Six Years of Standards-Based Middle School Reform

In

Long Beach Unified School District

October 2001

A confidential report to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

Written by

Judy Swanson
Education Matters, Inc. West Coast Office

Six Years of Standards-Based Middle School Reform
In
Long Beach Unified Schools

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has provided support for middle school reform in Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) since 1993. The first two years provided support for implementing the middle school philosophy. Since the 1995-1996 school year, the focus of the reform has been to support the transformation to a standards-based system. This six-year review chronicles the major developments of the past six years, highlighting the successes and the challenges encountered along the way.

1995-1996 First Year Baseline Report
In the first year of standards reform, the overall target for this initiative was established, *"**By June 2001, 75% of all students (excepting cognitively impaired special education students) will meet grade level standards in reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and history/social-science.**"* Although the target date has passed and the district's achievement levels still fall far short of the goal, a great deal has been accomplished in the last six years.

The Education Matters evaluation team of Barbara Berns, Gina Koency, and Leslie Talbot reported (August, 1996) that the middle school reform agenda was beginning to take hold in Long Beach due to proactive districtwide leadership. However, they doubted that standards would become the core focus of the district's efforts. In July of 1995 they wrote:

> Because Long Beach was already in the process of adopting new teaching strategies, the standards will not be the driver of all other components of systemic change.

Nonetheless they noted that they were impressed with the overall positive spirit that permeated the district, and the determination to improve student performance. Based on the following evidence they concluded that the standards initiative was indeed alive and well:

- Committees had completed, disseminated, and conducted initial training on content standards in the core academic subjects. In addition, development teams had drafted English Language Development standards (ELD) as well as standards for health education. Plans are underway to work on physical education, foreign languages and visual arts for standards development in the coming year. The effects have been downward and upward: development of Pre-K mathematics and language arts standards; consideration of standards for high school courses that fulfill college requirements; and the beginnings of content standards for undergraduate, general education courses offered by the California State University, Long Beach.

- Content standards were used to guide the selection of instructional materials throughout the district and served as the foundation for the mentor program and professional development programs (Writing to Learn, I-Search, Next Step Study Groups, National Humanities Faculty) to improve teachers' skills and knowledge. However, intensive training, particularly targeted to aligning content standards with instructional strategies and activities, had been limited at the district level.

- With the completion of the core content standards, the district examined alignment between its assessment program and the standards. As a result of this effort, the district identified areas that needed assessments, and teams began work to develop performance measures to fill these holes. Aligning assessments with the content standards became one of the district's highest priorities.

Berns et al. also observed significant variation across middle schools. As anticipated this early in the reform effort, teachers had difficulty articulating what a standards-based classroom looked like. In fact, they found that a high proportion of teachers had trouble differentiating between good instruction and good standards-based instruction. At this early stage of implementation the following observations stood out:

- Teachers' knowledge about standards ranged from awareness to active attempts at implementation.
- Teachers generally viewed standards in a positive light, and recognized their potential impact on student learning and equity.
- Teachers' views ranged from believing standards would not cause them to teach in substantially different ways, to those who thought it had already begun to change their teaching, to those who were overwhelmed by the changes that standards required.
- Teachers expressed concerns that students were ill-prepared for middle school and, therefore, would have problems in achieving the standards.
- Teachers expressed concerns about the unrealistically high level of some instructional materials.
- Teachers did not think they could go forward with standards unless the district provided them with performance assessments.
- Increasingly, teachers in all schools kept student portfolios. The form, content, and use varied from school to school and classroom to classroom.
- Department chairs provided varying degrees of support to teachers in the implementation of standards-based reform.

After the first year of standards reform, Berns and her colleagues believed that one of the district's greatest strengths was its understanding that if standards were to become a part of teachers' and students' everyday classroom experiences that they would have to be aligned with all other components of the school system. They had already begun aligning textbook adoptions, the selection of curriculum materials, and selected professional development efforts. The team was less clear about the match between the standards and the district's accountability system and Certification of Rigorous and Challenging Curriculum—the board's policy for ensuring high quality instruction.

While the central office assumed much of the leadership for standards-based reform, there was considerable involvement from small groups of teachers in the development of the standards. Berns and her associates recommended that principals and teachers would need substantial support in understanding the standards and the implications for their classrooms.

1997-1998 School Year.
In the fall of 1997, the composition of the evaluation team changed when Barbara Berns turned over the coordination of the work in Long Beach to Judy Swanson. Gina Koency remained on the team giving us an important historical perspective and continuity. To ease the transition, Swanson and Berns made one visit together. In our brief update report of December 1997, we focused on developments in four areas:

- Increasing Unity of Vision and Direction for Standards-based Reform
- Professional Development
- Support and Interventions for Low Performing Students
- Standards-based Assessments

*Increasing Unity of Vision and Direction for Standards-based Reform***.** During the fall visit we were impressed with an increased level of consistency and shared purpose between the district and area offices, and between the area offices and the schools. There was widespread participation in the development of the district's next proposal to the Foundation, and increasingly, the lines blurred between middle school reform and work on the Clark grant. The two efforts had become one, which focused on long-range school improvement. Across the district, reading comprehension was identified as the top priority for improving student achievement. It was the first time we heard all three area superintendents talk about specific training for department heads to begin to take a more significant role in improving instruction. Principals also seemed more aware of the challenges teachers face in implementing standards-based instructional practices.

District's Role in Leading Standards Reform.
The central office was mounting a well-coordinated effort to implement standards. The superintendent's weekly meetings, known as the "Area Supe's meetings," were the nucleus for the district's work. The meetings included all the key administrators in the district: the executive staff, Area Superintendents, Assistant Superintendent for Research, Planning & Evaluation, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, Human Resources, the Business Office, High School Superintendent, and Facilities. It was a decision-making, problem-solving group. Each week issues were raised, discussed, and strategies were adopted for investigating and addressing the matter at hand—everything from leaky roofs to creating job descriptions for standards coaches. This structure created a close-knit team with strong communication among the area and curriculum offices.

For example the Area Supe's group was the mastermind for new performance assessments, which attempted to measure performance in two domains with a single test. The concept originated and was developed within the administrative team, and a strategy was put in place to carry it out.

Another significant development to evolve from this administrative team was the creation of new standards coaching positions to do in-class professional development to facilitate standards implementation. This action reflected an agreement across all areas of the need for more teacher support at the school level.

All of these developments occurred within the ever-changing political context of the state of California. In the early days of standards reform, California was viewed as leading the charge with the development of the state curriculum frameworks and its groundbreaking work with a student assessment system, CLAS (now defunct), that was consistent with the state frameworks. Together they provided a strong foundation to guide standards development in Long Beach Unified. The state's Program Quality Review (PQR) process provided a vehicle for schools to examine their instructional program through the analysis of student work. It provided a convenient framework for guiding the implementation of standards at the school and classroom levels.

In addition, the subject matter projects and demonstration grant programs supported by the State Department were aligned with the state frameworks. These professional development opportunities provided content-rich, in-depth learning experiences for teachers throughout the state. Many of the teacher leaders in the district point to these programs as some of the most powerful professional learning experiences of their careers.

*Professional Development***.** With the greater coherence among central office, area offices, and schools, LBUSD seemed well positioned to focus on a comprehensive model of staff development. Although the district was still developing a strategic plan, we saw evidence that a coherent policy that integrated content standards and assessments into all training was emerging.

To create the new performance assessments, the entire curriculum department participated in training on performance assessments—writing prompts, creating rubrics, and learning how to do rubric scoring. Curriculum leaders worked with the research department to write and refine prompts that would meet the objectives of both the writing domains and the content areas. Curriculum leaders also enlisted teacher leaders in their discipline, to write, pilot, and revise classroom performance tasks that could be used in their classrooms to prepare students for the new districtwide tests. This was a major undertaking, involving everyone in the district. On scoring day, curriculum leaders orchestrated the entire enterprise, solving problems and trouble-shooting as mix-ups occurred. Teachers, principals, and central office administrators all pitched in, working side by side, to score each student paper six times: twice (two readers) for content, twice for rhetorical effectiveness, and twice for conventions. Not surprisingly, they encountered some difficulties with this new format, and the research and curriculum departments were working together to resolve and complete the scoring process, having learned a great deal from the pilot.

But the top professional development priority that year in the district was to develop an induction program. Over the previous two years LBUSD had hired 900 teachers, 750 of whom were brand new to teaching. To provide support for these new teachers, the district developed an on-going the

professional development program, which began with a five-day orientation. By pooling resources and seeking additional grants, the district strengthened and expanded the mentor teacher program to provide every new teacher with a New Teacher Support Provider.

To strengthen the induction of new teachers, LBUSD also created linkages between their professional development program and local preservice programs. For practicing teachers, the curriculum leaders planned a system of institutes in each of the core disciplines to strengthen teachers' content knowledge around several standards and introduce assessment tools to monitor student learning.

Support and Interventions for Low Performing Students. The major initiative during the 97-98 school year to end the practice of social promotion, was the establishment of Long Beach Preparatory Academy for all students who had multiple Fs on their final report card in 8th grade. Over 400 students from the district's middle schools were referred to Prep Academy. The school got off to a shaky start. Administrators found it difficult to staff the school as few LBUSD teachers opted to transfer. While most of the staff was deeply committed to the students, few had the experience or skills to address the academic needs of the students. Districtwide, many educators seemed to think Prep Academy was doomed to failure from the start and did not believe it was an effective strategy for helping low-performing students.

Standards-based Assessments. The district made significant progress in developing a standards-based assessment system, including two levels of assessments: those administered and monitored at the district level and those managed at the classroom level. The goal of the classroom assessments was to provide teachers with at least three different tools for assessing each standard. In addition to the state standardized test (SAT-9), the district-level performance assessments included writing tasks and open-ended math items. A district "Scoring Day" was set aside for teachers to score student responses.

1997-1998 School Year.

The 1997-98 school year was a productive year. District leaders worked hard to build an organization where everyone—teachers, principals, central office administrators—were continually expanding their capacity to understand the complexities of systemic change. By blending top-down and bottom-up efforts, the designers were learning to monitor the effects of their implementation strategies, seeking out feedback from both inside and outside the district, listening to the feedback they received,[1] engaging stakeholders in problem-solving, refining and modifying and trying again, while monitoring and evaluating the results. By giving individual schools the freedom to try out their own ideas, while holding them accountable for producing results, the district was building commitment to a shared vision.

Progress in implementing standards reform was in evidence at every level of the district:

[1] With hindsight, we believe that Kristi Kahl's leadership as the coordinator of the Clark grant, greatly facilitated the district's reflective stance to feedback during her tenure.

- Content standards had been in place in the core academic subjects since 1996, and standards were now in place for English Language Development (ELD), health education, and physical education.

- Content standards guided not only the selection of instructional materials, but also the design and selection of professional development offerings, and the design of assessment tools.

- The Seamless Education initiative, a partnership between California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), Long Beach City College (LBCC), and LBUSD, had made significant progress in aligning the K-12 content standards with the university's entrance requirements, undergraduate courses, and the master's degree in teacher preparation.

- A major step forward in developing performance assessments aligned to the content standards was taken this year by piloting innovative performance tests designed to assess both content knowledge (science or history) and writing ability. The district continued to develop, pilot, and refine instruments that could be used to monitor both student performance and inform instruction. We saw the impact of these tests as a powerful example of assessment driving instruction.

- Efforts to end social promotion and hold students accountable for meeting standards were initiated when the Board of Education approved the Eighth Grade Educational Improvement Initiative and opened Long Beach Preparatory Academy in 1997. This alternative school was designed to address both the academic and the socio-emotional needs of students who received two or more F's on their final report card in grade eight.

- Performance standards had yet to be developed. This remained the missing piece to creating a comprehensive standards-based system.

LBUSD's progress in implementing standards reform was also reflected in the evolution of Carpe Diem, the Middle School Conference supported by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. In 1995, the first year of the conference, every teacher attended a two-hour session on the content standards in their specific discipline and grade level. For many teachers this was a first look at using content standards in their classroom. Year two, 1996, reflected an increased focus on raising student performance, with the introduction of a Student Achievement category, where most of the sessions focused on curriculum or instructional strategies to raise student achievement. For the first time there were a few sessions that introduced performance tests to assess whether or not students were meeting standards. Both years two and three witnessed a significant increase in the number of Long Beach teachers presenting. In 1997, there was also an increase in the number of content areas that focused on both content and assessment: history/social science, mathematics, physical education, language arts, English Language Development (ELD), and science. Many focused on general teaching practices, with a session that focused on the use of teacher portfolios in evaluation. The plans for Carpe Diem 1998 continued to illustrate the district's progress with standards implementation, with a half-day session devoted to standards-based content area instruction. These sessions were designed to

integrate content standards, instructional strategies, and assessment into a comprehensive unit plan. Teachers were also encouraged to include student work in their presentations.

Over the six years of standards reform in LBUSD we have observed steady attention on seven major initiatives. With the preceding historical context as a backdrop, the organization of the report at this point shifts to maintain the coherence of each initiative across the next three years. The seven major initiatives were: (1) Seamless Education, (2) A Comprehensive Standards-Based System, (3) Assessments, (4) The 8th grade Initiative, (5) A Strategic Plan for Professional Development, (6) The Reading Initiative, and (7) Standards Coaches.

The Long Beach Partnership's Seamless Education Initiative

LBUSD's perspective of school reform reaches beyond the district's boundaries recognizing that their success is dependent on the availability of highly skilled teachers. For this reason they have invested in the Seamless Education Initiative, a collaborative effort with California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), and Long Beach City College (LBCC).

The Seamless Education Initiative began when LBUSD started developing its content standards. Significant progress has been made on many fronts that promise to contribute to improving the quality of education in Long Beach. Together, CSULB, LBCC, and LBUSD examined data to identify which students needed remedial support. This led to a discussion about the alignment of math courses and the university's math placement test. Similarly, Long Beach's Eleventh Grade Writing Initiative grew out of the Seamless Education effort. After agreeing on the writing domain, looking at student work and grading criteria, representatives from all three institutions designed the test. The University has agreed to waive the English placement test for students who scored a five or a six on the eleventh grade writing test. These agreements were possible because of the growing consensus about the standards all three institutions wanted students to meet.

The Partnership also worked together to improve teacher education at the university. They have developed and secured approval of a middle school credential. In addition, university faculty team taught some of the standards institutes with district staff, and many district staff taught methods courses at the university to ensure that preservice teachers were learning about standards-based teaching.

All three institutions are engaged in collaborative research to develop a database to track student performance. The goal was to understand what contributed to success in college that would inform K-12 teachers what they need to do differently to be better prepare students. This is a very exciting partnership that works because each of the members recognized that their goals are interdependent and mutually beneficial to the mission of each institution.

Moreover, the Partnership leadership has collaboratively created structural and financial interdependence by establishing a partnership organization and hiring an administrator to run it, funded by all three institutions. They have written grant proposals that required collaboration between university departments and schools, providing release time and additional stipends as

added incentives. Their mutual interdependence is reinforced by strong personal and professional relationships that facilitate communication across institutions.

A few of the significant initiatives that have developed out of the Seamless partnership were efforts to provide faculty professional development, the development of new programs that focus on the middle level, and a concerted effort to recruit prospective teachers, especially teachers of color.

A Comprehensive Standards-Based System.
Substantial progress was made during 1997-98 to create a comprehensive and coherent approach to standards reform. We credit the quality and boundless energy of educators leading this reform in the district offices and in the schools. We saw evidence in every classroom that teachers used the content standards to guide their instruction. However, most teachers thought of the content standards as a new curriculum scope and sequence, albeit one that is more challenging than the curriculum they had taught in the past. Teachers also agreed that content standards were providing much needed consistency in what is taught across classrooms and across schools.

In our baseline report we noted "pockets of excellence," where teachers were engaging students in creative and challenging learning experiences, using strategies that have a strong research base. We have watched those pockets of excellence expand to include new teachers, and we've seen new pockets open up at each of the schools in our sample. The challenge now is to address the substantial gap that still exists between this impressive group of teacher leaders and standard practice in many classrooms. We also believe that the district has not used the existing expertise as effectively as it could to provide a model for new teachers or departments that were struggling to improve their programs.

Efforts to improve communication with parents continued through the development of individual student academic profiles, which are comprehensive records of each student's achievement on a range of assessments, as well as the interventions provided to support student growth. Similar efforts have been instituted to improve communication among educators across the district through the publication of Standard Times, and a new slide presentation, "Putting Together the Standards-Based Puzzle" to help everyone understand the "big picture" of standards reform in Long Beach.

In August 2000, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation announced that the 1999-2001 grant will be the final implementation grant awarded by the Program for Students. In light of this, Education Matters felt it was important to rethink the design of the evaluation to consider how we could be most helpful to the district in providing feedback that could inform their ongoing work beyond the life of the grant. We chose to concentrate our efforts on the most challenging aspect of standards reform—how to support students who were not meeting standards. In Long Beach, the district's work during 1999-2000 continued to be ambitious, but also experienced some significant interruptions that caused the district to diverge from its formerly steady course. There are a number of reasons for this:

1) Practically, a change in district organization, eliminating the old area structure put several efforts on hold until administrators learned their new jobs and established their priorities. The new superintendents for elementary, middle and K-8, and the new deputy superintendent needed to spend time getting to know the schools now in their charge, and principals had to learn about the expectations and working styles of their new supervisors.

2) In addition, as the state's high-stakes accountability system evolved, the district had to go back and realign its standards with the changing state guidelines. Beginning in the 2001-2002 school year, the state will be implementing a High School Exit Exam that students must pass to receive a diploma.

Although the test hadn't been completed, and the levels of performance that will be required to pass have not been specified, the standards to be tested were. As a result, the district had to realigning district standards to match the revised state standards, working backwards from the High School Exit exam to determine the content of End of Course exams they introduced in the spring of 2001. These exams will become one component of their assessment system. This work pre-empted a lot of work that was planned for the 2000-2001 year on developing performance standards and assessments in the content areas.

3) Furthermore, indicative of the complexity of standards reform, as the district tried to move forward on new initiatives, they have learned from problems encountered that required them to step back and do more groundwork. A notable example is the district's experience with the development of performance standards.

An important development during 2000-2001 was the completion of Long Beach Teaching Standards, which provide guidelines for what all teachers should know and be able to do to effectively teach the content standards to all students. Although these standards have not been widely distributed or understood by teachers to date, this is an important step toward developing a standards-based system.

District Assessment of Content Standards

LBUSD's effort to establish a set of assessments consistent with the Content Standards would best be described as a work in progress, one that took a significant step forward in 1998 with the piloting of performance assessments in science and history. The district continued to develop performance indicators and other assessment tools through an iterative process of piloting and revising performance tasks, using teachers' feedback and student work to inform the revisions. Considerable energy was spent developing and revising the classroom-embedded measures and accompanying rubrics and identifying sample student responses as anchor papers to help teachers and students understand the level of performance that is required to meet standards. Sets were made available for the four core content areas. In a number of cases, the types of prompts and demands of the classroom-embedded measures resembled those of the district performance tests. In addition to helping teachers and students prepare for the district administered performance tasks, the classroom-embedded tasks provide models of good assessment that teachers could follow and use throughout the year to monitor their students' performances. They also served to focus instruction on approaches that were most likely to engender success on the district-

administered tasks. The plan was that these tests would eventually become an essential part of assessment portfolios in each of the content areas, which would provide the basis for a standards-based report card.

In response to the implementation of the district tests, teachers invested time and energy into preparing students, providing numerous opportunities to learn both the content and the skills needed for students to demonstrate what they know. The assessments were designed to assess both content knowledge (science or history) and writing ability, thus they stimulated collaboration across departments to look closely at student work to monitor growth and identify student needs. While that first administration raised a number of issues regarding the technical quality of the tests, particularly regarding the reliability and validity of the scores, we found they had a very positive influence on the quality of instruction needed to prepare students for these new tests.

In the process, Long Beach Unified teachers acquired considerable expertise in using rubrics; they see the value of rubrics as tools for informing students of their accomplishments and the standard by which these accomplishments were judged. As the assessment system became increasing aligned with the content standards, the performance assessments and supplementary classroom-embedded measures provided powerful tools for monitoring student progress and informing instructional practice. However, teachers needed additional training to understand the potential, and put it to use.

The piloting of the assessment portfolio in mathematics signaled the next step, developing a system to certify that students are meeting the standards in each of the content areas. The primary purpose of the Standards Assessment Portfolios was to certify student achievement of the content standards; but, they also served instructional purposes such as helping teachers focus on the content standards, identifying students in need of additional help, and helping teachers with planning and pacing of the curriculum. The math portfolio was introduce at Carpe Diem in the fall of 1998, but at the end of the pilot year we found that teachers were still uncertain about how to implement each of the components, and they did not understand the purpose. More timely and more thorough staff development to guide math teachers experimentation might have resulted in a more robust test of the pilot instrument.

In 1999-2000 portfolios were required, and the first round of data collection they were used to determine proficiency on each of the standards. Within the high stakes climate of the state's new accountability system, the district tried to design a system that provided alternative measures to the standardized test that would give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate their mastery of the standards. But we have yet to find that teachers use this standards-based assessment system to determine grades.

In addition, Area Superintendents each implemented their own accountability measure, requiring schools to complete and submit some form of student work protocols. At the state level, it was the first year of a new high-stakes accountability system, based on the SAT-9 standardized test and the SAT-9 Augmentation test. Not only did the state publish and rank order schools based on SAT-9 scores, but low performing schools that failed to improve after three years faced

possible reconstitution. The combination of the districtwide performance tests and the extended SAT-9 test with augmented sections stimulated a new emphasis on test preparation.

Overall, LBUSD made significant progress in increasing teachers' experience and facility with using rubrics and scoring guides to assess student work. Many teachers recognized that if they informed students of the expectations in advance that the quality of the work improved. In contrast to the Area Superintendent's accountability measures, teachers acknowledged that the classroom embedded assessments were extremely helpful in understanding what was expected.

While standards had been identified for student performance on the district assessments, the district was working to develop measures to define how good is good enough "on multiple measures to demonstrate proficiency of the benchmarks and curriculum objectives.[2] From this experience, the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development realized the need to develop a whole bank of classroom embedded assessments for each of the standards before they could roll out an assessment portfolio in each of the four core disciplines. They would then need to pilot test and figure out how to score the portfolios, and how to develop a shared understanding of what is required to reach proficiency. These are all prerequisites to developing a standards-based report card. Similarly, in 2000-2001 the curriculum leader in history/social science piloted an assessment portfolio. In both math and history, homework and effort remain contentious issues that teachers don't want to give up, making it difficult to move to a standards-based grading system.

A coherent and thoughtful plan guided the district's work. Part of LBUSD's strategy for moving to this next step was to create an assessment system aligned with the content standards, which could be used to inform instruction aimed at improving student achievement. Two initiatives were introduced 1999 to help teachers make that connection. One was an instructional tool, Thinking Maps, or graphic organizers to support student learning. The second, Curriculum Mapping, is a tool to help teachers understand the big picture—to understand the connection between standards, curriculum objectives, instructional practices, and how to use assessments to plan backwards—as well as a tool to pace and scaffold instruction to assist students in meeting the performance expectations.

Ending Social Promotion -- The Eighth Grade Initiative

The eighth grade initiative and the creation of Long Beach Preparatory Academy (LBPA) in the fall of 1997 was the first step in holding students accountable for meeting minimum standards and ending social promotion. The rationale was that Prep Academy was to provide a "safety net," giving students a second chance. After completing its inaugural year, Long Beach Preparatory Academy (LBPA) graduated approximately 95 percent of the students who completed the school year. (Many students left the school during the year, some transferring to other districts.) After a challenging start, by mid-year Prep Academy settled into more or less a comfortable operation, having modified the schedule numerous times, experimented with the

[2]"Putting Together the Standards-Based Puzzle," by Chris Dominguez, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction and Professional Development.

composition of teams, revised the content of the Life Skills class, and struggled with high teacher turnover.

Our initial impressions of the school were that a lot of dedication and hard work on the part of the administration, support staff, teachers, and Dorothy Harper, Area A Superintendent, produced some very positive results. We were impressed by the commitment of the staff to addressing the socio-emotional needs students. Teachers worked very hard to find ways to teach effectively, to connect with the students so that they would **want** to learn. Teachers told us that most of the students' difficulties came from lack of motivation. The students agreed that the major reason why they ended up at Prep was that they just didn't do the work. Motivating some of the students continued to be a challenge all year, as demonstrated in the high absentee rate.

It was clear that the Prep staff has made a significant difference in the lives of the students they worked with that year. We were impressed by students' confidence and presence when they greeted us and welcomed us to their school. The counseling and support systems help students feel valued and safe. This was a major achievement, for which the staff deserved enormous credit.

Year two of the school got off to a smoother start. Under the leadership of a new principal, the staff worked together for two weeks prior to the start of school, developing a shared vision, agreeing on core values, and focusing on the culture and climate. During this year, the evaluation team selected a sample of nine students that we planned to follow into their first year of high school. We wanted to understand how well the additional year "safety net" prepared these students for high school.

The most obvious observations we made while getting to know these students was that all of the students at Prep Academy were there because they each have serious socio-emotional issues in their lives. These issues were not just recent, temporary events, but had been with them for many years, interfering with their ability to focus in school. The impact of social/psychological issues dominated LBPA and it raised concern about the timing and type of interventions other middle schools in Long Beach are providing for their students. Every school instituted a number of early interventions in 6th and 7th grade to identify students at risk of academic failure. Most schools have developed academic support programs for these students, but all of the principals acknowledged that existing social and health services fall short of meeting the needs of those most at risk.

Our efforts to follow the sample of nine students from the 1999 class were frustrating and somewhat discouraging. To our knowledge, five are still in school somewhere, but we were unable to keep track of three, and we learned that one had dropped out. Even though all nine students in our sample were determined to succeed in high school, they left Prep with significant needs. Very few supports were in place to help these students transition into the huge crowds in high school. We found that no one monitored these students' progress or attendance. If there were support programs available at the high schools, these students were not aware of them. The counselor from Prep Academy was the only person who made an effort to follow up (monitor) on how these students were doing. It was not surprising to hear that a few of the students went back

to Prep when they needed help with homework. It was one place where they knew someone cared and would be willing to help. Whatever safety net LBPA provided, few remnants remained to support them as they moved on to high school.

Even within this supportive environment, we lost a third of our student sample by January of their Prep year. One student who left complained that the classes were not challenging and just repeated the previous year (even though she rarely attended). Unfortunately, we had to agree. Many of their classes were boring—watching videos, coloring diagrams of plant cells, round robin reading that lost most of the class, crossword puzzles of vocabulary words—a lot of busy work. Not surprisingly, many of these classes were also unruly.

The ability of the teaching staff to connect with their students was impressive, however, the lack of rigorous instruction at Prep troubled us. Students consistently told us that their classes were easy, less demanding than 8th grade had been at their previous school. We were also concerned about the impact of grade inflation. Many of the students were under the impression that they were currently doing A or B level 9th grade work. Responses from surveys sent to Prep's first graduating class by the school's administration indicated that students thought that the major differences between Prep and high school were that high school classes were much harder and there was much more homework. Some students even sent along their recommendations to the next Prep class to "work harder, because it's way harder in high school."

The third year, the principal revamped the curriculum into two intensive blocks, one for literacy and one for math. Science and history teachers were let go, and new teachers were hired using a new interview process that focused on subject matter knowledge and the teacher's core values. The administrators began taking a more direct leadership role in curriculum and instruction, and one of their master teachers stepped out of the classroom to become the staff developer for the literacy teachers. She conducted ongoing training one day a week with the staff, and took the lead in developing the curriculum taught in all literacy classes. The entire staff participated in an intensive two-week professional development institute before school started, beginning the year with lesson plans for the first two weeks, with the entire school reading the same novel. They brought in Janet Allen, a national literacy expert to work with the staff to continue to enrich and refine their curriculum. Our brief glimpse into classrooms in the fall of '99 was notably different than what we had seen in previous years. Students were engaged in more meaningful work, and discipline was no longer an issue. They had really begun to turn the school around. However, when the district moved the principal to another school midyear, the morale of both staff and students declined significantly and we did not follow the school in its final year. Prep Academy no longer exists, and students who fail 8th grade are assigned to various satellite facilities attached to district high schools.

A Strategic Plan for Professional Development.

In 2001 the strategic plan for professional development is still evolving, but with each visit in the last three years we learned of significant progress. By 1998, new institutes were in place in reading and writing that focused on teaching strategies to develop the skills students need to achieve the standards in every other subject area. In all the institutes we attended (reading, writing, science, and ELD) there was an emphasis on enhancing teacher's content knowledge

directly related to specific standards. These institutes also provided teachers with the resources needed (books, science kits, handouts) to go back and teach new lessons to their students. Some of the courses effectively integrated content with instruction and assessment and provided a more complete understanding of the objectives. Others failed to model teaching practices that would help teachers visualize how to incorporate the new material into their classrooms.

Overall, we were impressed by the positive response we heard from teachers toward district-sponsored professional development. The consensus seemed to be that there was a wealth of quality training available, and time was the only limiting factor. For those who participated, LBUSD seems to be meeting teacher's needs. Of course, the question remained, who was participating? We found that the strongest teachers were active participants, but teachers in need of improvement were less likely to attend. In response to an external study conducted by The Achievement Council during the 1995-96 school year, the district developed a database to keep track of the professional development activities. By the end of 1998 they had developed the capacity to monitor teacher participation. However, unless the training was held during regular work hours, teachers could not be required to attend.

1998-99 was a challenging school year in Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). It was a year filled with several new initiatives: the introduction of standards coaches, the Math Assessment Portfolio, curriculum mapping, thinking maps training, piloting of Reading Development classes, and the expansion and refinement of two middle school reading institutes. Not surprisingly, the number of new initiatives and the rapid pace of change produced a significant amount of stress, and at the same time significant progress, continuing to build on the foundation laid in recent years. Insufficient training added significantly to the stress.

Standards-based professional development institutes provided training and support to teachers in addressing the district's focus on literacy skills. New institutes on reading comprehension were developed and required of all teachers who wanted to teach summer school. This leverage significantly increased participation and emphasized the district's commitment to improving literacy. The goal was for all middle school teachers, regardless of content area, to take one of the reading comprehension courses.

The lesson from this ambitious reform agenda was that more thoughtful and detailed planning was needed to facilitate the introduction of new practices. It was often the lack of attention to details in the implementation of new initiatives—the lack of clarity of the goals, insufficient training and guidance, and the time to learn and experiment with new ideas—that limited their effectiveness. Careful planning and "forward thinking" were becoming even more important because the work itself was getting harder. Long Beach had reached the point in this reform effort that is most challenging—*figuring how to bring about the changes in instructional practices that will help <u>all</u> children achieve at higher levels.*

During the 1999-2000 school year, the success of interventions in the district corresponded directly to the strength of the professional development provided to support teachers' efforts to implement reforms. As in previous years, the lack of clarity of goals, insufficient training and guidance, and the time to learn and experiment with new ideas have limited the effectiveness of

the implementation. This was the case again with Breaking the Code and site-based math interventions. However, one new initiatives, EEEI (Essential Elements of Effective Instruction) used strong professional development models and also produced significant changes in classroom practice.

Essential Elements of Effective Instruction (EEEI) Institute was established during spring and summer (2000). We found that most teachers (in both focus and non-focus schools) had participated in some version of EEEI training, whether it was through the New Teacher Institute, the six-day training, or a refresher course, designed for experienced teachers who had had previous training. We also found that a few "new" teachers attended only the one-day refresher, even though they had no previous exposure, because of tight schedules. Overwhelmingly, teachers reported that EEEI was effective training, especially in helping them deal with classroom management issues. Our observations (and feedback from coaches) indicate that EEEI has made a significant difference in classroom practice, particularly in regards to teachers' clarity about teaching to an objective, and strategies to promote active participation. Moreover, principals reported that their review of EEEI and training on how to work with teachers on implementing the elements was a powerful professional learning experience that helped them to focus on classroom teaching and to be more effective in their work with teachers to improve instruction.

By the fall of 2000 we saw significant progress in mapping out a three-year strategic plan for professional development for new teachers, and a comparable model was in development for training administrators. The plan incorporated a thoughtful sequence of courses and supports to help guide new teachers as they learn to refine their teaching practices. The New Teacher Institute and New Teacher support providers, along with Essential Elements of Effective Instruction (EEEI) and content specific training provide the backbone of the professional development program. In the second year, teachers would participate in additional EEEI training as well as Reading in the Content Areas. Even though providing quality professional learning opportunities has becoming increasingly difficult since the state eliminated eight professional development days during the school year, it is clear from these plans that the district understands what constitutes quality professional development, and that it is prepared to invest in teacher and principal learning.

Throughout the history of this reform effort, a consistent pattern has emerged. The innovations that have been the most successful (at least at the level of implementation, if not at the level of improved test scores) have been the programs that were supported by quality professional development. The depth of training and on-going support for EEEI training for focus schools, for MSRI and MSCAT (Middle School Reading Institute and Middle School Content Area Teaching), and the quality support standards coaches provided incorporated the major elements required for effective professional development.

These programs provide substantial opportunities for teachers to build their knowledge and skills over time through on-going training where exemplary practices were modeled. Moreover, the training included follow-up coaching with observations and feedback, providing support to teachers as they practice and refine their skills. They also involved a critical nucleus of teachers

learning together, and they built in accountability by monitoring the effectiveness of the training on teacher practice. In the last two years, the investment in EEEI and new teacher support has left few resources to support quality professional development for what the district identified as its top instructional priority—reading development. In the next section, we discuss the implementation of the reading development program, which has been put in place without the prerequisite professional development needed to ensure that every child has the advantage of a well-trained teacher. This is a concern as there is increasing evidence that well-qualified teachers do make a difference in student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Haycock, 1998). Substantial evidence from reform efforts indicates that changes in course taking, curriculum content, testing, or textbooks make little difference if teachers do not know how to use these tools well and how to diagnose their students' learning needs (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Literacy Interventions: **Reading Development Classes**

Three years ago, (1997-98) the district began a serious effort to improve reading at the middle school level. Recognizing that too many middle school students were reading far below grade level, two new courses were developed to strengthen teachers' ability to teach reading, MSRI and MSCAT. The two Middle School Reading Institutes were designed for teachers who would be teaching reading development classes, or supporting students' reading comprehension development in the content areas. These institutes also introduced the district's new approach to professional development. Six days of instruction took place over several weeks, allowing teachers the opportunity to go back to their classrooms and try out the strategies they were learning, and then come back together to discuss their experiences. Teachers were provided with professional books, and given time within the course to read and discuss these texts. Although there was no in-class follow up (e.g., observations and feedback) teachers did have opportunities to discuss their experiences with colleagues at the next session of the course. Moreover, the course instructors modeled the strategies teachers were learning to use with their students. Teachers greatly appreciated the quality of the course and the opportunity to be released from their classroom to talk about practice.

At the time, a district Reading specialist explained:

> What we've really found with our middle-school kids, our high school kids who struggle, is that for most of them the issue is not decoding. They are adequate decoders. What they don't do is comprehend what they read for a variety of reasons....I always say that in middle school reading you need more time, smaller class size, you need more materials, you need lots and lots of material: age-appropriate books with a range of reading difficulty, big classroom libraries. And the first thing is that you need teachers who are **specially trained**. (Emphasis added.)

1998-99 was designated as a voluntary pilot year for implementing reading development classes. A course outline was provided by the district, but each school had developed their own curriculum. Most of the middle schools did offer some kind of reading support that year, although the quality of the course varied across schools.

A course description for Middle Grades Reading Development was approved by the school board in April of 1999. Although there was no developed curriculum, the course outline delineated a comprehensive reading program aligned to the Language Arts standards, which included: flexible decoding strategies, comprehension strategies, vocabulary development, and metacognitive strategies for comprehension and fluency. It recommended the use of a variety of instructional methods and strategies for whole group, small group, and individualized instruction using read-alouds, shared reading, guided reading, visualization and verbalization, literature circles, reading workshop, and a home reading program. Reading Development classes were required for all 6th grade students scoring below the 25th percentile during the 1999-2000 school year. Many schools chose to also provide a reading class for seventh and eighth graders with low reading scores.

Over the summer (1999) teachers worked to design a new Reading Development course. Many of the teachers identified to teach the course had taken the districts' middle school reading institutes where they learned the strategies called for in the new course description. Unfortunately, there were not enough teachers who had been trained in reading to staff all the sections of reading development that were needed. One school had 21 sections. In that school, all 6th grade language arts teachers, whether they had any training or not, were assigned to teach Reading Development. At several schools, reading teachers reported that while teaching a new course for the first time was a challenge, they were excited about the way students were responding to the class.

Abruptly, two and a half months into the school year, reading development teachers were told they were to begin teaching a new program, Breaking the Code, as of the first week of December. Breaking the Code is a phonics program, which focuses on phonemic awareness and decoding skills. It is a highly scripted program and teachers were directed to implement Breaking the Code "exactly as it was designed."[3] The late start contributed to a number of issues that resulted in the program being poorly implemented, including:

- inadequate training;
- the top-down mandate that was counter to teachers' beliefs about good practice;
- lack of assessments to either inform the placement of students or monitor their progress;
- large class size; and
- the students' resistance to the program.

The August 2000 report documented in excruciating detail the problems with the course. The most serious issue was the lack of assessment to inform the placement of students. For some reason the one quality professional development program for reading, MSRI, was not offered that year.

[3] Breaking the Code, Fact Sheet for Middle School, a district handout for implementing Breaking the Code.

In 2000-2001 another new course was added to the reading development continuum, Soar to Success: Comprehension Focus. The implementation of this course repeated many of the problems encountered with Breaking the Code, although it started from the beginning of the school year, many teachers did not have materials until several months into school. There are plans to introduce another course in the series for the 2001-2002 school year, Academic Reading, for students who score between the 26th and 39th percentile on the reading portion of the SAT-9. In addition, all of the courses have been revised to have a broader focus. For example, the course formerly known as Breaking the Code was revised to include more reading as well as vocabulary development. The course formerly known as Soar to Success has been revised to include vocabulary, and more reading comprehension strategies.

In theory, the district's reading development program is designed to be a continuum, recognizing that no one program fits the needs of every student. However, for those courses to address the needs of individual students, teachers must be able to diagnose individual needs. Quality assessments for reading have been a serious issue in Long Beach. Last year, after school had already started, teams from the central office spent months testing students individually to identify the appropriate placements in reading classes. Unanimously, teachers felt that the entire effort was a waste of time. First, the tests were conducted by many untrained people, and the results were highly inconsistent with what teachers already knew about students. Second, since school had already started and the master schedules were set, almost no students were actually moved as a result of the tests. Reading teachers reported that students were still placed in the wrong classes, but most had to wait till the semester to rearrange their schedules.

Throughout the school year, a number of assessment workshops were scheduled to train reading teachers in running records, CBMs (Curriculum Based Measure of fluency), and reading benchmarks. Overwhelmingly, teachers reported that, other than running records, the training and the testing were a huge waste of time that interfered with teaching. They found that instruction came to a "complete halt" for weeks to do all the testing, which they found did not inform their teaching. The revived MSRI course and training with Janet Allen (at Washington) was the only professional development in reading that teachers found useful this past year.

The changes to the reading development courses do fill in some important gaps, but they don't address some fundamental problems with the quality of the curriculum in the first place. Moreover, some of the changes have incorporated glaring contradictions. For example, adding vocabulary development to the decoding course is important. However, they chose contradictory support materials for the course. First they purchased a vocabulary workbook to teach the vocabulary component and then they purchased Janet Allen's *Words, Words, Words* as the professional text to be used as a resource. In the first chapter of Janet Allen's book she explained that for much of her teaching career she had used ineffective methods of vocabulary instruction: programmed vocabulary workbooks. She finally realized that students rarely gained enough in-depth working knowledge to integrate the words into their spoken or written language. So her book focuses on a different approach. The reading team was not aware that the materials they had selected were in conflict, nor had they planned to address the cognitive dissonance that teachers would inevitably experience in attempting to reconcile two contradictory approaches. Moreover, LBUSD sent reading department heads and some teachers to a Janet Allen's literacy

institute where the message was often in direct conflict with the curriculum they are expected to teach.

In June, we had the opportunity to attend one day of the reading department institute and serendipitously ended up joining the Middle School Principals' Retreat where they were working on developing a vision for middle school literacy.[4] Dorothy Harper, Asst. Superintendent for K-8 and Middle Schools, was embarrassed to admit that three years into the reading initiative they had not developed a vision for the program. In many ways, this captured the status of the reading program in the district. In the beginning, the former reading coordinator had begun to develop a strong foundation for reading. When Breaking the Code was brought in on the spur of the moment, a decision that the superintendent admits was a reactive quick fix strategy to raise test scores in a hurry, there was no longer a thoughtful plan for building a reading program. In the last two years the reading team has tinkered with the programs, adding missing components, but also introducing contradictory ideas. The program seems to be evolving by grabbing bits and pieces of good ideas, but it is not guided by an informed vision. The problem centers on the fact that among the reading team, although they have worked very hard and have learned a lot, there is no one with significant expertise in reading guiding the development.

Standards Coaches.

Long Beach Unified's first year of using Standards Coaches in 1998-99 to promote standards implementation at the classroom level was successful on many levels. The teacher leaders were chosen for their demonstrated curricular expertise through many years of successful classroom teaching. We identified a number of implementation issues that made the introduction of this new role more difficult than it might have been. Most notably the concerns were the lack of definition of the position to begin with, confusing reporting structures among area superintendents, curriculum leaders, and building principals, and a lack of training in coaching skills needed to carry out this important work.

Despite these issues, the first year of standards coaches was successful in many ways. The coaches provided support to department heads and helped to develop more reflective and collaborative climate in the school, especially when the coaches were in residence full time at a single school site. They also provided extensive support to new teachers. They had conducted some staff development workshops, and facilitated greater collaboration among teachers at the department level.

Much of the ambiguity in the position had been resolved in year two. The coaches were now officially supervised by their building principal. As a result, coaches were able to focus on the specific needs of the teachers in their building and support the priorities at that particular school. For coaches who worked with more than one school it meant that the role changed from school to school depending on the principal's priorities. At a school where there are a lot of new teachers, coaches often dealt with classroom management and crisis intervention. In other schools they were asked to assist teachers with SAT-9 preparation. At other schools they were

[4] The curriculum office was working on broadening the focus of reading to literacy, integrating reading and writing. Part of this plan was to strengthen the reading component of language arts classes and incorporate reading strategies in the content area classes.

able to continue work begun the previous year, revisiting curriculum maps to guide lesson plans that address the essential questions.

Furthermore, the two-day training in "Adult Learning Theory," conducted by Joellen Killian of NSDC provided needed guidance in how coaches should carry out their work with teachers. Having developed relationships with teachers, coaches reported that their work moved to a new level the second year. Teachers turned to coaches as critical friends, asking them to reflect with them about a lesson they'd developed, or about student work they'd received. Coaches also reported that some of the training they done was becoming more evident in classrooms; more teachers used thinking maps across all content areas and used curriculum maps to help focus their instruction.

The original purpose of standards coaches was to facilitate the implementation of standards based classrooms. The district, however, did not provide a description of what that should look like. Moreover, with so many different priorities and no consistent strategy, mandate, or training in how to implement this focus, we found that their work varied at every site. Standards coaches made significant contributions, providing much needed support to teachers in a number of areas. At Hamilton, in addition to providing support to new teachers the focus became supporting the implementation of EEEI practices and each spring SAT-9 preparation. However, establishing specific priorities would not address the problem that there were not enough standards coaches to provide support to all the teachers in need. After two years the district dropped its support of the role and schools were required to fund the coaches from building funds. Hamilton, Washington, and Jefferson were three schools that found the role so important that they continued to fund the position; most schools did not.

However, the new role of technology standards coaches during 1999-00 was a welcome addition and teachers accepted those coaches more readily. This was due, in large part, because their role was more clearly defined from the beginning: the grant that funded these new positions had a very focused target. In addition, the teachers they worked with all volunteered to participate in the project. As a result, the tech coaches found teachers very eager to learn to use the new technology that the grant has made available. Their jobs the first half of the first year focused mainly on training teachers to use the technology, both hardware and software. Once teachers were comfortable with using the equipment, the coaches focused more on the primary goal of the grant, to coach teachers to use the technology as an instructional tool to enhance student learning. Teachers who participated gave the program rave reviews. However, once the grant expired, the program was dissolved. The district did, however, continue to fund the technology curriculum leader position.

The evaluation team and the coaches themselves, struggled to understand why the district had made the investment in them, sending them to extensive professional development sessions, only to drop them after two years. These coaches had acquired significant experience in providing the kind of support that many less accomplished teachers needed. This decision has turned out to be even more baffling, given that in the last year, the district has decided that coaches are an effective strategy for supporting their lowest achieving schools. In addition, the Middle School Office has added instructional coaches to support schools, although the current arrangement

actually represents a decrease in the amount of support to schools. Central office coaches are spread too thin across too many schools.

Conclusions Across Six Years

If we have learned anything from the history of standards reform it is that new initiatives always seem to take longer than anticipated. This is to be expected as the work of systemic change is extremely difficult and many of the challenges are uncharted. During the past six years we have seen significant change in LBUSD, especially in the development of a standards-based system. The district is constantly revising its content standards and assessments to stay aligned with the State. The array of performance tasks in each of the content areas has not only helped teachers understand the expectations, they have also focused instruction on both content knowledge and the skills needed to demonstrate what students know.

The professional development plan for beginning teachers has been significantly strengthened while the Seamless Education partnership has improved teacher preparation. As we have emphasized in previous reports, the impact of large numbers of new teachers in one school deserves special consideration. This is a major issue at both Hamilton and Washington, which had 24 and 26 new teachers respectively last year. Even with the extensive schoolwide professional development in literacy at Washington, instructional improvements are slow to develop because inexperienced teachers are working on so many fronts at once. Fortunately, both of these schools have additional support from standards coaches. The strong BTSA program provides important support, as well. Despite these supports, schools with such significant numbers of new teachers need substantially more help. This is especially critical in a school like Hamilton that is on a multi-track schedule, where the entire department is never on duty at the same time.

There is still much work to do to improve professional development for inservice teachers, especially in the area of reading. The lack of district support for standards coaches is troubling. Unless the quality of teaching improves in every classroom, too many students will continue to not meet standards. Site-based standards coaches were the most effective vehicle we have seen in six years for providing the needed support to teachers.

Finally, the most critical need is to improve the quality of instruction in all middle school classrooms. It is also the most difficult area to bring about lasting change. The Long Beach teaching standards were developed to provide a framework for what all teachers should know and be able to do to effectively teach the content standards to all students. Although these standards have not been widely distributed or understood by teachers to date, this is an important step toward developing a standards-based system. Maintaining high standards of practice is critical to providing the supports students need to achieve at higher levels. The focus on EEEI training to develop strong instructional delivery of the content is also an important step in this direction.

It is vital that "all teachers and administrators know what a standards-based classroom looks like," but training in EEEI only addresses a very small part of that objective. Similarly, the goal that the quality of instruction improves in middle school classrooms is also essential, but EEEI training will only address a small part of this objective as well. Teaching to high standards requires substantial learning on the part of teachers in how to

actively involve students in making meaning, rather than just accumulating information. Learning how to orchestrate new classroom roles and relationships involves more than simply sharpening teaching skills. Teaching for understanding requires teachers to have comprehensive, in-depth knowledge of subject matter. These are the teaching practices the district teaching standards strive to achieve, and teachers will need significant support to get there.