

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

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**I. Introduction**

On August 30, 1997, we submitted an update report to the Foundation on the status of standards-based reform in Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). In that report, we noted progress in several areas. We talked about the shift in standards-based activities from the central office to the area offices. We saw this as a healthy move, and thought that over time, they would reach a balance that would best meet the needs of the schools.

In addition to the positive developments, we commented on a number of areas which required further effort in order to develop a standards-based environment for teaching and learning. We identified professional development as an area needing increased attention and resources by the district, areas, and individual schools, and urged a comprehensive plan for improving the support and guidance for teachers who must help students meet the newly adopted standards. To quote our report:

We found the principals and teachers in our sample increasingly knowledgeable about the standards, but we also recognized their need for additional guidance and support as they move from conceptual understanding to actual classroom implementation. Given the teachers' needs and the pressure they are feeling about improving students' performance, there has never been a better time for the district and area offices to establish a comprehensive standards-driven professional development effort.

While professional development is essential to advance standards-based reform, we also suggested that the district had to provide more consistent and solid support for low performing middle school students. While individual schools implemented various approaches to identify and monitor students, their interventions largely seemed remedial and tutorial in nature. The district seemed to exhibit a "hands-off" approach, and the schools developed piecemeal responses for the students with multiple Fs. While some schools or individual teams within schools looked inward about the possible causes of student failure, this was not a common response to the number of low performing students.

Concerning students with low performance, a districtwide committee began to plan for the Preparatory Academy which was scheduled to open in the fall of 1997. With neither a strong research base to establish a foundation for the school, nor a teaching force experienced with such a student population, the district faced a major challenge.

During the fall, our three person evaluation team visited the district to collect information for this update memorandum and to start developing our evaluation design for the next grant period. We interviewed central office administrators, area superintendents, and the four principals of our sample schools. We met with the vice president of the Long Beach Community Partnership. We also attended the Open House of the Preparatory Academy and then met with the acting principal, and a small team from the school. Throughout the fall, our on-site evaluator attended meetings of the Middle School Advisory Committee.

We greatly appreciated the district's openness with our team, and their candor and professionalism. We found it impressive that the Middle School Advisory Committee had reviewed our August report and, in fact, had debated our observations and findings. Several of the schools also shared our report with their staffs, and found it elicited good conversation and reflection.

The Foundation requested that this report serve as a brief update, and we have tried to honor that request. Therefore, we will highlight only the following issues

- Increasing Unity of Vision and Direction for Standards-based Reform
- Professional Development
- Support and Intervention for Students with Low Performance
- Student Assessment

## **II. Increasing Unity of Vision and Coherence for Standards-Based Reform**

More than ever before, we observed a unity and shared sense of purpose between the district and area offices, among the areas themselves, and between the area offices and the schools in our sample. When we visited LBUSD, many of those we interviewed were contributing to the district's proposal to the Foundation. Increasingly, the line blurs between middle school reform and the Foundation work. We heard an anecdote about a group sitting around and brainstorming about the proposal. One of the participants commented, "You know, this isn't a Clark proposal, this is long range planning!"

The district office continues to do much of the planning and development work, but more and more, they are working alongside of area staff on issues of implementation. One telling example is the sharing of area and district staff to concentrate resources and support teachers in specific areas such as reading and writing. As an illustration, an instructional specialist from one area provides professional development in the area, and also works with the district curriculum staff in providing professional development throughout LBUSD. In another situation, an area staff member works closely with the district curriculum staff to provide English Language Development (ELD) institutes. To quote one of the area superintendents:

Everything we do we work directly with Chris' office [Instruction, Curriculum and Professional Development]. We're not doing this [a series of workshops]

in isolation by ourselves anymore. These workshops and professional development programs are not just designed for our folks, anybody can come.

In terms of area-to-area coherence, we identified several commonalities. First, each area now has some type of system to more intimately connect at least two middle schools within an area to share expertise, knowledge, and strategies. Frequently, area superintendents are pairing schools and teaming principals. Many different pairings now exist: between focus and non-focus schools; between two schools that have started new GATE programs; between schools with similar schedules (traditional year schools); between schools with similar demographics and challenges; and between a large school (which desires to develop smaller learning communities) and a smaller school. In one area, we discovered that site-to-site visits result in discussions about what principals have observed and what they can do to support each other. While the process may vary, from one area superintendent's perspective, it looks something like this:

I have them lined up to visit each other's schools. One day a month, one whole day a month, they have to go to each other's schools and then report back to me about the kinds of things that they're seeing. Where is the rigorous and challenging curriculum? What is a standards-based classroom?

Second, area superintendents consistently identified the same set of priorities in supporting the needs of teachers and students. In terms of academics, reading comprehension is a case in point. Across all areas, there seems to be agreement that this is one of the major limitations of middle school students who are struggling with their school work. Therefore, professional development for reading comprehension is a high priority and area offices allocate resources to this effort. Professional development takes many different forms, but the district is building a program paralleling ELIC training that teachers believe has been successful for improving the reading comprehension of limited English speaking students.

Another issue we heard across all areas is the need for teacher support at the school level. On a very optimistic note, the area office superintendents and staff seem to be developing a proactive system of support for the schools. It is not uncommon to hear a conversation from area staff that begins with, "How can this office now support you [school level educators] to make sure you're doing X or Y?" To enable more consistent support to schools, some of the areas are reconfiguring their staffing patterns, trying to move people from administrative responsibilities to substantive areas in which the schools need direct teacher support and assistance (e.g., bilingual education, reading). Likewise, we are beginning to sense a tendency by area superintendents to identify what they called, "non-negotiables" for their schools. For instance, in one area, all the middle schools agreed that they would have some areas of similar focus as they engage in long range planning with each other. To ensure this occurs, each school is identifying a teacher on site who will be freed up 50 per cent time to become a standards coach. This team will participate in training and will work with their colleagues to help students produce quality work.

Similarly, we have previously reported on the changing role of department heads at the school level. For the first time, we heard all three area superintendents talking about specific inservice

opportunities for department heads. We also heard much more interest in organizing department heads' time to focus specifically on supporting teaching and learning within the context of the standards. This effort entails training and more focused supervision of their work.

Our recent conversations with principals confirmed our sense that area office staff are more proactive and more "hands-on" with regard to standards implementation in the middle schools. Principals were more likely to talk about their interactions with the area offices than in previous visits. This corroborated our perception of a growing partnership between schools and area offices, and between schools within each area.

The increasing coherence of standards reform across the district has produced a deeper level of understanding. Principals seem increasingly aware of the challenges faced by middle school teachers in attempting to promote standards-based instruction in classrooms. They are clearer about their own responsibilities for helping teachers with instructional strategies and curriculum that will put the content standards into action. Through interviews with central and area office staff and visits with principals in our four sample schools, we sense that schools range from those at early stages of readiness to those that are at an advanced phase. One of the area superintendents said it like this:

They're all over the map...All schools are at a point that they know that standards are the core curriculum. Where they're not all at the same point is, and this is something we're working on this year, is what is a standards lesson? The big thing that we're talking about is that you don't do your lesson and say, "Well, how does it fit the standard?" You look at the standard and design the lesson. So that message is loud and clear.

### **III. Professional Development**

With greater coherence among central office, area offices, and schools, LBUSD now seems well positioned to implement a comprehensive model of staff development, one which has the capacity to integrate content standards and assessment into all training. Although the district is still developing this strategic plan, and not all of the pieces are in place, we saw evidence that a coherent policy is emerging. The model is expected to incorporate a consistent training focus for every level of district staff. Administratively, professional development is now merged with curriculum and instruction in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, to provide more consistent training to all teachers, including special education and ELD teachers, as well as principals and central office staff.

Central Office. All of the curriculum and professional development staff have attended training on assessment to learn how to write performance tasks and scoring guides. A technical assistance advisor from the research office is now working with them to develop performance tasks in all of the content areas. As draft performance tasks are revised, selected teachers are asked to pilot them in their classrooms, and then submit student work samples to begin the conversation about creating task-specific scoring guides and developing a shared understanding

of what exemplary student work looks like. By having teachers participate in the development of a variety of performance tasks for each standard and supporting teachers as they learn to use them, teachers become clear about the standards and more knowledgeable about strategies for assessing the standards within their classrooms. Including teachers in the development process provides them with a more complete picture of standards reform and its implications for instruction.

Induction. The top professional development priority in the district this year is an induction program. Over the last two years LBUSD has hired 900 teachers, 750 of whom are brand new teachers. To provide support for these new teachers, the district developed an on-going professional development program, which began with a five-day orientation, in which the teachers learned about the content standards, and received two weeks of lesson plans to “get started.” By pooling resources and seeking additional grants, the district has strengthened and expanded the mentor teacher program to provide every new teacher with a New Teacher Support Provider, or coach. The new teachers get six release days to meet with their coach, to visit other classrooms, or to have their coach come in to observe them. The coaches receive training in how to support a new teacher, and how to engage in reflective conversations about the new teacher’s work. In addition, there is one teacher site coordinator for every six new teachers at each school. Three times a year the coordinator uses a Pathwise assessment tool, which is based on the California teaching professional standards, to monitor each teacher’s development in four domains: 1) Organizing Content for Student Learning, 2) Creating an Effective Learning Environment, 3) Teaching for Student Learning, and 4) Teacher Professionalism. This monitoring/coaching approach has union support, with the assurance that it will not be used for evaluation purposes. Ongoing professional development focuses on supporting the new teachers’ individual induction plans in literacy strategies, math, and content standards.

To strengthen the induction of new teachers, LBUSD is also creating linkages between their professional development program and local preservice programs. The district has strong internship programs with California State Long Beach and California State Dominguez Hills. Many of the district’s curriculum staff teach the methods courses at Dominguez Hills, and LBUSD staff are working with Cal State Long Beach to revise their teacher education classes, infusing standards into all of the courses. The internship programs facilitate getting the emergency-credentialed teachers and interns into pre-service programs, where they learn about the Long Beach standards in their university course work.

Inservice Training. For practicing teachers, the district is putting together a system of institutes in each of the core disciplines. The institute courses build content knowledge around several of the standards, explore ways to assess students’ content knowledge and the instructional strategies and resources needed to enable children to achieve at higher levels. The institutes also provide training in designing standards-based lessons and looking at student work in relation to the standards. Although there appears to be a consensus within the district that student work must be an integral part of all district professional development efforts, we found no consistent approach to utilizing student work. In some settings we heard about using the Education Trust model; in other settings, teachers used the Protocol strategy; and in still other settings, educators

struggled with both the purpose and the process for analyzing student work. We heard about plans to begin training department chairs and principals in a consistent strategy next spring and summer.

Curriculum coaches provide follow-up to the institutes through classroom work with teachers where they conduct model lessons, and observe and coach teachers to implement standards. Currently the district has coaches for early literacy, middle and high school literacy, reading and writing to learn, ELD, and K-12 mathematics.

This past summer the math and science curriculum staff conducted institutes aimed at transforming the role of department chair to one of instructional leader to support standards implementation. In the course, department chairs learned a process for shaping department meetings around strengthening content knowledge, developing standards-based units, and looking at student work. Teachers responded so enthusiastically that a group of department chairs is now revising the job description for department chairs and tying it to providing support for standards implementation. The district is planning similar institutes for department chairs in the other content areas. Beginning in Spring 1998, department chairs will participate in training based on a consistent strategy for analyzing student work, enabling them to facilitate the process in their department meetings.

Principals. Professional development for principals is collaboratively designed among the area superintendents and the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development. The district organized a five-day summer institute for principals which focused on standards implementation, with each of the curriculum coordinators presenting on the standards in their content area. The institute also focused on issues of site-based management, different governance structures and the role of department chairs and administrative staff in the school. At Carpe Diem, Debra Pickering, a consultant, conducted a session for principals on supervising a standards-based school. She will provide ongoing principal training over a two-year period, including summer institutes, which will emphasize supervising standards implementation, student learning, and the analysis of student work.

Area superintendents provide additional training and support with some variation by area. For example, in one area, middle school principals undertake action research projects focused on literacy, the district's top instructional priority. Each project's aim is to improve reading comprehension skills, and to get teachers to become better diagnosticians of student learning. All of the area offices offer study groups for principals on James Popham's, *Classroom Assessment: What Teachers Need to Know*. Some area superintendents have begun mandating focus school participation in some of the institutes to reinforce the commitment to raising student achievement.

Special Education. At this point, special education represents a special case in the district's approach to professional development. Historically, special education teachers have maintained a separate status in the schools; their funding was separate, carrying with it specific guidelines and reporting structures. Incorporating special education into its standards reform remains a

challenge for Long Beach. The district recently initiated a concerted effort to train special education teachers in the content standards, providing the same training that classroom teachers have already had. The superintendent chairs a steering committee to oversee the reform of special education. In addition, the district plans to train principals to understand and monitor what standards look like in special education classrooms. At the same time, the district is already working with CSU Long Beach to get paraprofessionals into the special education certification program in order to expand the pool of qualified special education teachers for the district. As this training effort progresses, the district plans to identify a few schools to serve as models of standards-based special education for the rest of the district.

Overall, all of the pieces of a comprehensive professional development program seem to be either in place, or in the works. One of the professional development staff members seemed to capture the picture that is emerging when she said:

Our understanding of what quality staff development is has really taken some great leaps forward. I found in my office that I just moved into a transparency that someone left behind that I just love. It says, "Staff development without follow-up is malpractice." I think that's becoming our collective consciousness.

#### **IV. Support and Intervention for Students with Low Performance**

As the professional development program gets up and running, we hope to see teachers more knowledgeable about content and pedagogy, and more skilled at designing lessons to meet the district's standards and the students' distinct learning needs. In the interim, schools are responsible for identifying students who are failing, and providing additional academic support as soon as possible in the school year. Some schools are trying to get a head start on addressing student problems by improving articulation between the elementary and middle schools and starting orientation programs for sixth graders. When reading seems to be the precipitating problem, areas and/or schools are trying to develop programs that allow students the time needed to improve their reading skills and achieve passing grades.

We identified different models of intervention/student support programs in our last evaluation report to the Foundation, and it is our understanding that the Middle School Advisory Committee will continue this effort. In fact, a subcommittee will focus on these programs, with an eye on what seems to be most effective. We hope that area staff will supplement this effort by assessing the current school climate, organization and teaching strategies to ensure that schools are doing all they can to meet the needs of their diverse student bodies. When we return for our next evaluation visit, we will look at school-based efforts to identify and support low performing students.

In its effort to provide assistance to low performing students and to prohibit social promotion, LBUSD opened the Long Beach Preparatory Academy for students who, in 1997, had multiple Fs and could not matriculate to high school in the fall. Schools referred over 400 students to the

Academy which was designed to meet both their social and academic needs. The Academy operates on a block schedule for core classes, and has a life skills course as well as core workshops for students to complete projects or get additional help. The school also offers mentorships and community service opportunities.

Like many new undertakings, the Academy had major start-up problems. While we did not find this surprising, the stakes are high and all eyes are on the mistakes or problems. Administrators found it difficult to staff the Academy because few LBUSD teachers opted for transfers. As a result many Academy teachers are either new to the district or new to teaching. The district did not encourage the best and brightest of their own teaching pool to apply to teach at the Academy; the teacher recruitment did not emphasize opportunities for professional growth, creativity and innovation. Many of the teachers with the skills needed to work with youngsters who have not succeeded in mainstream schools did not apply.

For the new teachers, some training occurred in the summer, however, all staff were not on board at that time. A group who participated in the summer inservice said it was stimulating and they helped to craft the school's mission and some of the organizational elements that are now in place. We spoke with several staff members from this original core and they demonstrated a strong commitment to the Academy. While we did not meet with the principal, conversations with the area superintendent indicate that she meets weekly with staff and tries to focus on issues related to improving instruction. However, even from a brief visit to the school's Open House, we sensed a schism among existing staff in terms of expectations for students, issues of classroom management/discipline, academic challenge and reaching students with very diverse learning styles.

Districtwide, many educators seemed to think the Academy was doomed to failure from the very start, and have not actively supported its development. In our view, with the exception of the superintendent and individual educators in the district, we generally did not see much support for the Academy as an effective strategy for helping low- performing students.

## **V. Student Assessment Programs**

LBUSD continues to make progress in its efforts to develop a sound and comprehensive assessment program. The assessment program has several purposes: meeting Title I testing requirements, monitoring student progress toward the content standards, identifying instructional strengths and weaknesses, and providing parents and students with feedback on how well students are doing. The district simultaneously focuses on multiple elements including: 1) producing matrices to identify how standards will be assessed, 2) determining which measures will be used, 3) developing needed assessment tools, 4) establishing criteria for judging student performance against the standards, and 5) investigating reporting approaches. Driving all these efforts is the district's commitment to an assessment program that is compatible with the content standards yet is economically feasible and keeps to a minimum the amount of testing required.

The program design comprises two levels of assessments: those monitored and administered at a district level and those managed at the classroom level. District-level assessment tools include a standardized test and alternative measures such as performance tasks and open-ended items. Classroom-level tools include Running Records, math fact tests, projects, and portfolios. The advantages of including classroom-level measures is that these tools can be administered more frequently, can include a greater variety of assessment techniques, and can be more directly matched to the type of knowledge being taught and evaluated. The results of the classroom-level tools are due to the district office toward the end of the school year. Most of the pieces of the assessment program at the district level are already in place; therefore, the district currently targets development of assessments to be administered at the classroom level. The timetable is a little behind schedule, but progress appears to be steady.

#### Classroom- Level Assessment

The current aim of the classroom-level development efforts is to provide teachers with at least three different tools for assessing each standard. In addition, each content area has organized the development effort around a small set of standards each year. The mathematics group developed free-response items, piloted and revised them for the first set of their content standards, and expanded new item development to include a broader set of standards. The science group has already drafted assessments for the physical science standards, and is now considering science assessments which include writing prompts, performance tasks, and open-ended items. The language arts group has produced drafts for writing and proofreading measures. Similarly, drafts of assessment items for the U.S. history standards have been developed. All these items are being tried out in classrooms this year, and teacher feedback will inform revisions. Given the experience gained in drafting and piloting these first sets of items, we anticipate future development efforts will progress more smoothly and in a more timely manner. In addition, the district will pay close attention to the development of task-specific scoring guidelines to accompany these measures, and will investigate record-keeping systems that teachers can implement to record results from the classroom-embedded measures and monitor student progress.

#### District- Level Assessment

The primary district-level assessment has been CAS<sup>2</sup>, a norm-referenced measure consisting of multiple-choice items (ITAS) and performance tests in reading, writing and mathematics. The ITAS had norms that exceeded a five year limit established by the state of California; however, in anticipation of a forthcoming state test, LBUSD continued to use the CAS<sup>2</sup> up until last year. Recently, California selected the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT9) for the state test. Since LBUSD must replace the CAS<sup>2</sup> with this test, the district plans to perform an equating study (between the CAS<sup>2</sup> and the SAT9) to be able to continue to monitor progress in student achievement. We do not know if the district plans to conduct a similar study between the Spanish ITAS and the Aprenda, the Spanish language companion to the SAT9. The district will report results from the SAT9 for individual students, and by district, school and grade level. Finally, it is worth noting that recent ITAS results indicate virtually no change in middle school student performance for the past three years. Scores have remained stable across reading, language arts, and mathematics.

District-level performance assessments include writing tasks and open-ended math items. Whereas the district administers the norm-referenced measure at all grade levels (2 through 11), it only gives the performance tests to students in targeted grades (3, 5, 6, 8 and 10). District teachers score student responses to these test items on a date set aside for this purpose. One of the weaknesses of the performance component currently in place is that the district administers only one of each type of item at any grade level (one in writing and one in math). Assessment based on one performance item is less reliable than performance based on multiple items. The district is therefore considering increasing the number of items for each type of performance, and would administer a broader number of items using matrix sampling procedures (i.e., different students would take different items). In the coming spring, science and history performance tests that have been developed will be administered to students in grades 6 and 8, respectively. These performance tasks are designed to facilitate the dual assessment of writing and key knowledge in science or history. Because it is anticipated that a component of the state testing system will include tests in science and history, LBUSD will limit their efforts to expand district-level assessments in these two content areas.

Currently, the scores on the writing and math performance assessments are combined with those of the norm-referenced test for Title I reporting requirements to show how many students are meeting the standards in math and literacy. The district uses a general scale of four performance levels to describe student performance with respect to the literacy and mathematics standards. These are advanced, proficient, partially proficient, not proficient. In addition, the acceptable level of performance, or the performance standard, is at least proficient (either proficient or advanced). The district has also developed a matrix for combining scores to generate a global performance indicator of the percent of students meeting the standards. In the four schools we have been following, Spring 1997 data for middle school students, aggregated for all groups, shows that the number of students meeting or exceeding the combined literacy (reading and language arts) and mathematics standards ranges from 18.2 to 54.8 percent for grade 6 and 21.8 to 49.2 percent for grade 8. If these schools are representative of middle schools throughout the district, these results suggest that the schools have considerable work ahead to move students to the level where 90 per cent of the students are meeting or exceeding the standards.

The district office now provides schools with the data broken down by proficiency areas, by test and by specific subgroups (e.g., gender, ethnicity). This information will help the schools to determine topic areas (literacy or mathematics), grade levels, or student groups that they should be target for program improvement. It remains unclear if the district will use the same four-level scale to report data to the parents, however, it will have to summarize performance from the multiple measures comprising the district's assessment system, particularly those administered at the classroom level.

## **VI. Next Steps for Evaluation**

This brief report concludes our evaluation of the current grant cycle in LBUSD. We have reviewed the district's proposal to the Foundation and are aware of the major initiatives planned

for the next phase of standards reform. In response, our evaluation will now focus on the implementation of those plans. In particular, we will focus on the impact of the district's efforts to improve teaching and learning in middle school classrooms.