

**Update Memo:
Standards-Based Middle School Reform
Long Beach Unified School District**

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I. Introduction

In our annual report (August, 1998) to the Foundation on the status of standards-based reform in Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD), we described the comprehensive approach LBUSD has undertaken in implementing standards reform. We reported progress at every level of the district: content standards are the driving force for systemic change throughout the district, guiding not only the selection of instructional materials, but also the design and selection professional development offerings, and the design of assessment tools. During 1998 the district piloted performance tests, which for the first time tested content knowledge in science and history. The district has taken major steps toward ending social promotion and holding students accountable for meeting standards through three initiatives: one at eighth grade, one at fifth grade, and one at third grade. Although all of these efforts are still evolving, requiring further refinement and broader and deeper participation, the district has demonstrated a clear focus on their goals. As we noted in our last report, the missing piece to completing a comprehensive standards-based system was the establishment of performance standards, which are scheduled for completion during the 1998-99 school year.

During our fall visit to the district¹, Swanson and Koency visited all four schools in our sample. We interviewed teachers and principals, and observed classes. At Long Beach Preparatory Academy (LBPA) we also conducted introductory interviews with a sample of eight students. We attended the annual middle school conference, *Carpe Diem*, a Seamless Education Conference, *All Teachers are Teachers of Writing*, and an inservice workshop for eighth grade history teachers designed to help teachers prepare their students for this year's districtwide performance test on the U.S. Constitution. We chose to focus our attention during this visit on the schools for several reasons. First, was our primary focus on improving teaching and learning in middle school classrooms. Second, the design of our study of the Preparatory Academy required that we establish rapport with students early in the year to allow us to follow their progress throughout their experience at the Academy. Finally, given the scope of the district's reform agenda, time constraints made it impossible to examine all aspects of LBUSD's reform efforts in a single visit. As Chris Dominguez, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum,

¹We made a "make up" visit in January, 1999 to complete our data collection because we did not have a third researcher onboard during our November trip.

Instruction, & Professional Development said, “So much is happening so fast. The big picture is constantly evolving as we work on it.” (*Standard Time*, December, 1998)

Consequently, for this update memorandum we have had to rely a great deal on documents we received from the district. We did have the opportunity to meet with Kristi Kahl, the administrative assistant to the Superintendent and had a brief conversation with Lynn Winters, the Assistant Superintendent for Research. However, most of what we have learned to date about the district’s work is through the eyes of the teachers and administrators at the school sites as they experience the new developments, and their voices are reflected in this report. We are well aware of the tremendous amount of work district administrators did over the summer to launch several new initiatives this fall, and acknowledge that this interim progress report does not adequately represent the district’s strategic thinking behind the new developments. We have plans to visit the district again in March, when our focus will be to learn more about the district’s efforts from the designers of the reform: central office personnel, Area Superintendents, Curriculum Directors, and Standards Coaches.

Nonetheless, in keeping with the purpose of a “brief update report” we highlight what we believe are two sides of the same issue -- the rapid pace of reform. First, we outline the considerable recent advances LBUSD has introduced to further standards-based reform. Then, we discuss the implementation of those new developments as experienced by teachers and principals at the school sites. We will conclude the report by offering our reflections on the factors that seem to affect the various responses we observed to the new initiatives in middle school reform.

II. LBUSD’s progress in furthering standard-based reform.

Significant developments introduced during the fall have started to bring together a number of different initiatives into a comprehensive whole, furthering the district’s reform efforts to have all students achieve at higher levels. Four major new thrusts in the district this year are: 1) Curriculum Mapping, 2) Assessment Portfolios, 3) More comprehensive content-rich Professional Development, and 4) a significant focus on Professional Development for Principals.

Curriculum Mapping, from Dr. Heidi Hayes-Jacob’s book, *Mapping the Big Picture*, is a tool the district is advocating to support classroom implementation of the standards. Teachers have been working with content standards for several years now. As the reform has evolved the district has also developed benchmarks and curriculum objectives to guide teachers’ implementation of the content standards into their classrooms. What a curriculum map does is provide a graphic organizer for teachers that makes the connections between the content standards, the benchmarks and the specific learning objectives more explicit. The curriculum map can be used as a tool for breaking down the standards, identifying the major concepts and principles that are crucial to students’ understanding, and identifying the skills that need to be taught to enable students to reach the standards. The map also provides a strategy for long-range planning that helps teachers identify and work toward specific benchmarks and curriculum objectives as they design or select the units they plan to teach over the course of the year. Having laid out the

instructional units, teachers can use the map to plan the assessments they will use to evaluate student learning. For

example, by charting when district and state tests are given, teachers can plan backwards to ensure that the knowledge and skills tested have been taught and practiced prior to testing.

Curriculum maps offer several potential benefits to teachers. The process of creating the map help teachers internationalize what students are expected to know and be able to do, and it provides a framework for focusing instruction on core principles and making decisions about how to support student achievement of the standards. It can also enhance teachers' understanding of their own content. Once created, it can save teacher time with lesson planning because it provides an organized road map for the year. Curriculum mapping also helps build a professional community as departments work together, and helps teachers identify opportunities for collaboration within and across department boundaries. New teachers commented that this was a particularly useful resource in helping them understand what they are expected to teach, how long to devote to each unit, and what students should know and be able to do at the end.

Standards Assessment Portfolios. Over the last two years, the district has developed and provided teachers with an array of assessment instruments tied to the district standards, to be administered in classrooms. Classroom Embedded Assessments, districtwide performance assessments, district scoring days that provide training in rubric scoring, and the advocacy of looking at student work at the school sites, have all been efforts to promote a paradigm shift in teachers' conceptions of student achievement. These developments are part of an effort to move away from the traditional practice and belief that grades are distributed along a normal curve, with some students excelling while others fail. The Standards Assessment Portfolio brings all of the components of the assessment system together into a portfolio, which is being piloted in mathematics this year. The district's plan is to develop an assessment portfolio in each of the four core disciplines. This is a significant step toward identifying performance standards that will be used to certify whether a student has met the standards. LBUSD's performance standards are scheduled for completion in the spring of 1999. We understand that the district is moving toward a standards-based grading system, where all children are expected to meet high standards of achievement. At this stage of development, it is still unclear what the relationship between the assessment portfolio and grades will be.

Mathematics Standards Assessment Portfolios. We had the opportunity to learn right along with the math teachers during a training session at Carpe Diem. Standards coaches and department chairs conducted sessions on "Standards Assessment Portfolios, Learning Records, Tasks and Scoring Guides." The session provided teachers with a step-by-step explanation of each of the components that would be required in the assessment portfolios for each student, and the guidelines required for the administration of each of the entries. For the most part, the required entries in the portfolio are items that teachers were already doing in their classes: a Basic Facts Test, Open-Ended Math (OEM) problems, graded student work, free response items, and final

End-of Course (multiple choice) Exams.² The district curriculum office has provided teachers with copies of most of the required items: the tests, Free Response items for each standard, and the OEMs. The two additional components of the portfolio that are new this year are the Math Learning Records, and the cover sheets that must accompany each of the entries to explain how the assignment was graded, including the rubric or scoring guide, and the content standard addressed. The Math Learning Records are notebooks of organized notes the students take on all the new concepts and strategies they learn. It is intended to provide a systematic record that students can use as a resource to help them learn new mathematical concepts. While many teachers already have students take notes during class, the key difference with the Math Learning Records is that students will be asked to record the new concepts in their own words, including explaining examples -- a strategy designed to enhance students' understanding of new ideas.

Content-rich professional development that incorporates all the essential components of standards reform. The integration of content with instructional strategies and assessment practices helps teachers understand the big picture -- how all of the components of the reform work together to support students learning at higher levels. The addition of standards coaches to provide additional support at the school site is already making a significant contribution toward this effort. We had the opportunity to learn how the district is attempting to integrate all the reform efforts in history, through two different forums: the National Faculty summer institute, and a district inservice workshop for eighth grade history teachers.

The National Faculty program gives teachers the opportunity to work with local university historians for two weeks in the summer, to strengthen their understanding of history, within their own historical period and beyond. The institute combined teachers across grade levels, with elementary, middle, and high school teachers divided into three historical periods. One sixth grade and one seventh grade teacher shared with us the insights they gained from the National Faculty experience.

It was interesting to see how everything is tied together and the focus was the [diffusion of ideas] -- migration through trade. [Learning about history beyond the period we teach] helps to see the progression. I mean we're starting here with the beginning of civilization, early humans, we only get to Greece or Rome. Well, what happens after Rome? [Teacher A]

Another important thing that came out of National Faculty was to connect the different parts of the globe through some common theme or some concept. And it's very hard to put all of it together. I mean, we tend to teach things in terms of civilization of the week. Well what is happening in China, how does that relate to

²The End-of-Course exam was piloted at the eighth grade in the spring, 1998; the end-of-course exams for sixth and seventh grade are still being developed.

what is happening in other parts of the world? And it seems like it's too fragmented. So we spent a lot of time in National Faculty sessions trying to put it all together. [Teacher B]

These insights are critical for helping teachers develop a greater appreciation of the important themes in history and to be able to identify the important concepts that students need to know. Without this depth of content knowledge we find teachers remain tied to what is covered in the textbook and TCI (Teachers Curriculum Institute) materials.

In addition to the content taught during National Faculty, participating history teachers also learned about curriculum mapping. Most importantly, they were given the time and opportunity to begin constructing their plan for the year, with the assistance of curriculum experts.

Learning from last year's pilot districtwide performance test in eighth grade history, the curriculum leader for history, Linda Melbrech, along with a few standards coaches, developed an inservice workshop for all eighth grade history teachers to help them prepare for this year's districtwide test. The training combined understanding the important conceptual ideas with instructional strategies (thinking maps) that would help students organize what they know, and transfer that information into a coherent written structure -- in this case, a five paragraph cause and effect essay. This training, along with the sample writing prompts provided by the Curriculum office, gave teachers a number of practical strategies for preparing students for this year's test. We learned from teachers in our sample that similar training has taken place for sixth grade science teachers to help them prepare for the districtwide performance test.

Furthermore, additional support is provided to schools this year through the assistance of standards coaches. Standards coaches are teacher leaders who have demonstrated their curricular expertise through many years of successful classroom teaching. The coaches provide assistance to individual teachers and school staffs in a variety of ways: conducting demonstration lessons, assisting in the development of curriculum maps, working with new teachers on classroom management, helping teachers develop standards-based units, or collaborating with department heads to plan meetings or staff development sessions. As this is a new position this year, coaches are still feeling their way and developing a sense of their jobs. A five day institute in August, 1998 was held to prepare coaches for their new roles. The institute included training on analyzing data, curriculum mapping, using the curriculum map to "unpack" the standards, developing standards-based units, writing performance tasks, developing rubrics and scoring guides, developing culminating tasks, and group facilitation skills and peer coaching. In addition to this initial training, the standards coaches meet monthly with Area Superintendents and with their Curriculum leaders.

The position of standards coach continues to evolve, but our initial observation is that standards coaches are providing valuable additional resources to the schools, especially in the cases where coaches are assigned to the school site. It takes time for all of the coaches to develop rapport and earn the trust of fellow teachers. This "get to know you" phase seems to have occurred more rapidly in schools where the coaches are "in residence" at the school site. We have heard of a

few difficult transitions that have developed in isolated cases, which is to be expected with any new initiative -- especially one that makes the private practice of teaching, more collaborative, and therefore, more public. Our evaluation team has plans to look more closely at the impact of standards coaches this spring, once the coaches have had a chance to settle into their roles.

Professional development for principals. The district has made a concerted effort to launch intensive professional development for principals. Extenuating circumstances resulted in getting off to a slow start, but the pace has intensified as the school year progressed. The district has demonstrated their commitment to providing principals with the training they need to support the reform effort and move their schools forward. As one principal told us,

What I like about Long Beach is they tell us, ‘This is what we want you to do.’
Then they give you training so you know how to do it. [Principal A]

There has been a significant increase in the number of principal meetings and professional development sessions this year. The district has contracted with Richard Sagor and McREL for two institutes. Richard Sagor has conducted two workshops in action research -- one of the new options available to principals and teachers in the new teacher evaluation system. The McREL training in Supervision of Learning focuses on what students are learning, rather than on what the teachers are teaching, which is a significant departure from the traditional model of supervising and evaluating teachers.

In both cases, principals report that the quality of the presenters’ presentation skills detracted from the content of the message. While the pace is extremely slow, principals are finding the content thought provoking. Principals told us that they found two key ideas helpful in focusing what they look for in classrooms, and the feedback they provide to teachers. One piece is making sure that students know what they are learning. The second is the quality of feedback given to students to guide their learning. One principal explained how she is using these ideas --

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In addition to these formal Principal Institutes, the district is providing training for principals on all of the new initiatives that are being introduced to teachers: the

Math Standards Assessment Portfolio, Curriculum Mapping, etc. They have also arranged for principals to participate in the middle school reading strategies institute, which incorporates using the thinking maps that teachers have been encouraged to use in their teaching. The pace of all of this instruction has been intense, leaving little time for principals to think about how these new ideas -- or old ideas repackaged with new labels -- can be used most effectively to support teaching and learning.

Overall, the district is moving rapidly in a direction that makes sense, integrating curriculum, instruction, and assessment while providing support to schools via standards coaches, resource materials and professional development. The New Teacher Support program has been extremely helpful for supporting new teachers as they try to make sense of all of this while learning to teach. From the beginning of the year the message to everyone in the district has been very focused. The superintendent told his staff that they had to do two things this year: “work harder and raise test scores!” Everyone is working very hard toward that goal, however, as one would expect, when attempting to make so many changes in so many different parts of the system simultaneously, there are often glitches. Timing is not always synchronized, individuals differ in the comfort levels in coping with change, and in their learning rates. In the next section, we discuss some of the significant issues that have developed as educators attempt to implement these new initiatives.

III. Implementation from the perspective of teachers and principals at school sites.

While we encountered a wide range of reactions from teachers and principals to the new initiatives in the district, the one overwhelming observation is that teachers are extremely stressed. When we visited the district last spring, we found teachers were very tired and stress levels were high, but we felt that the stress had had an energizing effect because teachers were able to see positive results from their efforts. This year we are concerned that the stress level is so high that it is beginning to have debilitating effects.

In November at the Carpe Diem Awards Dinner, Superintendent, Carl Cohn acknowledged that he was aware of the elevated stress levels of middle school teachers, and reassured teachers that the district understood their situation and would be responsive to their needs. In December, in *Standard Time*, Chris Dominguez noted, “Many of these techniques will be introduced on a pilot basis, so teachers are not overwhelmed.” Our experience is that this concession is insufficient to relieve the anxiety of most teachers. When we returned to the district in January, the stress level had not subsided at all.

It is important to note that teachers were not opposed to the ideas themselves. Moreover, most teachers and administrators saw the value of the new initiatives and agreed that all of these developments are needed. Nevertheless, many teachers were feeling overwhelmed. It appears that a number of factors are contributing to significantly raising teachers’ stress levels: the number of new strategies that are being introduced, the pace of change, as well as the process -- **how** they are being introduced to classroom teachers and building administrators.

Everywhere we went we heard recurring variations of the same theme. The source of the anxiety varied from department to department and from school to school. In some instances it was the pressure to improve test scores on the districtwide performance assessments:

The language arts department is just completely stressed, period. And they feel incredible pressure [to improve students scores on the performance assessments.]

And I know the new teachers are just, even now, really feeling the pressure just trying to figure it all out. [Teacher C]

Another teacher told us:

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One history department chair indicated that her teachers were also reaching their limits:

We're pretty much at that top out level. And I can see why teachers are gonna burn out. I think you're gonna see, the next coming year, a lot of young teachers leave teaching. Because it's a terrible burnout job.... Plus, our English department is really on overflow. So I think one more thing they have to worry about would be too much. [Teacher E]

In other situations it was not a single innovation that caused concern, but the accumulative effects of so many new initiatives all at once:

The coaching has made people a little bit uncomfortable at first and then all the requirements and you have to have content standards and agendas -- all those things are not bad, but I think after everything we went through last year, people sort of thought we can come back and we can teach. [Instead of refine and develop the things that were new and difficult last year] we just have new and more difficult things. So it's kind of a pile and a pile on a pile. Just like you give children think time, you need to give [adults] think time and need to let them absorb what they've learned, and then go on to the next thing. [Teacher F]

Not surprisingly, the situation was exacerbated for first year teachers --

He's so overwhelmed with so many things that sometimes I don't think he knows whether he's coming or going and understandably so. I mean, the reform movement in education has become serious business! ... I think one of the frustrations is the district wants to see results quickly. We're doing everything we can to get results and a lot of people just don't want to wait [Teacher G]

Curriculum mapping, in particular, has overwhelmed many teachers because it is a time consuming process, even though most teachers admit that it is a valuable tool.

This is just more detailed than some people have done in the past. But to be honest with you, we're all feeling really overwhelmed with all this. Every time we have a department meeting, it's guess what we're doing now? And everyone is just pulling their hair out. And some people are just putting their heels in and saying, you know what? Next door -- he said, I'm thinking about just quitting.

They're just asking too much -- and he's an excellent teacher.... And then another teacher here that's really experienced, her saying the same thing is like -- it's scary! I think they might push some people out, unfortunately. [Teacher D]

On the other hand, not all teachers have experienced curriculum mapping as an arduous task. Some teachers expressed real excitement about the insights they've gained from the process.

It tells me exactly what I need to do. It tells me the essential question up there, what are the human developments from Homo Habilis to Cro Magnon, that's just an objective put into question form. And my kids were able to understand that the project they're working on is answering that question and then I show them that this is one of the things you have to know before you get to seventh grade. [Teacher A]

First of all, I became more organized with the curriculum map. I mean, we expect our students to map things; to use graphic organizers; and the whole reason behind that is to get them organized in their thinking, so, this serves the very same purpose. Another important thing that this does is it shows the gaps. And we do have those. So we need to work on filling those in. Also, within the areas that are filled in with curriculum objectives, I do feel, and I think 6th grade teachers would agree, that some of the objectives are not as relevant, perhaps, or as important as others. And we need to look at those and see what needs to be changed or eliminated. This is really a living document. I mean, nothing is planted firmly in the ground here. And I think that's the beauty of it is that we can change it. And if you change it, it doesn't mean that it's a weak document, it just means that we're growing. [Teacher B]

For math teachers the source of the stress is the new math standards assessment portfolios. During the Carpe Diem workshop on Math Assessment Portfolios, the presenters tried to reassure teachers that the portfolio was not really something new, but rather it is an organizational strategy for collecting in one place all of the major tests and assignments that together constitute a comprehensive assessment of student achievement. The purpose of the assessment portfolios is to provide a classroom-level certification of students' attainment of the math content standards. While this first year is a pilot year, teachers were told that the math portfolios would be audited by the district. Just how they will be evaluated, or how the portfolio scores might be used remains unclear. Part of the stress is resulting from the feeling that the additional requirements will take class time and teacher time, in what is already a very full year.

To reduce the tension at all of the schools, principals are having to run interference and provide a lot of support to their teachers to help keep things in perspective. One principal adopted the strategy of synthesizing all of the various efforts to show teachers how they fit into the big picture.

One of the things I'm trying to do with the staff, because there's so many different things in the district, as you've said. There's this, this, this, this, and this. A lot of it really is all of the same piece. And I'm trying very hard to make it look that way to the staff and to present it that way, that this, that key results, PQR, what we are trying to do here at the site...it's really all the same thing. So that people don't feel quite so frazzled. [Principal B]

Another principal finds herself doing more counseling and cheerleading these days:

[The department chair] is very concerned too, about how we're going to do these portfolios. And I said, it's a pilot year. It's our year to muck around with it. It does not have to be perfect. We do have to try the key pieces, Because the district is going to change it and if you don't have enough input to offer, we're going to be stuck with this next year. So write down your observations, make sure your teachers are getting their feet wet, and I tell you, it's going to evolve. I know it's going to evolve.... But that is causing a lot of stress. [After a meeting with the math department a standards coach] said the teachers were very aggressive and very upset and they needed some venting time before she could even move on. [Principal A]

This additional responsibility is increasingly difficult when principals are being pulled out of the building more than ever before. Although, principals need to be informed and understand where the district is going and how it plans to get there, they all expressed frustration that too much of the out-of-building time was spent in meetings where information was disseminated, rather than engaging in professional learning. All agreed that they would like to explore other vehicles for communicating information, as benefits do not outweigh the costs of being off campus. This was especially true when meetings were K-8, and many of the issues discussed only applied to elementary schools.

IV. Reflections on the factors that seem to affect educator's reactions.

Three factors seemed to have a strong influence on how teachers and principals experienced the new reform initiatives. The first was whether or not educators were given sufficient opportunity to understand "the big picture." The second was timing -- **when** the new ideas were introduced, and how much time teachers had to work with them and understand the purpose. The third factor was whether or not educators' felt they had any voice in implementing change and whether their input was valued.

Those teachers who were most enthusiastic about the new strategies for furthering standards reform, were those teachers who have had the greatest opportunity to learn about, digest, and experiment with how to make them work. This group included standards coaches, department heads, participants in the National Faculty Institutes, and some of the teachers who had had significant opportunities to work with standards coaches at the school site. There was an observable correlation between educators' comfort with the new initiatives and their opportunity

to learn and understand the new ideas. The more thorough the initial training, and the more time teachers had to play with the ideas, with the help of coaching support, the more beneficial teachers found the innovations while enduring the least amount of stress. Due to the rapid pace of change, the district has relied heavily on a trainer of trainers model, where one or two people from each school attend a training session, and then they are responsible for going back to the building to train their colleagues. This strategy can often be problematic depending on the skills of the individuals trained. Moreover, what we usually find is that it is difficult to find the time back at the site to conduct a “full-blown” workshop, so presentations become abbreviated, practice time and modeling are often cut short. The result is often too superficial to enable teachers to understand the process well enough to make it their own. Given the full agendas at each school, and the large number of new initiatives that are being disseminated, much of the training has yet to take place because time is so scarce.

The training provided to standards coaches is a good example. The standards coaches training began with an overview of the big picture. They had the opportunity to read the book on Mapping the Big Picture, and they have had the opportunity to play around with ideas, and work with their colleagues to put together a curriculum map. These experiences have helped them to see the powerful potential of the tool.

Under this content standard goes this benchmark, and then under that goes the curriculum objectives. And that curriculum objective part was really easy for me to understand cause it was a document that was already there. It just, it kind of forced us to look back at those documents and realize, "Oh, it's all here." It's not like we're recreating, we're not trying to rewrite the curriculum, it's just taking what's already there and using it. And they gave us a lot of really nice template-kind of pages where we could actually build units.... It's kind of like I have to keep visualizing it in my head and talking about it. And the more I talk about it, the more I kind of go, "Yeah. This all makes sense." What the district's asking us to do, I know and sometimes it seems laborious and a lot of teachers are regarding it as another layer. You keep hearing that language. "It's just another layer. It's another layer." But, they all kind of, all the pieces all kind of dovetail, I guess. And so I feel like if we're doing one thing, it just naturally leads to another. [Standards Coach A]

The value of the curriculum map became obvious to another standards coach as she planned lessons with another teacher.

We're changing a lot of things as we go because one of our focuses here is curriculum mapping and looking at what we're teaching and why we're teaching it and whether or not it fits. So I think that's probably another reason why we're more on schedule is because we're looking at every activity we do, we look at it and ask ourselves the question, does it teach to the standard, what do we expect the kids to do at the end. And we've even started planning backwards. When we start a unit, we look at their assessment and what they have to do at the end, and then we fit everything in that teaches to the assessment -- what skills they have to have and what knowledge they have to have in order to do that assessment. [...]

We're using all the open-ended writing prompts, the open-ended science prompts [as our assessments and as our framework for all our units.] [Standards Coach B]

The second factor that made a significant difference in teachers' reaction to the new changes was timing. There was a marked difference between history teachers who attended National Faculty in the summer, where they made a significant start on the process, and other subject area teachers who were introduced to it during the school year. One math teacher told us:

All we've seen is what we've been told that they'll [math assessment portfolios] include. And they should be nice -- the things that's bugging me is they want us to have these -- then why weren't they given to us before the year started so we can plan? [Teacher H]

History, because of its natural chronology is more straight forward and easier to map. As one of the teachers who teaches a core, and had attended the National Faculty, and had already constructed one map told us:

Language arts is not chronological and it's not as content driven so it's more of a challenge. [Teacher A]

Even the language arts standards coaches, who are developing models for teachers, are struggling with constructing a curriculum map for language arts. When we visited in January, they were still working on their's. Even though each of these initiatives are valuable, they are time consuming. During the school year, few staffs have been able to find the time required work with colleagues to realize the potential benefits that curriculum mapping or the assessment portfolio can provide.

Finally, as we spoke to teachers and administrators we noticed a significant departure from the conditions we described in our last report. In August, 1998, we wrote:

District leaders are working to build an organization where everyone -- teachers, principals, central office administrators -- are continually expanding their capacity to understand the complexities of systemic change. By blending top-down and bottom-up efforts, the designers are learning to monitor the effects of their implementation strategies, seeking out feedback from both inside and outside the district, listening to the feedback they receive, 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 responsible for producing results, it engenders commitment to a shared vision.

(P.2) (emphasis added)

We increasingly heard comments about top-down mandates, where no input from teachers was sought. In fact we heard of a few incidents where individuals' questions were not even recognized. Teachers and Administrators questions were not respected; they were essentially told to "just do it, and don't worry about it." They felt that administrators are moving so fast with the reforms that they no longer take time to listen to feedback or seek input as to how to improve the effort from those people responsible for implementing it.

For example, in the Math Portfolio training provided at Carpe Diem, although teachers were given clear directions as to what was to be included, and how it was to be constructed, it did not explain the purpose. The training focused on the guidelines for work that would be put into the portfolio, how much scaffolding teachers could provide, whether the work had to be done in class or could be part of a homework assignment. The notion of an assessment portfolio does imply that there will be some sort of evaluation of the portfolio as a whole, but how the portfolio will be assessed and how the scores will be used was never explained. Teachers were never told what the purpose was, how the portfolios would be used, or why they were being asked to do this. As a result, it was not surprising to find that teachers' understanding of the purpose of the assessment portfolio was all over the map -- "to follow the student from one teacher to the next, so teachers will know where each student is." "To inform your instruction so you know what each student needs to work on," or to "hold teachers accountable, to be sure they are teaching to the standards," to "document student achievement on the standards and benchmarks to support promotion and retention decisions" to "standardize everything we teach --to turn us into 'cookie-cutter' teachers." Teachers have a need to understand why they are being asked to do things differently. If they understand the purpose, teachers are more likely to see the value and make a greater effort to comply with requests.

V. Concluding Remarks

Everyone is feeling great pressure to increase tests scores, and we agree that the need is urgent. However, there are also human factors that need attention as well. We suggest that the district take time to review some of the important lessons that they've been teaching in many of the quality professional learning opportunities that have been provided for teachers. The lesson that this teacher learned about enhancing student learning applies to adult as well.

I think last year what I noticed anyway, and I've improved on that this year, I'm taking specific goals for the kids and at the end we do loop them back together. So this year I think there will be a tremendous amount of growth because the teachers are actually starting to see that you can't just lay this on them like that, you need to break it up into meaningful bits. [At the middle school reading institute] we talked about ways to help the kids take this new knowledge that we're giving them and apply it to background knowledge. I mean if the connection isn't made, then no learning is taking place. [Teacher I] (emphasis added)

Everyone is working very hard to improve test scores. Teachers want to see better results too, but they also need think time. They need to have time to reflect on the new ideas they are learning and to connect those ideas to what they already know. We would all do well to keep in mind the important insight one of the standards coaches shared with us:

In a standards-based utopia, there is no 'didn't get it.' [Standards Coach C]

We all need to be reminded of that, whether we are working with kids, or with the adults. It may take some longer than others, but the challenge is to find a way to enable everyone to meet the standards.