work that is required to achieve a standard. Scoring guidelines could be used in the process of assessing quality if exemplars of quality work were available as models. Our data suggest that they are not currently used this way by many of the middle school teachers in our sample.

Using Alternative Assessments. When teachers in CCISD talk about alternative assessment they are talking about using strategies other than formal tests to determine whether students pass a standard. Over the last few years, they report using more of these alternative modes of assessment, a significant step forward in standards implementation. However, some of the alternative modes of assessment that teachers report using may not reflect the depth of students' understanding of academic content. For example, we heard teachers talk about using posters, mobiles, models, scrapbooks, games and timelines. Although we saw only a few samples of each of these kinds of assessments, none required students to demonstrate deep understanding. Rather, they encouraged students to demonstrate mastery of facts about a particular topic.

Some teachers in our sample expressed their concern with alternative assessments and, in response to not knowing how to make them of high quality, said they are returning to formal tests.

I know the kids have fun doing the construction paper and the glue and the scissors and the drawing and the matching pictures and I know they like doing that, but I sometimes ask myself, "Well, is this enough?" You know, "Is this rigorous enough?" ...I want them to know the material. And that's why I also give them formal tests. ...I don't want them to just think that it's a breeze. I don't want them to just think that it's easy, easy, baby stuff. I want them to understand that, you have to open a book, you have to do some studying, some review, some brief essay type questions, things like that. The projects by themselves would seem to be not enough. (Teacher M)

Others described ways in which they are working with colleagues to develop alternative assessments that reflect student understanding of the academic content.

We're working on assessment tools [for the final products]... I'm working with other 6th grade teachers and we've met twice. And we take each of the standards and then we go back and we look at assessment tools that we could use... We're

giving [teachers] different options. Like instead of giving them a paper/pencil test, like for the graphs and everything, they could use an activity where they go out and actually do the interviewing [to collect the data they will graph]. ...And also what we're including on that list are some other activities to use before the assessment. It's not just, here's the assessment, go out and teach it. We're providing, a list of materials... It's very good. I mean, it gives you, I need to start here and this is where I'm going to go. Instead of just here's the test, that type of thing. And that's what it's been before. (Teacher N)

The opportunity to participate collaboratively is an important part of the work that this teacher describes. Collaboration has the potential to create consensus about quality among a group of teachers. Teachers who work on curriculum writing committees also have an opportunity to develop collaboratively agreement about content, quality and assessment standards. As the following teacher notes, CCISD is still in the early stages of developing and implementing standards. As a result, there is still important curriculum and assessment development work to be done.

I think sometimes there's still an inconsistency in [the work that teachers require] because the standards have not been around for a long, long period of time. And I think we're coming together on that. In these curriculum writing meetings, it's like, well, what do you expect with this standard and what do you expect with this standard? And I do think there are still some inconsistencies that have to be worked out. You know, I might really go real in-depth with one particular standard, someone else may not and yet go real in-depth with another one. I think we all see the importance of pulling that together and making sure that the curriculum and the expectation is consistent within the district and that's what we're working toward. (Teacher O)

It is not easy to design curriculum and alternative assessments that incorporate knowledge of facts, higher order thinking, opportunities for creativity, and the occasion to demonstrate deep knowledge of content. So, it is not surprising that teachers who attempt to develop alternative assessments on their own may not always achieve satisfactory results. We think it would be helpful for many teachers to have opportunities, like the ones described above, in which they could learn how to create alternative assessments that can be used as indicators for passing a standard.³ Such a process not only enables the creation of high level tasks, it presents an environment in which teachers could grapple with conceptions of what a quality product would have to include.

³We stress here the use of alternative assessments for assessing performance standards. While we think the collaborative development of such assessments is a priority, we note that alternative assessments can also be part of a teacher's strategy for learning what students do and do not understand during instruction and prior to demonstrating achievement of standards. This is the distinction between a "coaching" and a "scoring" rubric that Spence Rogers made at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference.

Using Tests to Assess Achievement of the Standards. Teachers who use teacher-made tests to assess student achievement of a performance standard, and this is particularly prevalent in math, report that there are considerable differences in the difficulty or ease of the tests. They are concerned that passing the standard in one class does not indicate the same level of work that passing the standard in another class would indicate. A few teachers note that this problem was built into the design of standards implementation.

That happened in the beginning [as a result of] giving the teacher the autonomy to present these standards to her kids where the kids are. And that's something I think a lot of teachers fought very hard for. You're going to have some teachers out there that will cop out and test down. But I think probably across the district, those are pretty few. I think most teachers are going to work pretty hard with their kids. I mean, I hope-- I want to think that. (Teacher P)

Certainly, teachers need to have the autonomy to teach in ways appropriate to their students. However, it sounds as if there has not been sufficient discussion of the fact that students should be expected to meet the same standard at the end of the teaching cycle. Teachers report that the current system permits wide variation in assessment/testing practices.

If they have passed all of the standards, no matter what their grades are on the report card, they make a 70. If they have not passed all the standards, no matter what their grades are on the report card, they make a 69. ...Now, of course, this is very strange to me considering we're talking about academic standards, yet we do not have a standard test for every particular standard. We don't have a standardized test, a districtwide test... Where's the standards? ...And you know, just as well as I do, that there are going to be people that will try and make the test easier in order to-- ...And I mean, I can't blame them in a way, but I don't think that's fair to the children. (Teacher Q)

I think the way the standards are written, that you can water down the test to make sure that you get 100 percent to pass. ...But I can see where that could be a concern... They've given us some examples for the performance standards, but it's up to us to decide if we want to use that test or to make up our own. ...We can all write a test that's very easy, where everyone passes the first time. I talk to teachers where they go, "Oh, no, I had 100 percent pass the first time." Well, to me, that's kind of, how hard was the test? You don't want to make it so difficult that they can't pass, but you want a true assessment of what they know and do they really know it. And that's my concern. (Teacher N)

I think, from the math department, I think our speculation was that it would be more difficult than what it is. I have in my classes, many, many students who make a 100. To me, that says these are too easy. And also I know that across the district, since we have no consistency in the district at all about what a test question should look like for any given performance standard. I've seen tests

from other schools. Some of them are more difficult, some of them are extremely easy. And so I've been concerned just on my own, that the tests I use are not difficult enough, are not challenging these students. And I'm thinking of, with the staff, sitting down and saying, "Hey, is this true for all of us? And do we need to increase its difficulty level, making it more challenging?" And that has been a concern of mine. Especially when it's 50 percent of their grade. (Teacher R)

As with the discussion of alternative assessments, we heard of efforts among teachers and vertical teams to create more consistency in tests designed to assess students knowledge of a standard. This is a sign of progress.

[The performance standard test is] something that our vertical team here in Corpus, they develop all of them. So we don't-- I mean, we have input into it as well. It's not just one teacher coming up with a test. We try to come up with a-- not the standard test, you know, that everyone gives, but as a suggestion. (Teacher I)

Summary: Scoring Guidelines, Alternative Assessments and Tests. Taken together, teachers' comments about using scoring guidelines, alternative assessment and tests strongly suggest that these approaches to assessing student work do not yet reflect an agreed-upon standard of quality at least in part because teachers have maintained autonomy for developing their own criteria for passing a standard. The scoring guidelines provide them with a way to distribute points to a product; they do not define the depth, breadth or quality of the product that is scored. As yet, they are not in line with the implementation of standards-based reform.

There are examples, however, of how some teachers participate in work that could lead to an analysis of quality and consensus about the level of work that should be achieved to pass a standard. Teachers' work on curriculum and assessment writing teams is a good step in this direction as are efforts within vertical teams to develop tests. We are aware that the district, over the long haul, intends to address the quality of student work. There are indications from our data that the time is ripe now to turn to this work.

Performance Standards as Components of Student Learning. Our data reveal three other ways in which standards implementation and the quality of student work are issues. First, some teachers still give considerable credit to students for work that demonstrates growth even if that work does not represent high level achievement. Second, teachers and administrators worry that performance standards are perceived as "events" rather than as on-going aspects of teaching and learning. And, third, teachers struggle with the question of how many times a student should be able to attempt to pass a performance standard within the regular school year. These three issues are interrelated and important. Teachers' difficulties in dealing with them suggest that not everyone, as yet, has fully understood some of the basics of standards-based reform.

1. Grading on the Basis of Growth and Effort. In standards-based reform, student progress and achievement must be assessed against agreed-upon standards and not as a function of

assumptions about ability or the extent to which work represents a mix of growth, effort and ability. Some teachers in our sample, however, have not yet adopted this approach to assessment as the following comments reveal.

[This piece of work is] good enough for an A because all I'm trying to get them to do is remember the important dates.... **Interviewer looking at another example: Now this one has more details, in the drawings. I think there's not just detail, but it's more finely done. And longer. So this would have also gotten an A?** Yes. And simply because they're two different students and I guess what I'm trying to say is I give depending on what they're able, capable of doing. (Teacher D)

...the effort behind it counts a lot here. To me, if they make an effort, they're doing the best they can. To me that's trying to learn and pass. I do give them a grade. A numerical grade... Like if I ask them to draw a turtle, label it, color it, and so forth. I more or less tell them, "Okay, this is what you need to do. There's five things: color, label, print, and so on. Just follow all those steps and then try to be organized and neat." Then what I do is I place them in three categories. Of course none of them failing. The better ones will get a 90 or better, 80 in the middle, and then the ones that really didn't make an effort, I give them a 70, 75.... **Interviewer: What does a child have to do to get a report card grade of an A, for example, in your class?** ...Basically just the effort behind it. I mean, if they're going to try to make an A, they're going to make an A in my class as far as doing all the work. Not missing any assignments. Being on time with their assignments, not being late. (Teacher S)

While we understand teachers' rationale for these grading practices, we think they are a threat to the implementation of standards reform especially for those children most in need of the opportunity to achieve at high standards. Teachers who work with students who are far below grade level, however, face a real dilemma. They cannot be expected to use standards which result in widespread failure in the face of student effort and growth. Under such circumstances, students would be highly demoralized by the result of their hard work. On the other hand, teachers cannot maintain traditional practices that dilute the meaning of passing performance standards because this denies students sufficient opportunities to learn.

CCISD would do well to consider how to help teachers work with students who have not achieved well at the elementary school level, but have been promoted to middle school. Such attention is necessary to insure that by the end of middle school all students are truly achieving at standard. The district has evidence from the implementation of Algebra for All that raising expectations and providing good instruction can lead students to do work at levels much higher than they or their teachers ever expected.

2. Performance Standards as One-Time Events. A number of teachers and administrators at the school and district level have voiced concern that performance standards are construed by

teachers and students as events, as one-time demonstrations of achievement. They worry that the idea of continuous growth and improvement is getting lost in the process of implementing performance standards. They wonder how to encourage students to work at higher levels when, in the organization of standards reform, they need only achieve a standard once during the school year as this teacher explains.

It's very hard to say that [performance standards are] a fair evaluation of the kids, and I'm just as guilty of this as the next guy. I teach persuasive writing, they write a persuasive paper, they do it one time, they pass or fail that performance standard. Instead of doing persuasive writing the whole year and seeing their progress. You know, ideally, it would be better to do it and like to watch their growth, to do portfolios or whatever. But that's so much trouble and so hard to do when you have 90 kids. (Teacher T)

They also wonder how to get students to take seriously work other than the performance standards when, in the long run, it is only the performance standards that can keep them from being promoted.

I think some teachers feel that when they're working on prerequisite skills leading towards the actual product, that there's still [concern about] whether the kids really take it seriously if it's not a product. I'm sensing that some teachers are feeling, okay, this is the product and it's still an event. And we don't want to make it an event. We want to make the whole quality issue and the expectation to be flowing through everyday, you know, rather than, okay, this is the product and we expect it when you do the assessment. So that's something, again, that we still have a long way to go with. (Principal C)

With the kids, it's gotten to where if they think it isn't a standard, they'll want to know. And they'll word it like this, "Now how important is this?" Because they know 50 percent of the grade is for the standards. ...So they're always asking me, "Now which one of those [categories] is this assignment in?" At first I'll say, "You do it and then I'll tell you." We're going to have to watch that a little bit. That they not think that only it has to be a performance standard [to be taken seriously]. Because it's not, you know, an event, so to speak. All these prerequisites lead into that [performance standard]. (Teacher A)

We heard many comments similar to these during our spring school visits and when observing at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference. They suggest that the occasion for demonstrating and measuring achievement has become disconnected from learning in the minds of, at least, some students. Students recognize the importance of passing the standard because the standard "counts." The CCISD video shown during the Leadership Conference demonstrated that students equate standards with important tests of their knowledge.

What factors seem to be leading to the situation in which the performance standards become events? First, the orientation to performance standards as events may develop because teachers see themselves as having to move very quickly in order to “cover” or “get to” all of the standards. They must get to them because students cannot pass for the year without having successfully completed them. Given this pressure, teachers and students may have come to construe the performance standards as things to “check off” as complete. There are teachers and administrators who say that the pressure to cover a great deal of material diminishes the possibility of teaching and assessing in high quality ways.

Here are the performance standards associated with science. And we work feverishly. So last year I said, “You’ve got to get them as far as you can.” That’s always true, but this year, we’ve got [more to cover]. And sometimes I think maybe you lose quality. Maybe, because you’re trying to go so fast, you don’t have time to stop and do a real quality product. And so that could be a drawback.
(Principal B)

Second, students are required to pass the performance standard with a score of 70. This score does not necessarily demonstrate high quality work; it represents the result of using a scoring guide with a designated pass score on a teacher-developed product, as we discussed earlier. If students are successful in scoring a 70, they need never return to the particular standard again during that school year. This organization of standards implementation, we think, adds to the feeling of doing a standard as an event. It is an event in the same way that an end-of-term test was an event before the implementation of standards reform. Once a student passed the term exam on the Civil War, for example, the student would likely never have to demonstrate knowledge of the war during the rest of the course (unless the course included a cumulative final examination). Our data suggest that performance standards are, to some extent, a new version of a final exam that requires a passing grade.

Third, the structure of report cards adds to the tendency to see performance standards as events. Passing a standard is reported only once. If a student passes the standard the first time, yet demonstrates growth later in the year on that same standard, the report card does not reflect such further achievement. In other words, students are not recognized in this formal document for growth in achievement of standards. There is one exception to this general statement. Students who fail a standard the first time have the opportunity to revisit the material, learn it at a higher level and then re-take the performance standard.

All of these factors, we think, contribute to the situation in which both teachers and students construe performance standards as events and as events in which a pass score, rather than achievement of standards, is the goal. Performance standards do not yet quite reflect the paradigm of standards reform.

3. *Time as a Factor in Completing Performance Standards.* In addition to teachers’ concern that the time pressure associated with covering standards may lead to the acceptance of work that is not of sufficiently high quality and may contribute to the perception of performance standards

as events, teachers and administrators are concerned about time in another way. They wonder how to develop a **fair** approach to letting students who fail a standard the first time continue to work on achieving a passing score. The question arises because such students, in effect, have more elapsed time in which to pass the standard than did those who passed the first time.

We heard about two ways in which this issue of time raised problems. The first had to do with the score that a student could achieve when re-taking the standard. Teachers did not want students to be able to get a very high score and, as we understand it, during the 1997-1998 school year, the highest grade permitted was a 70 regardless of the actual score that the student achieved. (During the coming year, the grade may be no higher than an 85.)

This issue is important to teachers because most say that students who fail to pass a standard fail because they had poor attendance and/or chose not to do the required work.

The only time that a kid, I believe, will fail the performance standard is if he just rebels against it, decides he wants to fail... That's the only way I see kids failing those things. (Teacher U)

Few teachers in our sample said that students failed because they worked hard but did not understand the material. Assuming that this finding is correct, teachers do not want to reward students who neglected their school work.

The second concern focused on the elapsed time during which students could re-take the standard -- during the next six week period, during the semester, during the year -- and on the number of attempts the student could have before having to attend summer school.

These issues of time and fairness arise because children who pass the first time do not have an opportunity to raise their scores. Teachers wonder what is fair to the children who did their work on time, passed with a grade of 70 or higher and must keep the score they got.⁴ Most of the teachers in our sample want to address this problem with uniform, district guidelines about repeating standards and with maximum scores, as noted above.

It needs to be uniform. It doesn't need to deviate between schools. In other words, if you get two chances in classes, you get four chances in tutoring and you get three Saturday schools or whatever that criteria is for that, that needs to be a districtwide thing. Not vacillating between schools and that's what it is now... that's not fair. ...I see a lot of disparity, a lot of, you know... The school board needs to sit down, look at this, and say, "Okay, for this district, this is the criteria for meeting standards." (Teacher P)

⁴This issue was discussed at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference by some of the individual school teams we observed. At least one school decided that, to be fair, it would allow all students to work toward improving their pass score if they chose to do so. We want to note that the discussion focused on fairness about grading; it was not about enabling students to achieve at agreed-upon high levels of achievement.

However, teachers also recognize the implications of taking this route, especially of limiting the number of times a student can attempt to pass the standard during the school year.

We normally tell them they have two chances, but we give them till the very end of the semester. I mean, we give them every chance possible. And the reason we tell them two is because if we don't, they'll come back and they'll try to retake every [other day]. Instead of trying to pass it and either study for it or really actually turn in a product that's passing. I mean, they may come like five or six times just to see if we'll pass them, just to see if we have pity on them or whatever. We say twice, but really we say twice and it's written on twice, but an unwritten rule that we have - and I don't know whether that's appropriate or not - but we give them as many chances as we can, really. But we just don't want like 50 kids coming in the last week of school and trying to make up a performance standard. That's why we say two. (Teacher H)

We think the issue of how much time to allow for students to pass a standard raises important questions about standards implementation. The issue is connected to the perception of performance standards as events that occur at a time and place and then are over. It is connected to the traditional idea that all students must complete learning a body of material in a fixed period of time and then pass an examination on the material. Neither of these ideas meshes well with the implementation of standards. At the moment, however, they are the way in which many teachers and administrators think about implementing performance standards.

At the same time, we recognize the frustration of teachers who must deal with students who do not do assigned work and may be absent frequently. They want to motivate such students to be more attentive to school work. They do not want to reward their indifference with extended opportunities to try again. They do not want students who complete their work on time to feel that they are penalized for adhering to the teacher's timetable.

Resolution of the issues associated with time will likely come as the district further shifts its orientation away from traditional assessment practices.

Summary: Issues of Quality and Consistency. The data we presented in this section reveal the following:

- C The current scoring guidelines address the components of products but they do not address the quality of students' work. As a scoring strategy, they may lead teachers away from quality work by emphasizing the parts and minimizing the whole of the product.
- C Teachers and principals are unclear about the characteristics of a good assessment, especially when the assessment is other than a traditional test. Teachers, especially, need examples of good tests and good alternative assessments. They need help exploring the features of these assessments so that they can fully articulate what makes them strong assessment instruments.

- C At the moment, teachers and principals report that, with a few exceptions, there is no consistency in the difficulty of assessments -- tests or alternatives -- from one class or school to another. In light of the high stakes attached to passing the standards, this situation is problematic. Teachers are quite right to desire some standardization with respect to the difficulty of performance standards and the criteria by which they are scored.
- C Teachers and principals are unclear about what quality work in their content areas and grade levels looks like. They do not know what “good enough” work looks like and they are troubled by this condition. We think this situation occurs because CCISD has not yet begun the work of connecting exemplars of student work at different levels of quality with the performance standards.

Finally, we want to note that the pass score of 70 does not reflect a high standard of achievement. It is not connected to rubrics and exemplars of student work. It is not, fundamentally, a standards-based approach to assessing. Rather, it is a traditional cut-score akin to the 70 that is required on TAAS. However, a TAAS score of 70 percent equivalent represents minimum expectations. CCISD’s pass rates on TAAS continue to increase, and the district has reason to be proud of this accomplishment. Administrators, teachers and students have worked hard to gain increased scores. Having come so far in achieving the minimum, CCISD now has the opportunity to ratchet up its educational standards by raising the minimum required to pass performance standards. The district’s achievements to date suggest that it is capable of such an enterprise.

III. SAFETY NET STRATEGIES FOR FAILING STUDENTS

CCISD central office administrators, principals, and teachers have been experimenting with safety net approaches for several years. They have been learning from their efforts and continue to develop new strategies in light of what they learn. Currently, the district’s middle schools employ a variety of intervention strategies to help students who fail performance standards or who take a longer time than the majority of the class to complete them. On each campus, teachers provide structured time for tutoring students or allowing them to work independently, but with supervision, on projects.

The strategies, called Success for All Students (SAS), take place during the school day, before and after school, and on Saturdays. Students who still fail to achieve all their performance standards are required to sign up for summer school (a safety net we do not discuss in this report). This past year, some schools incorporated a period for tutoring into the school day, calling it the SAS Period. During the 1998-1999 school year, CCISD will allocate funds for each school to implement a Zero Period, an extra period before or after school, which will allow students who have failed or who are overage for their grade to work on past requirements. These safety net strategies demonstrate teachers’ and administrators’ commitment to helping children pass the performance standards; they represent a true commitment to standards reform.

We briefly focus next on four of the safety net strategies used in the schools: before- and after-school tutoring, Saturday School, SAS period, and the new Zero Period which will be implemented starting this fall.

Before- and After-School Tutoring

Each school has district funds with which to support students through before- and after-school tutoring sessions. Teachers described tutoring as a means for providing one-on-one attention to low achieving students, and as a way to provide extra time and support for students to complete standards.

[Completing a performance standard is [just a matter of organizational problems with some of them. So all of a sudden when they're finally due, then you have the kids that [say], "Well, I've lost this one" and "I don't have that one." And, "Well, I've got it, but I still don't have it in order yet." You know, so you do have a lot come before and after school to work with you and that's fine. (Teacher V)

We want to note, again, that teachers stress non-academic factors as the reason for failing standards. Many suggest that they use tutoring time to help students organize their work and to enable them to have uninterrupted time in which to complete the standards.

Saturday School

Schools developed Saturday morning programs as another opportunity for students to make up performance standards.⁵

...if you need to make up a performance standard, you need to show up to Saturday school... So it might be they're already tried twice to take it or once or maybe they've never taken it and they want to just take it. You know, re-take it for the first time! They have to show up for Saturday school. (Teacher H)

The campuses have taken steps to make Saturday School sessions accessible as well as helpful. At least one of the schools in our sample sends home postcards to parents identifying the standards their child needs to make up and the dates of the Saturday School sessions available. Despite this and other efforts to engage parents and their children, teachers report that the students who need most to be at Saturday School are the ones who do not show up.

Teachers recognize the value of providing this three-hour block of time for students, but they prefer additional learning opportunities that occur within the school day or before or after it. In part, this is because teachers, themselves, prefer not to work on Saturdays. And, it is because of the Saturday school attendance problems.

SAS Period

The SAS period was designed to minimize the need for after school tutoring and Saturday School. It is an effort to create time within the school day to help students who are having difficulty with the standards. SAS periods occur during the school day when teachers use their planning periods to pull students out of their regularly scheduled classes to work on standards. As a strategy, it aims to prevent failure, as this central office administrator noted.

It's an effort to catch the kids right when it's happening instead of waiting... I mean, if I'm struggling right now-- and maybe I don't want to come before school or after school or maybe I can't. Maybe it's not an option because of my family situation. And maybe I can't come on Saturday either. The idea is [to] build in a tutorial period in the school day to help those students and keep them from getting so far behind that they end up failing. Maybe just that extra class every day will keep me up with my math class or my science class or whatever it is. That's the SAS strategy... And it makes sense to me. I'm anxious to see what it will do. You know, I would be thrilled to death if we never had summer school. Wouldn't it be

⁵While we heard that some Saturday school sessions are set aside to provide TAAS preparation, Saturday School is most often described as a time for students to re-do or "re-take" a performance standard.

wonderful if we didn't have to have it? Or if it would be just a limited, smaller number of kids that we could really, really, really work with. (Administrator B)

To implement SAS, some teachers work with their team colleagues to coordinate the best times for students to miss a core content class. Others arrange to pull students from their electives.

Teachers did raise concerns related to pulling students from core content classes. Some worry that, for example, when students are pulled out of English to work on a math standard, they may miss the standards that are being taught in English. Others, however, reported that the opportunity to work individually with a student makes up for the time they miss from class.

...any one-on-one work that they can do with a student or extra time that they can pull somewhere to spend with a student is very much needed. If a student's behind in an area, it makes it doubly hard [however] because they miss even more when they're out of the classroom. But at the same time, if you can pull that student out individually and work on a one-on-one tutoring situation or even just two or three students, there's so much that can be valuable time in that and it kind of makes up for it. (Teacher W)

SAS requires coordination among teachers. It works best, of course, when the team is committed to the required collaboration.

Teachers and principals like the in-school approach to supporting the least motivated and most at-risk students. They also prefer to help students pass the standards in the first place so that they will not have to re-take them. For the 1998-1999 school year, the district has organized another safety net strategy that is in-school and which minimizes the need for students to miss core content classes or electives.

Zero Period

Zero Period is a strategy to enable students who have failed or who are overage to be conditionally promoted. The terms of their promotion include attending Zero Period during the first half of the school year -- an hour everyday before or after school -- until they have completed the standards that they failed. Once completed, students are officially promoted. If they do not complete the standards by the end of the semester, they are returned to their previous grade's classes. CCISD will provide the funds with which to pay two teachers to staff the Zero Period. It will be up to the schools to decide how Zero Period will be run; initial thinking is that teachers will focus on reading and math.⁶

⁶Schools will have the opportunity to design their own approach to Zero Period. We look forward to learning how they choose staff members for the positions and how they approach the needs of students who have failed subjects other than those the Zero Period teachers teach.

The idea [behind Zero Period] is... the policy says that if you fail a standard, you fail the course. And if you fail the course, you fail for the year. Policy says you have to pass all the performance standards to be promoted... If you go to summer school, you take those, you master them, and you come back and then you'll be promoted. There are cases where the student fails those three and he doesn't go to summer school because mom says, "Okay, I'll teach you a thing or two. You'll just have to repeat." Well, we bring the student back and in August, let's say he's a 6th grader. We place him in 7th grade until he masters the standards and then we officially place him [there]. (Principal A)

While the priority will be to enroll students who have already failed a grade, it may be possible for schools to enroll students who are in danger of failing and need extra tutoring, if the school has space in the Zero Period class. The Zero Period is envisioned to have the double role of creating an in-school opportunity for students to make up their work, while at the same time acting as an incentive for them to finish as quickly as possible: as soon as they finish, they will be officially promoted into the next grade.

Summary: Safety Net Strategies.

CCISD and the individual schools are putting forth substantial efforts to provide support to students who are in danger of failing or who have failed one or more standards. The safety net strategies are varied and reflect a commitment to continually refining ways to work with students during the times that they are most available.

Safety net strategies, for the most part, reflect the belief that students fail standards because they do not do the work, not because they do not understand the material. Therefore, schools provide students with supervised time. Safety net strategies, we were told, are not designed fundamentally to provide students with new instruction, although this may sometimes occur.

If it is correct that students need time more than they need instruction to successfully complete standards, we think the finding raises important questions about the level and quality of work that students are being asked to produce. If the work is not too difficult for any students, we wonder if it is difficult enough for many of them. We wonder whether the academic standards are sufficiently challenging to the middle school students of CCISD. We imagine that this finding is supported by the data we presented earlier that a) the quality of work needed to pass a standard varied considerably from campus to campus and, perhaps, classroom to classroom, and b) because of the lack of consistency, too much work was acceptable at low quality levels.

If these findings are correct, CCISD is in a strong position to propose increasing the quality of work it expects its students to demonstrate. If the district does this, and provides the needed support as it has done with implementing Algebra for All, no doubt students and teachers will rise to the higher standards.

However, if the district does increase the level and quality of work that students must produce, it is likely that some of them will have difficulty mastering the material for reasons other than time. Some will need additional instruction; some may need alternative ways of learning; and some will need more time because the content is challenging and will take them longer to master. Some students will need safety net strategies that provide them with additional instruction as well as with additional time. They will need teachers with appropriate content knowledge to help them learn and pass the standards. This will provide CCISD with new challenges.

We heard a few examples of how safety net strategies can be settings for additional and alternative instruction. For example, one administrator reported that “we target kids that have various weaknesses and we literally invite them to come [to Saturday School] for extra instruction...” (Principal D) In this school, the SAS period also focused on specific, targeted instruction.

Let's say I'm a math teacher. If you're in my class and you're having problems,... I write you a pass saying that you need to come during my SAS period... If I know you're having trouble in a particular area, then I'll target that. We do have situations where the child will come in and say, "Sir, I didn't understand this too well and, you know, can you re-explain it?" And so-- we do a lot of re-teaching one on one. (Principal D)

This administrator stresses that periods set aside for remedial help can be used for instruction for students who are failing and for students who are not failing but want additional help. As yet, however, not all teachers think of using tutorial or other time in this way.

Some of our teachers, instead of tutoring on a regular basis to try to keep up and avoid problems at the end of the six weeks, traditionally it's kind of, “Well, here comes the end of the six weeks and you're missing this much work. Now, you need to come in and let's start picking it up.” I would like to see tutoring done more consistently throughout rather than at the end of critical periods, if you will. [On the other hand] there are some teachers that use tutoring religiously. I mean, even if a child is like in the low 70s and they're still passing, the teacher will bring them in and say, "Hey, I want you to improve and let's get you higher." But others just kind of wait. (Principal D)

CCISD has in place safety nets that could support the implementation of higher standards. Those that occur during the school day and enable teachers to work with their own students, for example in tutoring sessions, offer great promise. In addition, we imagine that the district's teachers and administrators could creatively develop new strategies if the quality of the work demanded of students is raised.

IV. THE SUPERINTENDENT'S LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

The Superintendent's Leadership Conference was called, "Putting the Pieces Together: Standards-Based Reform." The cover page pictured a red, white, and blue schoolhouse whose foundation was identified as "Academic Standards." The top of the chimney was called "Assessment." In between these two structural features, from the foundation up, were the walls of the house which were called "research on superior schools, vision, mission and belief, campus action plan." The roof was professionalism and the bottom of the chimney, immediately below "assessment" was "grading guidelines." The house was situated in a "neighborhood" of "Rules, Responsibilities, and Respect." (A copy of this page is attached as Appendix B.)

The conference had an up-beat, can-do feeling from start to finish. Administrators and teachers who spoke to the entire assembly emphasized the positive impact of what they had accomplished to date and their potential to do much more. They stressed the importance of team-work in accomplishing their goals. Speakers reminded the group that they had the capacity and the responsibility to take the conference's message back to their colleagues.

Dr. Saavedra, Superintendent of Schools, made the first formal presentation in which he introduced CCISD's new 3-R Discipline Program. The program,

...commits to ensuring that district campuses will be safe, secure, and violence free places where all students can learn and achieve to their fullest potential. Therefore, drugs, weapons, profanity, verbal abuse, offensive physical contact, and assaults will not be tolerated. Students or adults who engage in these behaviors must accept the consequences that are associated with this behavior. (Conference Notebook, Section 4, p. 19)

The 3-R Discipline Program includes three basic beliefs:

- (1) All students and adults will follow the discipline rules.
- (2) All students and adults will assume responsibility for making campuses safe, secure and drug-free environments.
- (3) All students and adults will show respect for self and others. This applies to conduct in the classroom, hallways, cafeteria, gym, on the school grounds, and behavior at all school-sponsored events---during, before and after school. (Conference Notebook, Section 4, p. 19)

Dr. Saavedra's presentation of the Discipline Program was received with great enthusiasm. The discussions we heard in breakout sessions later in the day confirmed that teachers and administrators looked forward to bringing the new policy back to their schools and working with their colleagues, with students and with parents to implement it. School teams suggested that the program provides them with the support they need to create appropriate campus environments for teaching and learning.

Following Dr. Saavedra, Dr. Lanier-Lerma introduced the conference theme: “Putting the Pieces Together.” The pieces were identified as: creating a warm, nurturing, safe environment in the schools; professionalism; academic standards; grading guidelines; and, interlocking with the other four pieces, assessment -- self assessment, school assessment and the assessment of student work. The purpose of the conference was for all participants to internalize how the pieces of reform fit together. The process for accomplishing this purpose, according to Dr. Lanier-Lerma, was reflection:

...to have people reflect and assess themselves, their school, and think in terms of assessing students. We were actually laying the groundwork for moving into a deep, a deeper probing of what assessment is. And our plans are to continue the dialog that was established at the conference.

By 9:45, school teams were in breakout rooms to,

reflect on the purposes of their school campuses, using research and data about school and teaching as a profession. The teams will describe and rate their schools against themes that research states should be present to ensure high standards. Focus sheets and research reports will be used by campus teams to analyze where they are, where they are going, where they want to be, how they are going to get there, and what their vision is for the future.

The research as well as the poll results in the article *Americans' Views on Standards* include, as a major priority, school environment that is warm, caring, safe and secure. (Taken from the Table of Contents for the conference. The research data and the self-assessment sheets are attached as Appendix C.)

In order to facilitate the work of the school teams, principals had participated in a day-long training session the previous week. In that training, they learned about the theme of the conference, the strategies and goals for the break-out sessions, and how to facilitate conversations among their team members that stayed focused on the topic. The middle school teams we observed included principals, assistant principals, several key teachers and at least one counselor. Principals appeared well-prepared to fulfill their roles as facilitators. Needless to say, principals adapted the conference focus to the needs and issues pertinent to their campuses.

Although the conversations we observed varied from school to school, all of them focused on the designated topics. We observed teams discussing how to present the 3-R Discipline Program to their colleagues and how to get buy-in for consistent and uniform implementation. They discussed how principals and teachers could demonstrate commitment to the policy by including it in their campus action plans. We observed teams trying to use the self-assessment instrument to identify the school's strengths and areas in need of improvement. And, we saw teams helping new principals to understand the culture and climate of schools they had just begun to lead.

During the afternoon breakout groups, we heard teams discussing the district's grading guidelines in order to develop a campus grading policy. Teams seemed quite pleased with the guidelines which, they felt, gave them parameters within which to work while providing consistency across the district. The teachers we heard seemed pleased with the decision to compute report card grades using performance standards as 50 percent of the grade, monitoring grades (homework, quizzes, participation, for example) and major grades (tests) each as 25 percent of the grade.

One of the school teams we observed struggled with issues associated with the number of tries a student could have to pass a standard. Given that a) the highest score a student can get after failing a standard is now an 85 for that standard, and b) a score of 70 is passing for all students, some teachers felt that the new system penalized those who had passed with a seventy.⁷ They were grappling with the extent to which they should allow all students to work toward a higher score once they had passed the standard.

Although this discussion was not complete when we finished observing, we think it raises interesting questions about fairness and about quality. The discussion focused on questions of fairness and students' opportunities to get a higher grade. We think the discussion could easily be channeled into one that considers, as well, strategies for improving the quality of student work in the context of standards reform.

The second day of the conference shifted participants' attention to issues of assessment. Spence Rogers, the guest speaker, delivered an informative and engaging talk entitled "Practical Approaches to Assessment and Evaluation to Increase Motivation, Achievement, and Professionalism." Rogers' presentation strategy included modeling practical hints that teachers could use immediately, using humor to make significant points, and referring to research to support his position. The talk provided CCISD educators with much food for thought.

From our perspective, one key point for CCISD was Rogers' distinction between assessment for scoring/evaluation and assessment for improving teaching and learning. He strongly made the point that assessment for scoring, although it is necessary, will never improve teaching and learning. In addition, he offered the finding that grades were tremendously de-motivating for students other than those who achieved "As." Grades also emphasize the end of learning. Assessment used for learning, in contrast, helps teachers realize what students do and do not understand. Used well, it can help teachers figure out what else to teach and how to teach in different ways so that students have a better opportunity to learn. It can help students understand clearly what they do and do not know. With this in mind, Rogers talked about the importance of having coaching as well as scoring rubrics.⁸ Coaching rubrics are for assessment that will guide

⁷Schools can decide to allow students to achieve a lower grade than 85; they cannot give them a higher grade.

⁸We want to emphasize the use of the word "rubric" rather than scoring guide. Rogers point was that teachers need to provide students with exemplars of work that match rubric scores at

new teaching and learning. Rogers also talked about and demonstrated how students can be effectively engaged in developing rubrics for their work.

Rogers offered a strong introduction to the topic of assessment; he was a fine speaker for the conference. However, we noted that in the afternoon breakout groups, no school team that we observed sustained a conversation about the content of his presentation. Teams that began to consider the list of nine questions quickly returned to issues associated with the district's grading guidelines. The conversations, which were often enthusiastic, hardly touched on the themes of the morning's presentation. We think this is understandable. The ideas Spence Rogers presented were fundamentally different than the ideas that undergird assessment in CCISD. As such, they were interesting to school teams, but, for the most part, not applicable to their immediate goals. Teachers and principals focus on scoring; they do not yet talk about assessment.

Dr. Lanier-Lerma considered Rogers' presentation to be the introduction to the topic of assessment and to a longer range strategy to increase the quality of student work in CCISD. From her perspective, the conference met its goals because participants engaged in important, reflective work related to all aspects of standards implementation. In addition, the conference began a process designed to lead the district to more sophisticated assessment practices and to higher quality student work. In Dr. Lanier-Lerma's words:

[We want to] have the principals work with their staffs to discuss assessment, particularly the definition he gave, look at the examples that he gave, and to come up with a philosophy, a school philosophy, of assessment and evaluation. ...At the same time, we'll have a district committee that will be dialoging, looking at the whole issue of assessment and evaluation. And this committee will develop also a working philosophy of assessment. We'll establish the fact that the whole purpose is to take input from all the campuses, as well as the districtwide committee, and to come up with a district philosophy on assessment and evaluation, which will be approved by the Board. So as we work at the district level with the district committee that involves all kinds of stake holders, campuses will be continuing discussions. And they in turn will submit their thinking, relative to what assessment and evaluation should be on their campuses to the district committee, which in turn will take all that input, put it together, and come up with a district philosophy.

Although the Superintendent's Leadership Conference presented school teams with important information about assessment, broadly construed, we left the conference thinking that school teams were not yet sufficiently prepared to share these ideas with their colleagues. The ideas were new to most team members. Although they had time to discuss the ideas at the conference, the ideas were too new to most participants to enable a deep discussion. Teachers and principals

different levels of achievement. The rubric and the exemplars, together, enable students and teachers to be clear about the kind of work that is desirable.

could not have had sufficient time to reflect on them or consider their implications for practice. They could not have had the opportunity to consider how the ideas meshed and clashed with current district assessment policies and practices. Nonetheless, we think that the Leadership Conference was a good introduction to an essential topic.

Dr. Lanier-Lerma has outlined a strong strategy for achieving the goals of enhancing assessment for teaching and learning and improving the quality of student work in the process. However, the plan to address assessment on campuses this year seems unlikely to include issues of quality. This is because a) quality was not the focus of the Leadership Conference, and b) for a number of reasons, the district is reluctant to share exemplars that demonstrate quality work with teachers and principals. Without exemplars and without additional professional development that focuses on both assessment and quality, we think the school-based conversations will remain focused on scoring student work.

The cover page for “Putting the Pieces Together” depicts a house in which academic standards are the foundation and assessment is the top of the chimney. Assessment is as far away from standards as it could be; it is very close to grading guidelines. CCISD may need to remodel its house in order to shift attention to assessment and bring it, in all of its forms, closer to academic standards. As we have said before, the district has demonstrated its capacity to put its collective expertise behind difficult educational enterprises. We have no doubt that it will tackle its next challenge in a similar fashion. Therefore, we look forward to following the development of CCISD’s assessment work over the next two years.

V. CONCLUSIONS

We end this report by raising two basic questions that CCISD seems ready to address:

1. What level of work is good enough to imply high quality in CCISD?
2. How can CCISD insure that the same standards of high quality are used by all teachers across the district’s middle schools?

Our report was designed to explore teachers’ and administrators’ concerns about these issues so that the district, as it moves forward with implementation of standards-based reform, will understand the particular dilemmas that current assessment practices create for teachers.

To demonstrate the dilemmas, we presented the issues that arise as teachers implement and score the performance standards. They report having scant idea about whether their performance standard requirements are too hard or too easy, whether their assessments of quality, indeed, reflect high standards, and whether their standards bear a resemblance to those of their colleagues. Teachers’ and principals’ voices reveal deep concern with these issues and a strong desire to help children achieve at sufficiently high standards.

We also considered CCISD’s latest approaches to providing “safety nets” for students who are not making sufficient progress toward passing performance standards or who have already failed

them. The safety net strategies are an important component of supporting high quality student work. We suggested that they will become even more important as the district moves to increase the level and quality of work it demands of its students. And, we concluded, the district has the capacity right now to use some of its safety net strategies to help students who have passed the standards at a minimal level to achieve at higher levels.

We reviewed the focus of the Superintendent's Leadership Conference, noting that it provided all CCISD educators with an opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments, celebrate their progress to date and begin to consider the complex issues associated with assessment and quality.

We end our report with another question: What do CCISD educators think it will take to create an environment in which quality is the heart of the discussion? One possible answer, provided by a district principal, confirms our conclusion that the district's teachers and administrators are thinking about these issues and have the desire and competence to address them.

I think the quality issue is that, although we have the standards, we're still in the midst of changing the paradigm of the quality. We need a lot of training for teachers [focused on] "this is what a quality product looks like." I really think that we still need a lot of staff development on quality versus quantity. And although the district doesn't want to dictate...the timelines for when to teach the standards. Because they want to leave all that up to the teachers so that the teachers won't feel, "Well, you're taking everything away from me." I think we still need a little bit more structure. And I don't know how it would be done with regards to quality, but I think we need more. Maybe more of those teacher-led conferences where you actually display an example of a "no-quality" product versus a "quality" product. I think until we do that, you're going to see, you know, just a big gap between what one quality product looks like to one teacher and what it looks like to another teacher. (Principal C)

CCISD has accomplished a great deal in a short time. Content as well as performance standards are in place; everyone in the district knows that academic standards are at the heart of the enterprise. Everyone's work focuses on improving implementation. As the district turns its attention to quality and assessment, it will face new challenges. It will be able to build, however, on the knowledge and skill developed by those who are committed to seeing the implementation of high standards for all students in Corpus Christi.