

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

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I. Introduction

In our annual report (August 1999) we described the 1998-99 school year as a challenging one in Long Beach Unified. A number of new initiatives were introduced, leaving teachers feeling overwhelmed. The state of California's new high-stakes accountability system added to the stress. Although each new initiative was an important component of the district's journey toward becoming a standards-based system, we found the implementation of these reform measures was often problematic. We wrote that the lack of attention to details in the implementation – "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" last year. We were anxious to return to the district in the fall to see how these issues were being addressed. Unfortunately, circumstances forced us to follow an alternative course.

Our fall visit to Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) was an unusual one. We had timed our visit to participate in an introductory training on the Essential Elements of Instruction (EEI). The districts' Clark proposal indicated that they planned for EEI to become the foundational course in their staff development system, so it was an important opportunity for us to learn about this new venture. Just two weeks before our trip, there was a major reorganization within the central office, doing away with the area structure, and establishing Assistant Superintendents for elementary schools, and for middle and K-8 schools. In addition, Linda Bueno-Alahwal was appointed to replace Dr. Kristi Kahl as the new administrative assistant for middle school reform while we were there. Not surprisingly, with such major organizational changes taking place so rapidly, it would take some time for the district to determine who would be responsible for what, identify support needs, and put the structures in place to carry out the district's work. Many of the initiatives introduced the previous year seemed to be temporarily on hold. It was clear that it was not the best time for the Education Matters' evaluation team to visit the district. However, rather than postpone our trip for several months, we took advantage of this opportunity to focus on three issues that we have written about in the past, which we felt would be least affected by the changes occurring in the central office. During this trip we revisited the Seamless Education Initiative from the perspective of the partners in higher education, the evolution of the Standards Coach role, and we continued to study developments at Long Beach Preparatory Academy (LBPA), including continuing to follow our sample of nine students from the 1999 class to see how they were handling the transition into high school.

Although these three issues may not appear to be connected to each other, each is significant in

LBUSD's larger vision of systemic reform. As we noted in our August, 1998 report:

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. (p.18)

The district's commitment to the Seamless Education Initiative, a collaborative effort with California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), and Long Beach City College (LBCC), is an investment in ensuring that future teachers receive quality preparation. The introduction of standards coaches is a district initiative to improve the quality of instruction of practicing teachers, by providing in-class support to teachers working toward implementing standards-based classrooms. And, in the long-term, the district's efforts to end social promotion with the eighth grade initiative and Long Beach Preparatory Academy can be thought of as a "field test" of the districts' approach to raising student achievement by improving the quality of teaching throughout the district. Our purpose in studying Prep Academy is to help all of us develop a better understanding of how to reach the students who are most at risk of academic failure.

II. Seamless Education.

In 1998, as we began learning about the Long Beach Education Partnership and the Seamless Education Initiative, we were amazed at the level of collaboration that Judy Seal, Administrator for the Partnership and Chris Dominguez, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, described. Their description made the partnership sound almost "too good to be true." By their account, the Seamless Education initiative had achieved a degree of cooperation and commitment that is rare in school-university partnerships. What we learned from talking with faculty and administrators across the university revealed a remarkable institution-wide commitment to improving teacher preparation, one that is stimulating significant reforms in teaching K-16. The Seamless Education venture is built upon a deep commitment from the leaders of all three institutions, and a willingness within each organization to question current practices, and think systemically across institutional borders.

The building of the partnership began with the leadership of all three institutions getting together to discuss issues of mutual concern. The University and City College were troubled by the large number of students coming to their campus in need of remedial coursework, particularly in writing and math. The school district's concerns focused on how poorly prepared CSULB graduates were to teach in urban classrooms. They recognized immediately that improvements were needed K-16 that would benefit both the university and the school district. The stronger the teaching staff, the better prepared students would be to enter college. What makes this initiative so powerful is that it has the support of all the high level administrators in each organization. On the district-side the superintendent, assistant superintendents, and curriculum leaders are all actively involved. At the university, the president, provost, the Deans of all three colleges, and most department chairs are invested in the Seamless Education initiative. Their commitment has been critical as these are the people who have the power to establish policies that not only support, but reward participation in the reform effort. Their leadership is changing

the culture of the university by getting people talking and working together within and across departments, colleges, and even across institutions. Deans have encouraged and rewarded faculty participation by including work with teacher education as part of the faculty scholarship requirement. The provost's office has sent a strong message to the academic senate and all department chairs that this is a university priority, adopting the theme, "It takes an entire university to educate a teacher."

Moreover, the Partnership leadership has collaboratively created structural and financial interdependence by creating a partnership organization and hiring an administrator to run it, funded by all three institutions. They have gone after grants that require 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. One administrator characterized the partnership this way:

It's like any relationship. You're not always going to be happy, you're not always going to agree, you're not always going to get along. But as long as you can continue to focus on what the goals are, you can make up!

A few of the significant initiatives that have developed out of the Seamless partnership are 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.

Faculty Professional Development- In an effort to align the state and district standards with university entrance requirements and courses, Seamless Education has introduced many CSU faculty members to the concept of standards-based teaching. Furthermore, the effort to create a standards-based teacher education program has required some additional education for university faculty. Grant funds have made it possible for faculty to attend conferences and to fund a faculty member to coordinate professional development for university faculty. They have conducted workshops to introduce faculty to standards by identifying learning outcomes for their own courses, and then learning to write a standards-based syllabi that delineate the content and skills that students are expected to master. In addition, the faculty were introduced to the state and district standards, as well as the NCATE standards and asked to examine where those standards are taught in the teacher education curriculum. To facilitate this process, district standards coaches and curriculum leaders guided the faculty through the process of making curriculum maps to identify gaps and redundancies. They have also begun to address the question of how to assess the standards within each course. The final focus will be on pedagogy, and improving the quality of instruction across the university, where traditional lecture formats predominate.

A focus on Middle School preparation – The partnership has also brought attention to the need to prepare teachers to work at the middle level. Traditionally, middle school teachers either had elementary training, via a multiple subject K-8 credential, or a single subject secondary credential. Neither program provided specific training for the developmental needs of middle

school students. The new program will focus on the body of ideas and principles unique to middle level education to better prepare teachers to “meet the particular needs of young adolescents in a multicultural, multilingual society” (Draft proposal for Middle Level Masters Degree). CSULB has developed a multiple subject credential with a middle school emphasis, which will begin with its first entering class of students in Fall 2000. As with the new elementary program (ITEP), there is a special emphasis on deepening subject matter preparation, with students required to complete endorsements in two subject areas. It will be largely a school-based program located at Hill Middle School, with extensive classroom experience built-in throughout the four years of the program, and substantial involvement of LBUSD teachers teaching courses following a Professional Development School (PDS) model. There is also a new masters degree program for middle level teachers in the works, that will offer increased specialization for middle school teachers. The hope is to get the masters program approved this year.

Recruitment of Future Teachers – Within the state of California, and especially in the Long Beach area, there is a critical shortage of qualified teachers; the need is particularly acute in middle school math and science. As one of the premier teacher education institutions in the region, CSULB has initiated a comprehensive strategic plan to increase the number of highly skilled teachers, and to diversity the local teaching pool. The Seamless Education Initiative has facilitated this recruitment effort by using the established partnership to work with both the school district and the LBCC.

First, a team of CSULB teacher preparation faculty now routinely reach out to LBUSD students, talking with middle and high school students about college readiness and teaching as a career choice. The university is also more actively recruiting from the community college system. To this end, a recruitment steering committee has focused on easing the transition from community college into university; including improvements in community college advising regarding prerequisites need to move from one program into another. CSULB is also working to do a better job of recruiting potential teachers from within its own student body. A National Science Foundation (NSF) grant obtained by the College of Science and Mathematics targets increasing the number of highly trained math and science teachers. Specifically, the funding supported the development of Student Access to Science (SATS) centers within the Long Beach Unified School District. Currently, seven full-time CSULB staff members work on these access issues, conducting Friday seminars about possible career options in math and science. The goal is to bring more high quality teachers into the high schools and middle schools so that the university will get better prepared students as undergraduates in those areas, and hopefully some of them will become teachers.

The university's efforts to increase the diversity of the teaching profession has also been launched using multiple strategies. Most CSULB students enter the system having been educated in LBUSD or other neighboring school districts. Through such community ties, CSULB ethnic student organizations on campus have been identified as potential resources for increasing the availability of highly trained teachers. We learned that in some cases, there was significant community support to get local students to attend the university and think about

teaching as a career. However, there is still much work to do, especially within the African American community. The effort to recruit students of color has led to the identification of some non-traditional routes to teaching such as the recruitment of local school district paraprofessionals. Instructional aides very often reflect the diverse background of the student population to a greater extent than the current teaching force. Notably, CSULB officials recognize that sensitivity must be exercised when recruiting students of color for the teaching profession. A balance between personal autonomy and a collective identity (i.e., "Be a role model, go recruit in your community") is sought in these interactions. Finally, changing the demographics of the CSULB faculty to reflect the broader diversity of the seamless community is seen as an important pathway to diversifying the local K-12 teaching pool:

What we've tried to do within just our own hiring pattern at the university is to work very hard at changing the profile of our own faculty. And that obviously brings more voices to the table through personal experience and passion and commitment, who then speak more frequently, more passionately about [diversifying the local teaching pool].

The issue of recruitment exemplifies the comprehensive, and inclusive approach that has characterized the Seamless Education Initiative. Most of the university's actions have either directly involved the local school districts, the area community colleges, or both. It is also a demonstration that the partnership has strengthened each organizations ability to achieve it's individual as well as their collective goals.

From our vantage point, there are several important factors that contribute to the partnership's success: 1) Institutional leadership; 2) Mutually benefit, a win-win situation where everyone has something to gain; and 3) the strength of personal and professional relationships. The university has made an impressive start by beginning with volunteers, faculty members who are most interested in K-12 education, and have willingly invested their time into a program to which they have made a personal commitment. We have already heard testimonials from two of the district's history standards coaches about how well prepared graduates of the history/social science teacher education program are now. As first year teachers, they are already doing impressive work in middle school classrooms -- even in some of the more challenging schools in the district. The challenge for the university will be "getting to scale," bringing more faculty on board to ensure quality implementation of these reforms across the university.

While the Seamless Education Initiative focuses on improving the preparation of future teachers, the district is using standards coaches to focus on improving the quality of inservice teachers.

III. Standards Coaches.

Although LBUSD had experimented with curriculum coaches in math and language arts in prior years, the introduction of Standards Coaches was one of many new district initiatives launched in the 1998-99 school year. The goal was to provide in-class support for teachers to strengthen the quality of teaching among practicing teachers. The first year required a lot of on-the-job

learning and was at times a frustrating experience because of the lack of clarity surrounding the position. In general, most coaches understood their primary role was to work directly with teachers to facilitate the implementation of standards-based classrooms, but just how they were expected to do that was not well defined. Nonetheless, we found that by the end of the first year, standards coaches had accomplished a great deal: providing support to department heads, working extensively with new teachers, doing some staff development workshops, and facilitating greater collaboration among teachers at the department level.

Much of the ambiguity in the position has been resolved this year. Although it was never part of the plan, this year all standards coaches were very clear that their role is not an evaluative one. Another reason for greater clarity about the role of the coach this year is that the coaches are now supervised by their building principals. As a result, coaches are able to focus on the specific needs of the teachers in their building, and support the priorities at that particular school. For coaches who work with more than one school it means that the role changes from school to school depending on the principal's priorities. At a school where there are a lot of new teachers, coaches are often dealing with classroom management and crisis intervention. In other schools they are asked to assist teachers with SAT9 preparation. At other schools they may be able to continue work that was begun last 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. Several coaches noted that the most important message they took away from the training was that the coaches job was to meet the teachers' needs, not their own needs. But as they worked to address teachers' concerns, they had to work for a gradual transfer of responsibility, helping teachers to help themselves. One standards coach explained how this lesson has influenced her work.

When we do conferences before or after an observation, I try very hard now not to talk so much, but to ask those what and how questions that she really drilled into us and had us practice during that time she was there. I find that I'm learning a lot more about where the teacher is and why they did what they did. Then by using what and how [questions] -- it gets them to think about what they're doing and how it's progressing. [...] I realized that until you make the decision yourself as an adult that you're going to do this, it's not going to happen, and I felt that was her big message. That's what I picked up that we have to do - we cannot change an adult's behavior but we can guide them - but until they see what it is and make a decision that that is something that they feel is necessary to change, it's not going to happen.

Coaches also report that in the schools where they are in their second year, that teachers are responding to them differently this year. Teachers are reaching out to the coaches more. During the first year there was an inevitable period of "breaking the ice," when coaches worked at

developing trust. That often meant being a gofer: providing materials, sample lessons, or working with a small group of students. Having now developed relationships with teachers, coaches are reporting that their work has moved to a new level. Teachers are turning to coaches as 'critical friends,' asking them to reflect with them about a lesson they'd developed, or student work they'd received. Coaches also report that some of the training they've done is now becoming more evident in classrooms; more teachers are using thinking maps across all content areas, and using curriculum maps to help focus their instruction.

The new role of technology standards coaches this year is a welcome addition and teachers seem to have accepted these coaches more readily. This was due, in large part, because their role was more clearly defined from the beginning: the grant that funds these new positions has a very focused target. In addition, the teachers they work with all volunteered to participate in the project. As a result, the tech coaches are finding teachers very eager to learn to use the new technology that the grant has made available. Their jobs so far have focused mainly on training teachers to use the technology, both hardware and software, because so much of it is new. Once teachers are comfortable with using the equipment, the coaches will focus more on the primary goal of the grant, to coach teachers in how to use the technology as an instructional tool to enhance student learning.

With increasing experience, standards coaches are becoming more effective in their work with teachers and seeing real improvements in teachers' classroom practice. The site-based flexibility allows coaches to respond to individual building and teacher needs, and works well on an individual case basis. However, the lack of a districtwide focus, other than SAT9 preparation -- which has very little to do with their original purpose -- makes it harder to see consistent progress in the development of standards-based classrooms. Identifying a single priority that all standards coaches will work toward would provide a much needed focus to the district's reform efforts. Whether the focus is to design standards-based lessons that teach to the essential questions -- a focus that would be consistent with the emphasis of EEI on teaching to objectives, or if it is to analyze student work to inform instructional decisions and tailor lessons to address students' needs, that is a district decision. The curriculum leaders could provide needed leadership in the content areas toward this end. At the time of our visit, the curriculum leaders had yet to meet with standards coaches this year, but some work had been done along these lines during the Math Department Heads Institute last summer. The math standards coaches and department heads developed a draft checklist to help teachers score student work for the open-ended math problems. This provides a consistent tool for all math teachers across the district to use in analyzing student work. This was the only example we heard of that provided consistency across the district in any of the curriculum areas. Once the district reorganization has settled into an established routine and meetings resume between the curriculum leaders and standards coaches, we imagine we will begin to see greater focus.

Of course, there is a general understanding about the work of standards coaches, as one coach noted:

Underlying all of this of course is the notion of implementing the standards, and the objectives. And that's an ongoing thing. It comes up no matter what you talk about.

However, while this is generally assumed, when there are multiple priorities, and no consistent strategy, mandate, or training in how to implement this focus, we found no evidence that this underlying goal was present at every site. Another coach explained further:

Beyond SAT9, SAT9, SAT9, there's not clarity from the district in a global sense—standards coaches -- this is what they do. And maybe that's not what they want. Maybe it's supposed to be this amorphous description that is supposed to be tailored at the school site. But that too hasn't been communicated. And then there's this unwritten sentence at the end of our job description that says, 'and all other duties as assigned.'

While standards coaches are making significant contributions, providing much needed support to teachers, we could not identify any one initiative that was a consistent focus across the district. That, of course, makes it harder to document progress. However, establishing specific priorities won't address the continuing problem that there are not enough standards coaches to provide support to all the teachers in need.

IV. Long Beach Preparatory Academy

Long Beach Preparatory Academy (LBPA) has been described by the district as a “safety net” for students failing to meet standards at the end of eighth grade, providing students with an extra year to refocus and strengthen skills. At Prep Academy students benefited from smaller classes and instruction in study skills and life skills, such as anger management and conflict resolution in addition to the four core disciplines. Ever since the school opened in 1997, we have been impressed by the dedication of the staff and their efforts to address the socio-emotional needs of the students—which are great. However, we have also voiced serious concern about the lack of rigorous instruction that is needed to help the students develop the skills needed to succeed in high school. We were pleased to find that the principal had launched a concerted effort to improve the quality of instruction at the school this year.

The curriculum was revamped 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 has stepped out of the classroom to become the staff developer for the literacy teachers. She is conducting ongoing training one day a week with the staff, and taking 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 have 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 this fall were notably different than what we had seen in previous years. Students were engaged in more meaningful work, and discipline was no longer an issue. We are anxious to follow the development of the Prep program to see what they are able to accomplish with students this year. We want to know whether this class will be better prepared to succeed in high school than previous classes. If successful, it could be instructive for other middle schools in their efforts to support the students most at-risk of academic failure.

Our efforts to follow our sample of nine students from the 1999 class have been frustrating and somewhat discouraging. Two students have left the district and we have been unable to contact either of them. We discovered a third student had been ditching 70 percent of his classes since the first day of school. It was disappointing not only because we thought this was someone who had made a lot of progress and had the potential to turn things around, but also because no one at the high school was aware that he had not been attending until we came looking for him. Even though all nine students in our sample were determined to succeed in high school, they left Prep with significant needs. It seems clear that very few supports are in place to help these students transition into the huge crowds in high school.

The one strength that each of the students brought with them from their Prep experience is a positive attitude and a determination to succeed. Even when ridiculed by fellow students about being a Prep student, they don't let what other people think interfere with what they know about themselves. This student's resolve demonstrated the greatest confidence, but she was not unique in the attitude learned at Prep -- never give up:

I'm trying to do a new thing each year – to test myself and see how far I can go. Because I know I can reach any goal. I'm going to finish it regardless. [...] I love those people who tell me that I can't do, because they make me stronger, they make me want to do it anyway.

And yet this determination did not translate into being assertive when it came to school. There was a disturbing passivity among all the students about their academic work. The students did not know why they were taking the courses they were in; their counselors just handed them their schedules. Some students were able to choose an elective, others claim they had no choice. No one reported having discussed with a counselor what courses were needed to graduate. All but one student (who was taking algebra I for the third time), were struggling in algebra, but no one seemed to know whether tutorial support was available or not. A few noted that they could ask their teacher, but none of them had. A few found friends who they turned to for help, but none were proactive about seeking help to raise their grade above their shaky D's. All acknowledged that their math class at Prep did little to prepare them for algebra. This did not surprise us, as we had been concerned about the lack of rigor in math classes we observed at Prep.

Whether students are intimidated by the size of their classes, or the relative lack of outreach from teachers, they seem to be a bit adrift. No one is monitoring these students' progress or

attendance. If there are support programs available at the high schools, these students are not aware of them. The counselor from Prep Academy is the only person who has made an effort to follow up (monitor) on how these students are 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 enough and would be willing to help. Whatever safety net LBPA provided, few remnants remained to support them as they moved on to high school. We hope that the renewed academic focus at Prep will better serve this year's class.

CONCLUSIONS