

Update Memo:
Standards-Based Middle School Reform
Corpus Christi Independent School District

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with

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I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Corpus Christi set the stage for continuing standards-based reform during the 1998-1999 school year at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference, "Putting the Pieces Together: Standards-Based Reform," held on July 27-28, 1998. At the conference, Leadership Teams from each school, K-12, were asked to reflect on how much they had accomplished to date with respect to: 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. One major purpose of the conference, according to Dr. Sandra Lanier-Lerma, was for participants to internalize how the pieces of reform fit together. Another major purpose was to set the stage for serious work on understanding assessment and its place in the implementation of standards-based reform. The ultimate purpose of the proposed work on assessment was to increase the quality of work that students produce.

Toward this end, on the second day of the conference, guest speaker Spence Rogers delivered an informative and engaging talk entitled "Practical Approaches to Assessment and Evaluation to Increase Motivation, Achievement, and Professionalism." His talk was designed as an introduction to a) the topic of assessment and the ways that assessment can inform instruction, and b) a longer range strategy to increase the quality of student work in CCISD. In Dr. Lanier-Lerma's words, follow-up would occur at the schools and at the district:

[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 stakeholders, 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. (July 28, 1998)

As a result of the emphases at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference and the plans for continuing work at the schools, Education Matters' focused a significant part of its fall data collection on issues of assessment and the quality of student work. We attended "Surfing the Standards, the Third Annual Middle School Teacher-Led Conference," held on October 12, 1998, for the purpose of learning about the products teachers use to determine the quality of work that demonstrates achievement of performance standards. We attended three different school-based professional development sessions to learn whether and to what extent these

learning opportunities focused on assessment and the quality of student work. And, we interviewed central office staff and teachers and administrators at Browne, Driscoll, and Martin Middle Schools to learn about their work with standards and assessment.¹

What we learned from these various data collection strategies is that, while a great deal of standards-related work continues at the schools, little of it focuses systematically on issues of assessment in the terms with which it was presented at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference. We did not find much evidence of follow-up discussions of assessment or assessment philosophy at the schools. And, while we heard teachers, once again, discuss issues related to what acceptable quality of student work should be, we did not yet find systematic, schoolwide attention to this issue.

In making this general statement, we do not want to minimize the serious work that teachers engage in that is designed to better implement standards-based reform. Teachers are working hard to figure out how to help more students pass the standards, and this is important. They are developing or expanding interdisciplinary units with the goal of a) integrating standards and b) creating more "real world" experiences for students and they are creating alternative products that are other than paper and pencil tests. Teachers continue to design safety net strategies to provide students with additional opportunities to work on the standards. Some teachers are working with department colleagues to develop comparable assessments for the same standards. They note that they would like to have the opportunity to examine the quality of performance standards across the district and insure that quality is consistent. And a few teachers are spending time with their colleagues looking at their students' work in an effort to understand what would help them assess more consistently. Our interview data suggest, however, that these efforts, important as they may be, are about using assessment to evaluate student work. They are not part of a systematic, school-based approach to assessment that would inform instruction, or to issues relevant to the quality of student work.²

In this report, we emphasize assessment and quality because a) it is these two issues that we understood to be the center of the district's work during the 1998-1999 school year, and b) we think that a genuine focus on these issues will lead to improved student learning. We begin in Section II with a discussion of assessment as a tool to improve teaching and learning. By doing this, we are following up on one major theme of the Superintendent's Leadership Conference. In Section III we describe the work that teachers are doing to address issues associated with the quality of student work. And in Section IV, we discuss the implications for professional development by drawing links between the components of standards-based reform that were

¹Our current evaluation design has us spend more time at three of our four sample schools. As a result, we did not interview at Grant Middle School during our fall visit. Instead, we spent time attending professional development opportunities at our two focus schools, Martin and Driscoll. When we return in the spring, we will visit Grant as well as our other three sample schools.

²We raised concern about the quality of student work in previous reports, noting the absence of exemplars of student work that demonstrate achievement at different levels of quality.

discussed in the previous sections. Throughout the update report, we include the voices of the curriculum consultants. These specialists are in a good position to help address issues associated with assessment and quality because their role includes, among other things, a) facilitating and supporting the implementation of academic standards, b) planning professional development within their content areas, c) regularly meeting with department chairs of their content areas, d) modeling lessons and co-teaching classes, and e) providing direct help to teachers who may be struggling with teaching the content because they are new to the grade level or for other reasons. In addition, the consultants have a special, more intensive relationship with the district's focus schools. Their voices lend support to the argument that teachers are ready to move to the next phase of standards-based reform.

II. USING ASSESSMENT AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE TEACHING

To begin the discussion of assessment as a means to improve teaching, we want to distinguish between multiple meanings and uses of the term.

Assessments are tools that can be used to determine the extent to which students understand the material they are working to master. Assessments include traditional paper and pencil tests, essay questions, and research papers. They include the daily checking that a teacher does when asking in-class questions about the material students are studying and such non-traditional activities as group and interdisciplinary projects, visual displays and oral presentations. In CCISD, there is a great deal of talk about the need for alternative assessments. When they use this phrase, teachers and administrators, most often, are talking about using assessments other than formal pencil and paper tests to determine whether students pass a standard.

Assessments are tools that can be used for different purposes, the most familiar of which is to determine students' grades. But, assessments can be used to indicate progress toward mastery of some body of material or standard.³ Used in this way as feedback, assessments can be an aid to teachers and students. They can highlight information and concepts with which students are struggling and which, therefore, need to be taught again and, perhaps, differently. They can indicate when students have mastered the content and are ready to be evaluated on the quality of their learning.

It is this use of assessments as feedback to teachers and students that Spence Rogers stressed in his talk at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference. It is this use of assessment tools that we want to explore in the context of standards-based reform in Corpus Christi. Assessment as feedback can help teachers address students' learning needs whatever their current requirements for passing a standard. And, assessment as feedback can be an essential component of a strategy

³We do not want to confuse this discussion of progress toward a standard with the district's use of the "progress toward" as it relates to designations on the district's report cards. We are not talking about the district's evaluation process in this discussion.

designed to help students produce work of much higher quality across all of the middle schools in the district.

In one of our sample schools, members of the leadership team who attended the Superintendent's Leadership Conference were excited about the distinctions between assessment for teaching and evaluation, how they differ and why assessment to aid instruction is important. For example, one teacher talked about the distinction and then about how she would use that knowledge with her students.⁴

Assessment and evaluation. [Spence Rogers showed us] how they're different. And I loved that. Because assessment is how we're doing and evaluation is, okay, it's documented. And, you know, we've always used assessment as evaluation, we've used assessment as a synonym [for evaluation] almost. And I thought, "Oh, I'll never forget that. That was pretty neat." One of my performance standards, number five. We have assessment quizzes weekly on that. I use the term with my kids, too, and I tell them that this is assessment. Their evaluation won't be until we've gotten all those Performance Standard 5 words [learned], because there're like 30 of them. And so we've gotten all of those and then we'll have their evaluation. Basically it's like their independent practice. I tell them that's your assessment. And then when it comes time for the product, for the academic standard that they have practiced and they've received feedback on from the assessment, then we'll do the evaluation. (Teacher A)

Another member of the leadership team talked about the importance of sharing this information with colleagues at the school. She, too, mentioned the importance of this understanding for students.

Well particularly separating assessment from tests. Separating assessment from evaluation. That's something that we brought back from the conference. Some people didn't realize there was a difference and we have addressed that and I hope that we have corrected that. That we need to assess and the students need to assess and I think that's what we're doing and I'm trying, making a conscious effort, to use those words in the classroom so that the kids know the difference. [I say], "Check yourself. Where are you? How much do you need to study tonight?" And we mention that a lot in our team meetings: Have the students assess. Have them make predictions about where they are. How accurate were your predictions? I hope we've conveyed that and that was a new concept to me. I hadn't thought about that until that conference. (Teacher B)

In a similar vein, the principal noted:

⁴In order to mask the identity of teachers, principals and administrators we do not use individuals' names and refer to all interviewees as if they were female.

One of the things that we're having to do is come back to faculty meetings and include those items periodically. Because, if we don't talk about them, they're going to be shelved and we will not be able to do much with them. I would say once a month or so [we need] to get teachers to think about what the difference is between assessment and evaluation. When is it that we test students? Do we test them when they're ready? Do we test them when they are not ready and, therefore, give a grade that's really not representative of what the students can do? We recognize as a campus that we need to start moving towards getting teachers to talk about those issues. We do need to make a continued effort to bring assessment and evaluation into the fold of what's going on in our campus. (Principal A)

The Superintendent's Leadership Conference provided school-based educators with a new and important approach to assessment designed to help students learn and achieve performance standards. Assessment feedback can help students identify what they need to study and learn. It can take the mystery out of what is expected of them and enable them to determine if they are making progress. Assessment can provide teachers with information to use in considering how well they are organizing instruction for their students. It can let a teacher know, for example, that her assignment may not have been designed to enable students to demonstrate their knowledge, or that the rubric connected to the assignment did not specify adequately what the teacher wanted students to include in their work. In this way, such assessment information can help both teachers and students, one of the key points made by Spence Rogers.'

All of the consultants with whom we spoke have a good grasp of the different uses for assessment even though most had not been at the Superintendent's Leadership Conference. Their comments are similar to those of teachers and principals but reveal a greater depth and breadth of experience with the issue. They are aware of the interconnections between assessment, instruction, evaluation and student outcomes. They have explicit ideas about what has to happen to move the assessment agenda forward. The example below is indicative of the consultants' sophistication about assessment and instruction. For emphasis, we have highlighted the different components of assessment identified by this consultant.

I think maybe sometimes teachers are *evaluating too soon*. They don't *take the time to assess* where the kid is and then *adjust their instruction* to help that kid. And so they give them a test and so here's a test. And you flunked the test, so you flunked the standard. I don't think there's a lot of, in those particular cases, a lot of the ongoing assessment, and *not assigning a grade until the kid's ready for a grade to be assigned*. You know, the goal is for them to achieve the standard, not to flunk 8th grade. *...the intervention should happen before [the student fails.]* I think in most cases it's remediation. It's not intervention. And *I think in most cases it's an instructional issue*. And helping teachers understand the difference between assessment and evaluation and what the standards really are. *...[We need to] give them models of assessment*. This is what assessment is, here's how you

assess. This is evaluation. I'm not sure there's an understanding of the difference between the two... (Consultant A)

Several things have to happen if teachers are to become more capable of using assessment in multiple ways. First, they need to learn that such information can help them better teach academic content to their students. They need experiences in which they have the opportunity to develop a new assignment or teaching strategy in light of assessment that shows that students have not mastered the content. Then they need to try the strategy and, hopefully, see that students learn better. With such evidence, teachers are likely to be willing to invest additional time in developing and using assessment for these purposes.

Second, teachers need to learn about quality assessment tools that will help them get usable feedback on students' work. Rubrics are one such assessment tool mentioned by consultants.⁵ Consultants recognize that, in order to get assessment information that can inform further instruction, teachers need to have rubrics that specify exactly what must be mastered. For example, in discussing the development of a rubric for a history standard, one consultant said,

They need to be very specific on that rubric. The event. How specific do you want to get with their knowledge of the event? Do you want them to understand cause and effect relationships? Do you want them to make some sort of judgement as to whether that person was right or wrong in history? And I want to see that on a rubric so students know exactly what they're going to be learning and exactly what their goal is. There's no guessing. Because history has always been sort of a guessing game with students and teachers. The old do I have to know the names and dates kind of thing... And if a teacher can get to that sort of rubric, they're also going to see whether they are teaching at a lower level versus the higher level, critical thinking level. It helps them see it for themselves. Which they don't always do. If you don't do a rubric, you may not see that you're sticking with that knowledge comprehension level and not working your students up to higher levels. (Consultant B)

This consultant pointed explicitly to the ways in which having such a rubric can inform teaching as well as provide students with clear information about the work they need to produce. Spence

⁵ We offer this definition of a rubric used by San Diego City Schools, to insure clarity about our use of this word. We direct the reader's attention to the fact that there are teaching implications attached to the rubric score that a child earns. A rubric is "a guide for scoring a particular task. It often contains a scale that defines levels of performance and descriptors of that performance. The district [San Diego] uses a five-point rubric: 1 - does not meet criteria/needs extensive instruction; 2 - does not meet criteria/needs additional instruction; 3 - approaches criteria/needs revision; 4 - meets criteria for edited work; 5 - exceeds criteria," (P. 11, "A Standards Digest"). The rubric must be connected to descriptions of, and perhaps samples of, what work at standard looks like.

Rogers noted that it is essential for students to know what is expected of them if they are to produce high quality work. The rubric should be public rather than a mystery.⁶

Supporting this view, another consultant provided an example of an assessment that was quite limited in its ability to provide teachers or students with good information about their knowledge and skill. The example also suggests how having a weak rubric or a weak set of achievement criteria can weaken teaching as well as learning.

One of the standards is on volume and surface area. Well, traditionally in the past, the kids would get a worksheet or a test that has a picture and be asked to find the surface area of the shoebox or find the volume of Miss Julie Owl's aquarium or-- I mean, you could sit down and write a hundred of those questions because you know exactly what they look like. They're all the same. And if the kid has the process down, then they just plug in the formula and it's very simple. Okay? I don't think that tests understanding. I've got kids that could pull volume formulas off a formula chart, but then when you change the wording of the problem [to] how much will it hold, what is its capacity, there's no formula for that. They only know volume because we've taught them v for volume and they go to the formula chart. That's not mastery learning, that's not understanding. I appreciate kids that are capable of doing that and getting hundreds on those tests. But if they don't understand what volume really means, then it has no meaning for them. They're following a mechanical process. (Consultant C)

In other words, students need to know more than the formula for volume; they need to know that volume is about the capacity of containers and they need to have strategies for finding the capacity given appropriate information. Although the consultant suggested that teachers are working to develop and use such assessments, they are not yet the norm.

Yet another consultant reiterated this point by describing the important qualities that should be present in products designed to assess students' mastery of a standard.

I think your products need to [show] more in depth understanding of how-- not just can you regurgitate and get back to me what I've given you, but can you apply this knowledge in real world applications... I think that there is a need for a

⁶We understand that, currently, many teachers use the achievement criteria that accompany the standards to determine whether students have passed a standard. The achievement criteria are public and can be available to students as they begin their studies. However, they do not specify the quality with which they must demonstrate their knowledge. They are used to score the components of a product and generate a total score as a sum of the component scores. They are not used or useful for scoring the quality of the work that is the sum of its parts. Further, there are no examples of student work that meet the achievement criteria that teachers can use to guide both instruction and assessment. We attach examples of achievement criteria as Appendix A to demonstrate this point.

content-based test, as well as a product beyond that. [A] product that will show the teacher that the child has mastered this content and [is able] apply it to a different situation or a real world situation. That's what I think. (Consultant D)

These insights suggest that consultants have sufficient knowledge about the components of high quality assessment to support professional development in this area at the schools. They can be part of a comprehensive strategy to help teachers learn how to develop assessments that gauge students' genuine understanding of content, in part, through their ability to use that content in a range of applications.

Before we end the discussion of developing assessments that genuinely measure student learning and help students make links to the real world, we want to note an important issue that some teachers and principals have raised. They are concerned that, in the desire to move beyond paper and pencil tests that may emphasize regurgitation, and with the goal of engaging students in the work they must do, some teachers are creating assessments that are inadequate to the task. The assessments may be fun for the students, but they may not provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate knowledge of the content and its application. The following comments evidence these concerns.

I think that when you look at what they're asked to produce, you're really trying to demonstrate that you understand this content standard and so, the performance assessment that I'm going to use is going to show that I truly understand that. Sometimes, I'm not real sure a chart, a poster will be able to do that and to fully understand that there needs to be some writing. Even if you do a poster underneath that poster needs to be some type of written explanation of what it is and so that's the thing that we've been trying to look at and been trying to make sure that we have a lot of balance here. (Principal B)

But sometimes I think they get kind of carried away with this idea of [non-traditional] products. You know? For example, there was one that was called the nine digit puzzle. And what the students did was they had two, three place numbers. They were only allowed to use the numbers one through nine. And these were supposed to then equal -- these two numbers were then supposed to equal this number. Well, that to me doesn't assess anything. It's sort of an enrichment type thing. It's sort of, you know, find the patterns type of deal. Well, they were claiming that you can put that up on your chalkboard or your bulletin board as a product and I never quite understood. What is that for? What would this assess, you know? (Teacher C)

We applaud teachers' efforts to develop creative assessments. We also agree that there is a time and place for high quality pencil and paper assessments and that alternative assessments must be carefully designed so that they require students to demonstrate that they have and can use the material included in the standard.

If CCISD wants to successfully follow up on the work of the Superintendent's Leadership Conference, we think it needs to develop a strategy with which to support teachers and principals in using assessment to improve teaching. Right now, there are pockets of work going on across the schools and a variety of ideas percolating throughout the system. Consultants are part of this work. But none of these efforts is, as yet, attached to a coherent, districtwide plan for addressing assessment. As the district works to develop such a plan, we suggest that it consider how to join professional development on assessment with professional development that addresses the quality of work that students produce.

III. ESTABLISHING AGREEMENT ABOUT QUALITY

We have heard repeatedly from central office administrators and from some teachers and principals that the district is not ready for serious attention to the quality of student work. They claim that efforts to set benchmark standards, select exemplars and engage teachers in examining the work that their students produce in light of standards and exemplars is too threatening. For these reasons, we have been told, the district treads delicately toward implementing the next phase of standards-based reform.

Despite the district's reluctance to take on the issue of quality, we continue to hear teachers talk about it and engage in school-based activities that address it. As we have said in previous reports, teachers are quite aware that different quality work is said to meet the standards depending on individual teacher's decisions about what counts as passing work. Many are not happy about such a situation because they find it inherently unfair. They want to know what work that meets a standard should look like.

Based on our data and our knowledge of the progress of reform in other districts, we think that CCISD has the opportunity to move more boldly. In order to encourage the district in this direction, we turn next to a brief discussion of teachers' concerns about the quality of student work and some of their suggestions for dealing with it.

Teachers in the three schools we visited talked about how they are trying to address the quality of student work in meetings with colleagues where they look at samples of student work together. For example, one teacher described how these issues are being addressed in her department meetings.

Okay, in my department meetings, we discuss how maybe what would be an A paper to some teachers might not be an A paper to other teachers. When do you grade for every little thing? What makes a good paper? How does that tie into the standards as far as expectations? Are we all expecting the same things for the same standards? We're setting up some in-service days, staff development days, so that we can maybe explore that fully with actual models of student work, other than what we just happen to have. But we would like to take the student work

and assess it, maybe have one composition that everybody grades and compare. Are we all expecting the same thing? Are standards high enough? (Teacher B)

Another spoke about the ways in which her school will be looking at the quality of student work by examining public displays of work from a range of classrooms and performance standards.

What we're doing, and we're going to continue to do, is we're going to bring... our performance standards to the meetings and then I'm going to have us post a sample of our A, B, C and failing [papers] for each performance standard and we'll erase the students' names. But I do want us to have samples for the different performance standards. (Teacher D)

Still another talked about an additional schoolwide effort to deal with the quality of work required to pass a standard.

[Our principal] is really trying to carry this thing out, like look at-- we had a meeting where we looked at the different types of products that we're making and all the teachers critiqued them to try to improve them. We had a faculty meeting where several teachers displayed certain products and how they graded them. And the teachers went through them and looked at them and kind of evaluated [the products]. It was good to see what the kids are going through and how other teachers are doing. And it was mainly the English and history department. I learned how students have a hard time in some cases understanding time, time frames. I learned how other teachers are thinking and what they're producing. Kind of got a benchmark of what's going on. You really don't know how well you're doing unless you look at somebody else's work sometimes. (Teacher E)

Teachers also talked about the absence of examples of a) quality student work and b) the lessons that led to it at district sponsored events such as the teacher-led conference, Surfing the Standards, on October 12, 1998.

We need to see more consistency in the assessment process, the evaluation. We need to see, you know like that fair [Surfing the Standards] that we had the other day and I'm guilty too. I'm very guilty. There should be... there should have been plenty of exhibits. ...We don't really sit around and some of us are reluctant, we're reluctant to share lesson plans. See we have a lot of ideas but you never see a teacher present a complete lesson plan on anything. (Teacher D)

These teacher comments suggest that at least some teachers are ready to take on serious discussions about the quality of student work and the nature of the assignments and teaching that led to the work.

Entering into this work, however, can be difficult for a number of reasons. For example, our interviews suggest that some teachers still do not believe that all students can achieve common,

high standards. Thus, they will think the idea of establishing high quality exemplars is unreasonable. It will run counter to current practices as this teacher suggests when asked about how she grades students' work with respect to standards.

I try to take them individually by, you know, by the class, I mean. If it's a slow group, then I'm not going to expect the same as I would with a high group. In terms of quality wise. It's just not going to be the same. They'll do the same things, but the quality's not going to be there. (Teacher F)

Principals raise concerns about engaging in professional development that focuses on quality unless they and their teachers are trained in how to participate in such discussions.

It's difficult, I think, at this junction now, to get teachers to do that real dialogue that needs to take place in looking at a performance. Number one, if I am a peer of a teacher, if you were a history teacher and I teach the same sixth grade history and you brought in a performance standard, I'm not really sure I'd want to tell you that, boy, that looks yucky, that is very poor quality. That something we're going to have to learn how to do is called constructive criticism and how not to be offended when colleagues do that. So that's kind of a growing thing and we're going to need some training on that. (Principal B)

Teachers who have tried to promote discussions about the quality of student work have learned that the enterprise can be stressful for everyone involved.

I've had an experience where I asked the teacher, "How does this show that they actually learned anything," and the teacher said, and I quote, "Well, I guess it's obvious to everybody that I don't know what I'm doing," and got up and walked out of the meeting. Well, [how to lead] that is something I've had to grow and learn with, and now I just begin by saying, "Oh well, you know this is really good." And then, "What I've done, when I did an assessment similar to this, then I went on and used this to make sure the kids really understood it." And you know, sometimes the teachers, if they feel comfortable with you they'll say, "Well, yeah, but what do you do about the ones who didn't understand it?" And I said, "Well, I just did this or that and we'll just have kind of a casual, non-threatening conversation about some options that they can complete during the class period." (Teacher G)

The difficult experiences and the potential for disquieting discussions described above will certainly make teachers wary of sharing their work. But they should not be used as evidence that Corpus Christi's middle school teachers are not ready to move to this next stage of standards-based reform. Rather, as the principal suggests, the potential for hurt feelings and anger highlights the importance of providing skilled facilitators to a) orient teachers to the purpose of discussions about quality work and b) lead the discussions. Such facilitation must include clear elaboration of the process that will be used and the goals of the discussions. It must stress that

the goal is not to berate teachers but to draw upon their accumulated wisdom, perhaps provide new ideas, all with the goal of improving their teaching and students' learning. Teachers must be very clear that neither the work they bring nor the questions that they raise will be used to evaluate the quality of their teaching.

We found evidence in our interviews that the consultants also have knowledge with which to foster a systematic approach to this work. They understand the need for teachers to work together in establishing standards of quality and they understand the benefits that such collaboration can have for all aspects of teaching.

Consultants told us about their experiences bringing teachers together to dialogue about the quality of work that they expect of students. One consultant talked about how teachers can come to consensus on quality by collaboratively examining student writing to identify work that meets the standards. As this consultant notes, after doing this work for a while, teachers came to agree on the indicators of a high quality piece of student work.

I've tried this at one school where I went in and did a series of writing workshops and it was very helpful for them. And I'd say they're most successful in consistency and quality. Knowing what quality is. Once a week, they'd get together and bring in whatever student writing they had. And they'd all sit in a circle, the English department, and they'd read the paper, discuss it, talk about why it's quality. You know, why is it quality in relation to the standards?
(Consultant A)

Another consultant also talked about the effect of creating opportunities for teachers to talk about their expectations for student work. In this case, the conversations took place in the context of subject-specific professional development and led to a shared desire for consistent expectations for student work across the district.

One thing I got that I really wasn't expecting was teachers coming up to me and saying, "You know? I'm just so glad we are all together and I get to talk to people from other schools that I haven't talked to in years. And we start talking about, well, what did you do for performance standard two? What kind of product did you do? Well, what did you expect from your students?" And they are seeing that there are differences. They see the need for a more consistent approach to mastery. The same expectations for a student, whether it's within the same school, same grade level, or within a district. (Consultant B)

Although the consultants have had positive experiences bringing teachers together to talk about student work, they also know how challenging it will be to break the norms of teachers working in isolation.

For the longest time, forever, teachers have sort of just done what they thought was right in their room with their students. They've done their own thing. And I

think it's going to be very difficult for them to come to some kind of agreement or consensus about how to grade a specific product. [Although] you know, they know that across the district, that the standards are not going to mean anything until they're more in line with their grading of student work. (Consultant E)

If the greatest challenge is to help teachers feel comfortable sharing their own students' work with colleagues, the consultants realize that they will need professional development to enhance their skills for working with teachers in this arena.

It's so touchy, you know. It's so touchy to bring something that you feel is quality from your classroom, your kids did it, and then to say-- you know, analyze that. Is it really quality assessment? That's a very touchy situation and we're moving toward that. The consultants, we're all going to sit down and determine, you know, how we want to do that. Get some-- A little bit of training on looking at quality. And then move from there. (Consultant A)

The consultants and many teachers and principals are willing to get started with this work, but it is our understanding that, at the time of our fall site visit, the district did not have a clearly articulated strategy for moving forward. One possible approach would be for schools come to consensus on their own exemplars of high quality student work. This is what we thought might happen this school year. Then, representatives from schools could meet together to share exemplars across schools with the goal of developing exemplars that represent districtwide agreement about work that meets the standards at different levels of quality. Another possibility is for the district to bring together groups of teachers to share samples of student work and develop districtwide consensus on quality from the outset. We know that the district was planning to engage in a process that involved input from teachers across the district. What matters most is that the district adopt a strong strategy for developing exemplars for the performance standards and insure that teachers have the opportunity to learn what they need to know in order to help students achieve them.

The work ahead may be difficult, but the work that Corpus Christi has already completed was difficult. The fact that many teachers are considering questions of quality on their own, that they are tackling the issues in their departments and teams, suggests that they are ready to be helped with the next difficult component of standards-based reform. We repeat that teachers and principals will need assistance to move forward with issues of quality. They will need examples of high quality student work so that they can begin to consider what it will take to have all of their students strive for such a level. They will need help in identifying strategies they can use to teach students to meet those standards. The in-house expertise of the consultants can help in these areas, but we do not suggest that they can bear the weight of the entire enterprise.

IV. TAKING THE NEXT STEPS IN STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

In our August 1998 report to the Clark Foundation, we wrote about the need in Corpus Christi to link exemplars of quality student work with the assessments used to evaluate that work. We concluded that:

- C Teachers and principals are unclear about what quality work in their content area and grade level 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.
- C Teachers and principals are also unclear about the characteristics of a good assessment, especially when the assessment is other than a formal, 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 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.

In this report, we reiterate that it is essential to deal with these quality and assessment issues whether assessment is used for evaluation purposes or for the equally important work of assessing students’ further learning needs. We have used teachers’ and principals’ comments to show that at least some of them are ready to tackle this work. We included consultants’ comments to demonstrate that the district has in-house capacity with which to begin this work. Now, we want to suggest an additional area that the district might consider as it moves forward with its work. It is the area of pedagogy.

Consultants and other central office administrators with whom we spoke emphasized that pedagogy must improve if students are to produce higher quality work.⁷ They framed their discussion around the difficulties some students have in passing the performance standards. First, some suggest that students fail standards in the first place because the instructional

⁷Because of their work with departments and individual teachers, consultants are in a good position to understand what teachers need to know and be able to do to forward standards-based reform in CCISD.

strategies used do not sufficiently help them learn. Second, they suggest 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 are likely to be as unsuccessful the second time as they were the first. Although we have been told that principals select outstanding teachers for these safety net roles, teachers have told us that safety net strategies largely provide students with more time to do work that they did not complete when it was due. All of the consultants with whom we spoke explained that it was important to help teachers expand their pedagogical skills. One consultant outlined the view shared by others.

I would say that it's probably, the majority [of help to students] is re-teaching. It may be they break it up into smaller portions of materials. They may go at a slower pace. But I would say the majority of teachers are just teaching it again in the same way. At least in my subject area... I don't see a lot of teachers who teach it in a totally different way the second time around. If our teaching style is not [working for] the majority of our students or we're not offering them the information in a variety of ways, we need to learn how to teach it that way... Instead of just, okay, let me do my lecture over again. You know, if they didn't get it the first time that way, they're not going to get it the second time. It's not a matter of saying it again and louder. It needs to be, teach it a different way.
(Consultant B)

Teachers have told us that students have difficulty passing the standards because they are not motivated, are frequently absent and have problems with discipline.⁸ They do not often mention pedagogy as a reason for students to have difficulty with the work. Consultants, however, believe that some students do have difficulties 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.

And I feel when you get that content specific [pedagogy] going, you really have to know what you're doing. When you get kids in that classroom and you start spiraling that curriculum [to high levels of critical thinking], you have to be prepared for any question they may ask. And kids will know if you don't know the answer. And you have to be brave enough to say, "I don't know that. Let's find out." They're not-- they're not at that point where they feel they can say that. Because then they don't know that next step. (Consultant B)

You can't just take an ordinary [content] teacher off the street that's been teaching 7th grade [content] and make them a pro [at a somewhat different content] over night... So we're having to work with our teachers at the same time we're working with our students. The advantage is most of our teachers are

⁸We reported this in our August 1998 update report.

willing to work, they're enthusiastic about [professional development] and they want to make it work and they can see the value of it. (Consultant C)

As a result of this analysis, consultants have put a high priority on improving content specific pedagogy. Several suggested that it was their number one goal for work during the current school year.

We need to look at what's happening in the classroom. What makes this teacher good? ...I'm hoping I can find some teaching strategies that are common, some activities, something that I can follow that's going to make that work. Because right now I can tell you who's having success in [this content] because they are-- they are what I would consider to be dynamite teachers, you know. And I want to be able to pass some of those traits on to my other teachers. And that's just not going to happen overnight. It's why that training program and observation. And it's going to take a few years. (Consultant C)

With instruction at the heart of standards-based reform, teachers need sufficient content and pedagogical knowledge to enable students to produce work of desired quality. However, without agreement about, and exemplars of such quality work, they will be unable to design appropriate curriculum and assessments. Progress with assessment and quality goes hand-in-hand with progress in instruction. These three components of reform are tightly linked.

From the perspective of the consultants, and in our view, the best way to improve instruction is to engage teachers in ongoing, content-based professional development. There is some evidence that this is beginning to take place in CCISD. We encourage the district to support and expand on this work with the goal of raising the quality of work produced by CCISD's middle school students.

V. CONCLUSIONS

CCISD was moving in the right direction when it asked school leadership teams to return to their schools after the Superintendent's Leadership Conference and begin to discuss what they learned about assessment. The district was right when it tied further work in assessment to the goal of increasing the quality of work that students produce. However, we do not think that the schools have the capacity to move much beyond their current level of discussion without additional support. Spence Rogers' work was an introduction that made school leadership teams aware of important issues. But it was not designed to provide teachers and principals with the knowledge and skill necessary to work as assessment experts at their schools. From our perspective, what schools need now is sustained, informed follow-up that attends to assessment and the quality of work that students are expected to produce no matter which CCISD middle school they attend. And, we think that they need professional development that provides them with a greater range of pedagogical strategies to try with students who have difficulty meeting the standards.

We want to point out that there are implications for some of the district's current policies and practices if it moves in the direction of using assessment, in part, as feedback to inform teaching and learning. First, we think CCISD will have to reconsider its current approach to computing report card grades. Currently, report card grades are the result of a formula. Half of the grade comes from achievement of the performance standard, 25 percent comes from scores on major grades and 25 percent from scores on a combination of quizzes, homework and other assignments given by the teacher. If the assessment of work being done in preparation for doing a performance standard is used to modify teaching, then it may be difficult to justify a grading system that counts the grades on that work for a student's report card grade. It may also be difficult to justify counting the standards as only 50 percent of a report card grade.

Second, if students are assessed more carefully during the process of learning and do not do the performance standard until they are ready, some might ask, "How much time should they have to get ready?" This is an issue somewhat related to current concerns about how many times a student can "re-do" the standard before failing. While we fully understand the need to have students complete their work in a timely fashion, we think that greater emphasis upon assessment to improve instruction and learning will bring new concerns to this problem which the district hoped to solve with its latest grading guidelines.

Third, the district might also have to consider slightly different safety net strategies. We envision two different scenarios. On the one hand, if teachers are better at assessing students' learning needs and adapting their instruction to those needs, then fewer students should fail the performance standards. On the other hand, if CCISD raises the quality of work demanded of all students, then, even with more insightful assessment and instruction, more students might fail the performance standards. Students might fail because the work was quite difficult, albeit, not impossible for them and not only for the reasons that currently explain failure. In this event, the district would need additional safety net strategies that were more able to target the specific learning needs of the students.

These possible implications for extant policies arise because CCISD has created a coherent system of standards-based reform in which there are links between standards, students' performance, safety net strategies, and report card grades. As a result, changes in one part of the system have ramifications in other parts. This is not a weakness of the district's approach to reform. Rather it is a sign of the strength of a systemwide and systematic approach to standards-based reform.

Appendix A

Sample Achievement Criteria