STANDARDS-BASED REFORM: BASELINE DATA REPORT

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Written by

Barbara Neufeld

With Research Assistance from

Beth Hoffman, Donna Gaus, Kate Nissenson

August 30, 1996

Education Matters, Inc.
Cambridge, MA

STANDARDS-BASED REFORM: BASELINE DATA REPORT

JEFFERSON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

Standards-based reform in Louisville takes place in an extremely complex environment of teaching, learning, and assessment reforms launched by KERA (the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1989) and its associated set of assessment practices called KIRIS (the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System). KERA and KIRIS together are a form of standards reform; they require schools to teach so that all children make progress away from the standards called "novice" and "apprentice" and toward those called "proficient" or "distinguished" within a designated period of time. The state determines the elapsed time available to each school through the use of a formula that computes expected progress as a function of how close or far away from the goal the school was at the start of the reform. Schools are given biennial achievement targets; those that meet them are eligible for financial rewards. Schools that do not meet their benchmarks over time may be given technical assistance in the form of a Distinguished Educator to assist the principal and teachers in increasing student achievement. Stronger sanctions, such as the removal of a principal can occur, in theory, if further improvement in student achievement does not result.

Standards-based reform in Louisville also takes place amid middle school reforms begun with funding from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in a program the district called "High^5."[1] These reforms started prior to KERA, but are congruent with its assumptions about teaching, learning and achievement. "High^5" enabled a cadre of middle school teachers to participate in staff development designed to help them meet children's learning needs through adopting practices that better engage children in mastering academic content. In previous reports we wrote about their opportunities to develop an Integrated Language Arts (ILA) program, create block scheduling, use writing across the curriculum areas, develop portfolios, and create interdisciplinary units, for example. The focus and content of professional development funded by the Clark Foundation supported good teaching as defined by KERA.

Initially, much classroom-focused middle school professional development was provided by people from outside the district. But gradually, Louisville developed its own capacity to provide on-going, sustained, professional development at the individual school sites through its School Support Resource Teacher initiative. We concluded in our report of 9/30/95 that

---

[1] The original Clark program stressed high expectations, high content and high support as key ingredients of middle school reform. Louisville added high energy and high involvement creating five "Highs" which it called its HIGH^5 middle school reform program.

Louisville's capacity with respect to professional development had increased remarkably. School Support Resource Teachers in the first year of the program were accepted by the schools and took a substantial role in assisting with the School Transformation Plans[2] School Support Resource Teachers also conducted demonstration lessons, networked resources, and responded to a range of teachers' requests. The goal of their work was to increase students' KIRIS achievement by improving curriculum and instruction. KIRIS standards, in a very explicit way, were the outcome measures for teaching reform in Louisville.

In KIRIS, Louisville seemed to have standards and an accountability system for measuring progress toward those standards; with School Support Resource Teachers, the district had professional development to assist teachers in teaching to the standards. Why, given this context, was Louisville interested in adopting something else called standards-based reform? What did it think additional standards would add to its efforts?

At the end of our baseline data collection period, we are not sure that we have an answer to this question. Central office administrators, principals and teachers had little to say about standards-based reform as an initiative; they did not explain its connection to KERA work currently underway. Rather, they tended to speak about content standards as standards-based reform; emphasizing just this one element. On the one hand, this makes sense given that the district and schools are focused on KERA and KIRIS. On the other hand, there are aspects of standards-based reform that are not the same as KERA. Only a few people with whom we spoke pointed out these differences, noting that they were not yet part of the conception of standards-based reform in Louisville.

One essential characteristic of standards-based reform is the shift of primary focus away from the content of the curriculum and toward what learners will achieve. Of course, curriculum and instruction reforms are a part of this; they are intended to increase student learning. Certainly, teachers and administrators would argue, KIRIS puts the emphasis on student achievement. So one might ask, "What is unique about this focus in standards-based reform that might not already be present in what Louisville and Kentucky are attempting?" We think that there is something quite unique that distinguishes the two efforts but does not put them in contradiction with one another. A central office administrator[3] explained this and why it

---

[2] School Transformation Plans (STP) are required by the state and are intended to be planning documents that focus teachers' attention on their students' needs and their own professional development needs so that the school can develop a coherent strategy for addressing both. It is, fundamentally, a planning document. The STP includes a section on aligning curriculum with the content of the KIRIS assessments and standards.

[3] To preserve confidentiality, we do not identify central office administrators by name. We refer to all individuals with whom we spoke at Gheens as well as at Van Hoose as central office administrators. There are fourteen individuals in this category.

matters during our Spring 1996 interview.

> What a scope and sequence tells you is at each level and each content area what content **you're** responsible for, not what kids will learn. And, what standards tell you is what kids will learn. Those are two very different ways of looking at teaching. If I'm following the scope and sequence and Student A doesn't get earth science, well, it's really kind of too bad, because I covered earth science and she should have gotten it. If I'm looking at a standard for scientific inquiry and what I expect kids to come away with after they've studied science, then my teaching is different and I don't leave Student A behind. It's not satisfactory that Student A didn't get it even though I covered it. There is no such thing as "covering it." That kind of shift in conceptions of teaching is a major shift, and it has the power to change teaching as few reforms do.

The administrator added that, given this definition, the district had a great deal of work to do in order to become standards-based. Several associates point out that the district is still focused heavily on what content to teach rather than on what students are learning.

With respect to a second aspect of standards-based reform, the development of performance standards and associated assessments, we also heard little. And, we did not hear anything about plans to involve teachers in developing performance standards and examining student work within and between schools to develop, perhaps, district-wide standards. When asked about standards, the people with whom we spoke talked about the district's adoption of curriculum guidelines which were created out of content standards developed as part of the Clark-funded initiative. These curriculum guidelines will inform the development of the School Transformation Plans.

As a result of collecting this baseline data, we think that Louisville is focused so heavily, and understandably, on KIRIS that it has not yet figured out how to connect that focus with compatible components of standards-based reform. The district has not yet figured out what it wants children to know and be able to do aside from content and outcomes measured by KIRIS; it has not yet figured out how it will assess their learning in ways other than KIRIS provides. The district is, in other words, not quite clear on what it means to do standards-based reform in the context of KERA. It is construing the reform as an opportunity to do much needed curriculum work, to develop curriculum content standards and associated scope and sequences. The standards and scope and sequence may prove useful to teachers, students and the district, but we are not sure that they are designed, as yet, to address key components of what we and the Foundation are calling "standards-based reform."

There is no reason that Louisville could not continue to address KIRIS outcomes while adopting standards-based reform. On the contrary, they seem like an excellent match. However, and quite ironically, we were told that what makes it difficult for schools and the district to shift in the direction of teaching to learner outcomes is fear of KIRIS, which actually

measures learner outcomes.

Teachers and principals have agonized over how to teach what will be on the tests when, for several years, the test content was kept secret. As the state has become more willing to specify the test content, schools have become more focused on organizing their curriculum to include that content. Their desire for a scope and sequence is related to their desire to get the content right so that student achievement will increase and they can be in "reward" rather than in "decline." The history of secrecy and mismatch between curriculum and testing keeps attention primarily on content and not on learners even though, of course, it is the learners who achieve the outcome standards.

The anxiety engendered by rising and falling benchmark scores, according to many with whom we spoke, makes schools hesitant to move from a scope and sequence to genuine performance standards. They are not sure it will enhance their scores and there are consequences for not improving. Schools in reward as well as those in decline are afraid to take risks in the high-stakes assessment context.

The report that follows is the story of the current status of standards-based reform at the district level and at our four evaluation sample schools. It is a story of:

- Louisville's continuing attention to improving teaching practices and student outcomes in line with KERA reforms and KIRIS assessment,

- the increased capacity of the School Support Resource Teachers and Clark Fellows to provide valued and valuable professional development services to schools and individual teachers,

- increasing attention to curriculum and curriculum coordination with the goal of creating a coherent educational program throughout Louisville,

- the district's undivided attention to KERA, with the result that KERA appears to be the entire district agenda for school reform, and,

- the ambiguous place of something called "standards-based reform" in this mix of state initiated endeavors underway in Louisville.

As we noted in our grant proposal to the Foundation, there are, as yet, no cases of standards-based reform with benchmarks against which to judge standards-based reform in any of the six districts funded by the Foundation. However, we needed to attach our findings to some indicators of progress, even if only tentatively. As a result, based on our knowledge of school reform and the demands of this particular reform, we proposed that the early stages of implementation might have the following characteristics:

> During the start-up phase, we anticipate that teachers and others who focus on curriculum and instruction will be working on integrating, altering, or aligning their current curriculum and pedagogy in light of the new content standards. We would expect teachers to explore the meaning of the standards for themselves and for their students and to convey those meanings to the students. We would not expect to see full understanding of the standards and their implications, although we would expect to see a growing awareness of them over time. We would not expect to see dramatic changes in practice, and we might well expect to see some confusion as well as enlightenment as part of the process.

It is this set of characteristics that has guided our analysis and judgment of the progress of standards-based reform in Louisville. Our data will show that teachers and administrators in Louisville, for the most part, have begun "working on integrating, altering, or aligning their current curriculum and pedagogy in light of the new content standards" which are in the form of grade-level curriculum guidelines. Some of this work was underway before the current grant cycle. Louisville has not yet begun to explore "the meaning of the standards for themselves and for their students." This is not surprising given a) the overriding context that we described, and b) the fact that the district had not yet formally introduced standards-based reform to teachers or principals at the time of our data collection visit. That introduction was planned to occur as part of the Middle School Institute to be held August 7-9, 1996.

As a result of our baseline data collection and analysis, we see Louisville providing professional development that is likely to enhance teachers' expertise with pedagogy and curriculum development. We see schools taking a hard look at their curriculum in light of their desire for increased student learning. We see great attention to increased scores on the KIRIS assessment as the goal of a major part of this work. Some of this is the work of standards-based reform. We do not yet see evidence that the rest of the work will follow; we do not yet see evidence of the conceptual shift to learner outcomes described above.

Our baseline data report on Louisville begins with a discussion of our evaluation design and brief descriptions of the four schools participating in the evaluation. We turn next to a discussion of how standards-based reform has led to the development of curriculum content standards in Louisville and the implications of this work for further reform. In the context of the state's role in school reform in Kentucky, we consider the role of KIRIS assessment in the progress of standards-based reform in Louisville. Then we discuss briefly teachers' opportunities to improve their curriculum and instruction through professional development provided by the Clark Fellows and the School Support Resource Teachers. This is followed by an overview of current teaching practices at the four schools based on our brief observations and a discussion of how teachers currently assess students' work. We conclude with some remarks about the status of standards-based reform in Louisville and a brief description of our next evaluation steps.

EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODS.

Our report on progress during the 1995-1996 school year is based on central office data collected between November 1995 and March 1996 and school level data collected primarily during a five day site visit to Louisville during the last week of March 1996. During that visit, Barbara Neufeld, Donna Gaus, and Beth Hoffman spent a total of one person day at Williams, Lassiter, Conway, and Johnson Traditional Middle Schools. At each middle school, the evaluation team interviewed and observed 15 teachers and interviewed the principal and/or assistant principal. We spent another complete day interviewing 14 individuals at central office and at the Gheens Academy.

Williams Middle School (Focus School). Williams is a small middle school with 531 students, 33% of whom move during each school year. It sits in a neighborhood that is primarily blue collar: 40% of the students are African American; a sizable proportion is Appalachian white; 71% of the children are on free or reduced lunch; 15% are in special education with 10% of the entire school population in self contained Behaviorally Disorderd and/or Learning Disabled classrooms. The building, an old elementary school, cannot accommodate even this small school population. As a result, the eighth grade is housed in the high school which is a short walk away.

Williams seems to have been neglected for many years; the building is only one indication of this situation. With the advent of the current principal, who completed her second year at Williams during 1995-1996, and direct support from the Superintendent, teachers report that the school is turning around. According to the principal, the school has talented and energetic teachers who want to improve their practice. Some of them want to adopt "progressive" strategies; others are more inclined to maintain traditional, teacher directed classrooms. A cadre of teachers and the principal are involved in a multi-year leadership training program through the Gheens Academy. Williams has a Future Connections grant that connects children with a range of options for careers and further education.

Lassiter Middle School (Focus School). Lassiter Middle School, with a very well-maintained appearance, is situated in a residential neighborhood which the principal describes as working class supportive and safe. There are approximately 1000 students in the school with a mobility rate of about 32%; 60% of the students are on free or reduced lunch. Only 27% of the student body is African American. Lassiter has eight interdisciplinary teaching teams, some of which are multi-age. Teachers and the principal report that discipline is not a significant problem that they have to address before they can teach. Yet, achievement is not high. Lassiter teachers take part in many reform efforts. The school is a site for the Center for Leadership Reform, the NEA's Mastery in Learning Project, and the University of Louisville's Professional Development School program.

Conway Middle School (Non-Focus School). Conway Middle School was described as a school where teachers want to teach. The building is cheery, with student work displayed

throughout. Of the 879 students in the school, approximately 31% are eligible for free or reduced lunch. According to the principal, who was new to Conway last year, everyone comes early, stays late, and works hard. Yet, achievement is not good and teachers report that they are frustrated by their lack of success. They seem to attribute the lack of success to deficits that the students bring with them: lack of basic skills in arithmetic, reading, socialization, getting along in groups, and relating to society in a positive way, for example. They attribute some of the students' problems to their home lives. In an effort to create greater enthusiasm for learning within the school, and to attract children who currently choose schools other than Conway, the principal spearheaded an effort last year to create three "Academies" within Conway: Traditional; Technology and Communications; and Gifted and Talented. These will begin in the 1996-1997 school year.

Johnson Traditional School (Non-Focus School). Johnson Traditional selects its students from an applicant pool and it can discharge those who do not comply with the school's policies or achieve near grade level standards. The formal contract between parents and the school is one that many teachers claim facilitates their work by providing them with leverage unavailable in most public schools. Johnson has 950 children, 30% of whom are on free or reduced lunch, and a principal who is in her second year of leadership.

As a Traditional School, Johnson emphasizes basic skills. It also has a vision that some describe as "blurred" due to the many changes in leadership that occurred during the last ten years when the school had five or six principals. Faculty and parents met early in the last school year to discuss the issue of vision and create joint agreement on their goals. Teachers at Johnson are involved with standards-based reform; many talk about criteria for students' work and the use of rubrics to assess that quality. and are attempting to implement standards-based practices

Data Collection Strategy. Prior to our school visits, we asked principals to assist us in selecting teachers to interview and observe. Our goal was to create a sample of teachers who principals believed had a commitment to reform and were trying to change teaching and learning in order to improve student achievement. With those qualities in mind, we asked principals to identify a sample that included four language arts teachers, four math teachers, three science teachers, three social studies teachers, and one teacher of art, music, or physical education, for example. We asked that these fifteen teachers also include:

* teachers from all three grade levels;
* teachers with different lengths of experience; and,
* if possible, several department chairs.

Principals were very helpful in providing us with the sample of teachers. We then, with the school's master schedule, created an agenda of observations and interviews which we returned to the school prior to our visit to determine whether it would "work" from the school's perspective and to inform teachers of the schedule. For the most part, this process worked

well and we were able to arrive at each school with a complete schedule for the day.

We want to stress, at this point, the deliberate orientation built into in our sample and, therefore, our data. In line with our evaluation plan, we asked principals to select teachers who had some involvement with standards development or who were interested in implementing teaching reforms in their classes and schools. As a result, by design, our data do not represent the schools as a whole. They represent the work being done by those identified by the principal as having most interest in the reform. Our goal is to understand standards-based reform in schools with different characteristics and among teachers who have an interest in the reforms. By design, we are not studying standards-based reform in a random sample of teachers. Nor do we want to suggest that the teachers in our sample are the only ones in their schools who are interested in the reforms. Our sample represents the principals' best judgment of who to involve, given our criteria, out of a set of possible choices.

Our purpose in observing and interviewing at schools and central office was to a) understand the district's strategy and progress in implementing standards-based reform, b) learn the extent to which teachers and principals were knowledgeable about and using standards-based reform, c) collect baseline data on current teaching practices, and, d) select from the large sample of teachers a sample of nine from each of the middle schools to follow on subsequent site visits.

REFORM IN LOUISVILLE: CURRICULUM CONTENT STANDARDS

Louisville had been investigating the national attention to standards-based reform as part of keeping abreast of education nationwide. At the central office level, it had not made a decision to adopt this reform strategy. However, when the Clark Foundation framed its next round of middle school grants around student outcomes and standards-based reform, Louisville decided to remain a part of the Clark initiative by developing standards.

> Until we started the Clark proposal, standards didn't exist. The Clark Proposal drove us to develop standards for middle school, which prompted the development of the elementary and the high school [standards]. So you've got to understand that.[4]

This rationale for adopting standards as a route to higher student achievement is not necessarily bad; the Foundation and the national movement informed the district which then made a decision to include standards as part of its reform agenda. The value of the decision depends on what the district did next.

---

[4] Teachers and principals heard the same message at the start of the Middle School Institute, August 7-9, 1996. They heard no further explanation of what standards reform might be or why it was significant to their work.

The initial standards activities took place in the Curriculum and Assessment unit which drafted the content standards. The plan was to follow content standards with performance standards and assessment strategies, but this did not happen. Rather, as a result of what was described as considerable pressure from the Superintendent, principals, teachers and community, the Curriculum and Assessment unit turned the content standards into a series of scope and sequence curriculum guides.

> Now, that's something that the Superintendent wanted and the Board wanted, and a lot of the teachers wanted. [They said], "We don't know what to teach anymore and the standards don't tell us when to teach the Civil War or when to teach earth science, or whatever.[5]

Central office personnel shared with us their concerns about creating a scope and sequence. From their perspective, the district already had these, despite claims to the contrary, and no one paid attention to them. Why, they wondered, would teachers embrace another set of curriculum guides? Principals were a part of these discussions and heard central office concerns. They argued against them as this principal notes.

> [one key administrator] at first seemed reluctant because his feeling was that--and I agree with him--if the district creates it, it's not going to be anything different than the old curriculum guidelines we always had that nobody paid attention to. My response to him was, you're absolutely right, but the one thing that has changed in this reform is we're coming to you and asking for it. Never before did we do that. And we're only asking for it because we…need some kind of model that we can chew on and react to.

The desire for curriculum guides derived, in large part, from the greater attention to content over process now stressed on the KIRIS examinations. Teachers recognized the irony in their request for curriculum guides.

> It almost seems as if we're moving in two directions at once. Because KERA and the state program has all the SBDM (site-based decision making) concepts moving us in the direction of autonomy for individual schools, but the individual schools were struggling so much that they put pressure on the district to come up with standards so that they wouldn't have to invent their own rules. And so in a way [reform is] going in two different directions. It's like we threw out all the curriculum guides and we're going back to something that is essentially a curriculum guide. And in truth few teachers ever looked at the curriculum

---

[5]Teachers and principals attribute the loss of curriculum guidance to KERA which, they say, stressed the process of learning over learning specific content. This is a finding we have noted in previous reports.

guide [in the past].

There were concerns within the Curriculum and Assessment office that the scope and sequence would substitute for standards reform and not lead teachers to shift their orientation from "covering the content" to thinking about what students need to know and be able to do or the quality with which they need to know and do. Still, the unit developed the scope and sequences. When we visited Louisville at the end of March, this was the status of standards-based reform. We heard no discussion of performance standards, we heard only about plans to introduce standards reform to teachers and principals during the Middle School Institute.

Understanding Standards at the Outset.

Even though teachers and principals had not had a formal introduction to standards reform, they had received the district's middle school standards and they were aware that a reform was underway. We wanted to know what they understood to be the purpose of this reform. Therefore, we asked teachers and principals to tell us what they understood standards-based reform to be and why it was being implemented in Louisville.

Curriculum Coherence and Coordination. Most of the people with whom we spoke were not sure what standards-based reform implied, but they knew that standards referred to the district's newly developed content guidelines.[6] One principal told us:

> You know, we debated that; it's interesting you asked that. We actually debated what [standards-based reform is] in our principals meeting today and I'm not sure how clear anybody is on that, to be perfectly honest with you.

Teachers stress the value of the curriculum guides because of what they report as the lack of coordination within or across schools with respect to content taught. The lack of coordination results in duplication as well as gaps in curriculum. Some teachers told us that the situation is so idiosyncratic that they cannot decide what to teach in literature, for example, until the children arrive and they find out what they read last year. This situation is compounded by a high mobility rate within the district. So, as this one sixth grade language arts teacher said, "Maybe we need to be more defined on what fifth graders are to read." Others echoed this view.

> For me, standards are a framework to teach your curriculum, to make sure that

---

[6] Two principals and four teachers in our sample reported that standards-based reform is about focusing on learner outcomes rather than curriculum inputs. They spoke about using rubrics to assess student work and about looking for assessments that could help them track student achievement, grade by grade, through middle school. Three of the teachers and one of the principals who spoke this way were from Johnson Traditional.

> the sixth grade is not repeating the same things the seventh graders are doing, the eighth grade is doing, and leaving out key information.
>
> There's been too much teaching in particular areas. It's been repeated all the way up through [the grades] and it needs to be spread out into different areas. And I think it's a great idea that we can all get together as teams and find out what the other teachers are teaching so we don't have to teach that.

Teachers report that content standards help them create their School Transformation Plans. As one teacher noted, speaking with words that many others repeated,

> In our Transformation Plan, in the curriculum section, we, as a school, agree to examine what we are teaching and to align it and to make sure that we are in line with KERA goals. And each department is attempting to do that in a method that's going to involve everybody so that we will have a student body that will come out with a consistent background.

Curriculum guides provide teachers with a base, a common starting place from which to develop their own school's emphases. This is important since, as we described earlier, teachers are already held accountable for student learning through KIRIS, the high stakes assessment. If the content standards identify content that will be on the test (assuming that the district content standards are aligned with the assessment), then they are a valuable tool. As a part of standards-based reform, however, they keep the focus on what is to be taught rather than on what is to be learned.

When teachers, principals, and central office administrators told us about the plans for the Middle School Institute, our conclusion was that the Institute would still keep the focus on content and curriculum.

> The idea is that teachers from all middle schools will go for a three day institute. And will, in their subject areas, math, science, social studies, and so on, work with a specialist to get a better handle on standards and the implication for all curriculum. And then during those three days they will have time to work in their school groups to hone it for their school.
>
> Basically, [the Institute is for] learning the language and what that all means. Then they'll have time to work in content area groups to see best practices by content area folks. They'll also talk about how the content can be integrated for delivery; step-by-step through the three days at the conference. There also will be time for school-based groups to work together at a site where the central office support staff are available. There will be resources on site for the schools as they begin to talk about some of the things that they'll do within their own building in the fall.

> The Curriculum and Assessment staff have a pretty good part in that Institute in terms of trying to help the people understand how to take standards and make sense of the issues of standards, content guidelines, scope and sequence to develop, you know, their curriculum and also to think through the [KIRIS] assessment issues that have to be thought through at the same time.

Teachers and others will present a series of "best practices" sessions that highlight current approaches to aligning curriculum with content standards. There will be follow-up activities to the Institute during the school year.

> And then next year what we anticipate doing as part of our follow-up to the summer Institute is having content specific meetings on a regular basis. For example, for seventh grade science teachers to talk about what's working in the classroom and where am I now in my work on addressing the standards that we've identified that students must know.

Descriptions of these activities suggest a continuing emphasis on how to teach the content that must be learned.

Concerns About Accountability. When teachers begin to understand standards-based reform and their accountability for student learning, often they become quite anxious and offer examples of influences on students' learning that they cannot control and which lead to depressed achievement. They talk about family background, motivation, and prior achievement, for example, as limiting their ability to teach effectively. Teachers in the "High[5]" schools told us about these concerns that stemmed from KIRIS and we wrote that teachers were worried,

> that their students would never be able to meet the state or district standards due to 1) their weak reading skills and mathematics knowledge when they arrived at middle school, and 2) their social/emotional/family problems that kept their attention focused on things other than schooling. Teachers were also worried, in light of the high stakes attached to KIRIS, that **they** would always be judged failures because they could not help students overcome the disadvantages with which they came to middle school. (9/30/95)

The sample of teachers from our four evaluation sites echo the concerns of their colleagues who participated in the "High[5]" initiative. These teachers do not envision themselves capable of developing a sense of competency and a capacity to learn in all of their students. A few assume that their children will never reach high standards because they are incapable.

> I do have high standards for my classroom, but then I have to individually tailor those standards. I've got crack babies in this classroom, sometimes. It's enough for me to have a standard of that kid just sitting down and being quiet. I

> think it's really cool when you've got government or [other] people sitting off in some administration to talk about high standards…But when it comes to practice in the classroom, I'm not sure that it works quite as well.
>
> I think portfolio assessment is a good way of assessing student growth. The operative word is growth. I don't like the state portfolio assessment because it does not show growth. It judges the students based on what they're able to do in this one year, and it's not objective, it's subjective. It's not fair to the kids; it's not fair to score them that way because you're scoring all kids equally and we know that all kids aren't equal.

Still other teachers are concerned because children do not learn at the same rate. Given this, they wonder how teachers can expect all of them to reach a given standard at the same point in time -- the time of the KIRIS assessment.

> I love my students but I mean, I have some that came in very low and so this one concept that I thought was going to take me two weeks, may take me four weeks… And things I thought I would have covered by now I haven't. And, there are things that I won't even get to touch, unfortunately.

Other teachers sound overwhelmed at the prospect of being held accountable when they have no control over learner outcomes.

> If we set standards, how do we, who gets held accountable for the standards if we do what we're supposed to be doing? Because it seems to me like everything falls back on the teacher….I don't have any power to make a kid learn.

Teachers' comments about accountability focus almost exclusively on KIRIS and the impact of the state on their sense of efficacy.[7] The comments are not tied to a district set of goals and priorities nor to the district's participation in something called "standards-based reform." The state is the source of the anxiety; the state is the entity that the schools and district must please. This is understandable under the circumstances; we are not sure that it will be sufficiently productive.

We wrote in our report of 9/30/95:

> This emphasis on KIRIS is the logical result of the high stakes associated with the assessment, and the district must attend to the outcome measures. But, our interviews strongly suggest that the goal of higher KIRIS results has become decoupled from the larger goals of school reform and the broader concerns with

[7] Several teachers at Johnson Traditional also talked about being accountable to parents.

students' learning. Our sample of middle school teachers and principals, for example, could identify no district goals for middle schools other than KERA goals measured by KIRIS. This finding suggests that schools, like the district, are oriented toward the state.[8] As we said before, this stance toward the state, or even the perception of this stance by teachers and principals, minimizes the powerful leadership role that the district could take as an advocate for long-term school reform to benefit children. We are not suggesting a route that opposes KERA; we are suggesting that the district identify aspects of reform that it would promote even if KERA were to disappear and that it make a clear case for those aspects so that teachers, principals and others know that they are working toward those goals for reasons of their value rather than (or in addition to) compliance.

From our perspective, the situation has not changed. Standards-based reform may be a vehicle -- given district leadership that starts with the Superintendent -- to make a meaningful change in the direction of learner outcomes. But our baseline data did not reveal such an orientation.

The Focus on KIRIS Assessment. The focus on KIRIS assessment, we stress again, is not bad; it is just too limited and too external to be the heart of school reform in Louisville. We will try to provide some further explanation for this conclusion by distinguishing between two uses of assessment information.

Assessment can be used to audit a school or school system's progress toward some set of outcome goals. This is a reasonable and responsible use of assessment. Assessment can also be used to inform instruction; it can provide information on learners that helps teachers figure out learner difficulties in the process of learning and alter instruction to better meet the students' needs. This is also a responsible use of assessment.

In both uses, there is concern with the learner. In the case of accountability, the learner is necessary to make the school or system or teacher look good. In the case of instruction, knowledge of a learner's achievements and difficulties are necessary to inform further instruction. The individual learner is the unit of analysis. Both purposes are valid and useful, but they are different.

Complaints about the traditional use of norm-referenced tests, implemented primarily for audit purposes, often focus on the absence of usable information for teachers from the results. The scores often come at the start of the new school year, after the teacher taught the children who were tested; results could no longer help with instruction for those children. Aggregate school results might provide information that would lead a school to consider changes in how they

---

[8] This finding also appears in the middle school audit, March 1995, page 2, completed by the Center for Early Adolescence.

provide reading instruction, for example -- lots of children with low scores on comprehension do suggest an area in need of improvement -- but the scores do not provide information that can lead to alterations in teaching the children who were tested. They do not provide insight into children's understanding.

The same may be said of KIRIS assessments. The form of the assessment is different than that of norm-referenced tests, but the major purpose is an audit report. Here, too, scores are not often useful for making instructional decisions about specific children, rather they help to orient a school toward a particular curriculum content area or process: different science content, more open-ended response prompts. In addition, scores that are reported in subsequent years are not scores that reflect the impact of instructional changes on the same set of children; they are reports on a different set of children. The audit purpose is important and it can give longitudinal information about the overall impact of a district's instructional program. But, the focus of an audit is different than the focus on learners and instruction.

In Louisville, to date, we hear primarily about the audit orientation. Teachers and principals are concerned that they will be punished if they cannot get learners to produce state-computed outcome scores. All central office administrators with whom we spoke stressed the audit implications of KERA and KIRIS. They spoke about the dilemma of focusing only on accountability.

> I am concerned that we have become so focused on the [KIRIS] assessment system,…that instead of [assessment] being a tool -- Grant Wiggins' notion that assessment should improve learning, not just audit student performance -- in fact, what is happening is right now we've really zeroed in on auditing student performance. So I think one of the biggest challenges is to think about…how you use assessment to improve student learning, not just audit student performance. And I really do believe that that's an important challenge. When you start dealing with that issue, then you can start talking about, well, what's the quality of the performance look like? And that's where the performance standards come in. So I'm saying: How do you use assessment to drive and improve student performance, not just audit it? And then, subsequently: How do you use performance standards to help people to begin to think about what good student work looks like? To me, that's a real exciting challenge, but it's going to be a difficult challenge to move to that next step.

We heard related concerns when we collected data a year ago, in March 1995, data which we reported in our 9/30/95 report.

> I think teachers have the impression that the expectation is that they move students from novice to apprentice and so forth. In some ways, we have lost that feel for helping students be academically prepared.

> I would say, probably, that the biggest challenge is: How do you deal with mandated reform that's coming from the state level? Somehow we have to grab hold of this stuff and make it our own, and get that commitment. Because I don't think that we're going to make the changes that ought to happen in terms of a) more active involvement in classrooms, b) more integrated kinds of curriculum, c) more thoughtful kinds of curriculum for kids, until we're committed to [the reform]. And it's not just about compliance.

One administrator who is concerned with the district's preoccupation with KIRIS suggested that activities planned for the Middle School Institute might shift the focus of assessment through an examination of "best practices" that include assessment as part of instruction. Others propose that looking at the New Standards materials might be helpful in that they include examples of student work. Additionally, teachers might look at their own students' work in light of some performance criteria. Such an examination, suggested one administrator, might bridge the gap between the audit and instructional functions of assessment by beginning with work that students completed for the KIRIS assessment.

There are plenty of good reasons to use KIRIS as one measure of student achievement. But there are problems with total reliance on this assessment. First, as the district has said, the content of the test keeps changing. Second, when schools get the data from the test and analyze it, they report that they cannot necessarily tie their scores to what they do in the school. As one principal reported, "It's ridiculous for us to celebrate our rewards, because we're not real sure that it's indicative of what we've done." Third, the test does not enable the middle school to track student growth from sixth to eighth grade. Rather, the test examines a different cohort of children each year. This adds to the complexity of analyzing the results and tying them to school programs and practices.

Fourth, and perhaps most important of all, as long as the measure of success is something defined outside of the school system, something to which neither teachers, principals or administrators have contributed, no one within the district will really "own" the measure. It will remain imposed; it will remain an external accountability device. The potential of standards-based reform is its capacity to bring participation in developing the performance standards and outcomes **inside** the district, thereby creating local ownership and responsibility for students' achievement of them.

We want to make two additional points in talking about teachers' and others' focus on KIRIS outcomes. First, we are not saying that teachers do not care about the individual children or that they do not try to teach in ways that help them learn more. We know that they care deeply; they are working very hard to make changes in what and how they teach to benefit students. We will describe the school-based professional development activities that engage teachers in the next section of the report.

Second, we want also to note that teachers report positive outcomes from KERA reform.

Some say that they have more children who like to read entering sixth grade now than in the past. They attribute this to KERA initiated changes in the elementary schools. We heard teachers say that they demand more difficult work from students -- higher order thinking in comparison and contrast writing assignments, for example -- because of the standard required by KIRIS. Much to their surprise, they report, children are often able to meet this higher demand. Certainly, the School Transformation Plan which requires teachers and principals to look carefully at their middle school curriculum as a school in light of KIRIS outcomes is a good idea. There are benefits to teachers working together to figure out what to teach when in order to provide a coherent, meaningful program. There are benefits, teachers report, to creating some interdisciplinary units. KERA and KIRIS lead to many benefits for teachers and children.

Our argument is about the assessment context in which teachers and principals operate and the orientation that it encourages. From our perspective, the teachers and principals cannot change their focus on assessment unless the district takes a leadership role with respect to the outcomes and emphases it desires. The district, too, must attend to the state, but it can do much more. It can emphasize the importance of assessment for learner outcomes and encourage teachers and principals to move toward a true standards-based reform agenda, if it chooses to do so. As we said earlier, we think such an emphasis is congruent with achieving better KIRIS outcomes. Indeed, it may be the best way to proceed.

SCHOOL-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS

Louisville supports two professional development roles that provide teachers with a broad range of support services in their classrooms and schools: Clark Fellows and Resource Teachers.[9] We want to describe their work for two reasons. First, to reiterate what we said in our 9/30/95 report, that Louisville has created a fine staff development system that is sustained, close to the teachers, and driven in large part by teachers' definitions of what they need to know. Over time, this kind of professional development can have a positive impact on teachers' knowledge and skill. It is oriented around a particular view of professional development:

> One of the things that we have to do is let teachers know that professional development includes things like collegial discussions and support groups, that is professional development. There is the sense, partly because of the whole state credit hour thing, that you have to be somewhere where someone smarter is telling you something. That's the only way it's professional development. If

[9] Members of the Curriculum and Assessment Unit also provide professional development for teachers. We will focus on their work in subsequent reports.

> you're actually creating it, or you're with a group of people involved in thinking through your practice, that that's not professional development. So one of the things I think, and I've developed models. When we're on transformation planning we've given people examples.

This approach has already created a changed professional culture for many teachers and for schools. They now participate in a culture in which it is legitimate to identify areas of weakness and seek help in a risk-free environment. It is also a culture in which discussions of practice among colleagues within schools are becoming more common. These are profound benefits of the organization and content of the Clark Fellows' and School Support Resource Teachers' work. They attest to the skill of those who fulfill the roles.

Second, we see these skilled professionals as prime resources for standards-based reform. They have the content knowledge, professional status, and interpersonal skills necessary to the task. What is more, they have the trust of teachers and principals with whom they already work. This would enable them to take leadership roles in beginning the process of looking at student work within a school, for example, in light of a set of performance standards. Because they work in many middle schools, they could facilitate the process of developing standards across schools at the middle level. Clark Fellows and School Support Resource Teachers are an enormous resource that the district could employ in the task of developing and implementing standards-based reform. We want our overview of their work read with this potential in mind.

Overview: The Clark Fellows' Work

With funds from the Clark Foundation, Louisville supports four Clark Fellows, one in each core content area, who are available to all middle schools. Fellows are middle school teachers who have been released for a year from their classroom obligations to work as professional development specialists. They are chosen for their expertise in content and in pedagogy. Their primary role is to assist individuals with teaching, curriculum, and instruction; they can also provide professional development sessions for groups of teachers. Teachers who have worked with them report that they are knowledgeable, eager to help, and available when called.

Clark Fellows operate on what might be called a "demand" system. They make their services known to principals and department chairs at the middle school level and then they respond to individual requests. Principals have asked them to work with teachers who do not have sufficient content knowledge for the subject they are teaching. (Due to staffing issues, this is usually a result of teachers teaching out of their area of certification.) In these situations, Fellows describe their role as to "help these people get some content, feel comfortable with what they are teaching and with the fact that they can learn with the kids." At the same time, they try to wean teachers away from total reliance on the text, a problem they find not only with teachers who are limited in content knowledge.

> [There are] a lot of teachers who are very much tied to the text book, who are text book bound. They feel that they are doing everything they can. They're just really working hard. And sometimes they don't have the content knowledge or the skills to be more effective, and sometimes they do not know that they don't have the knowledge and skills, and they do not know the questions to ask [to get help].

Fellows encounter this situation in all four core subject areas.[10] Principals also ask Clark Fellows to work with teachers who lack management skills.

Teachers report that Fellows have provided them with curriculum resources and have been able to connect them with other teachers in the district who are working on similar units or issues. This is a great benefit, say the teachers, because it reduces their isolation and gives them a colleague with whom to discuss their work.

Fellows have also done or arranged for series of after-school workshops in reading and other aspects of language arts, for example, when teachers and principals have identified an area in which they would like some long-term assistance.

Clark Fellows engage in work that is explicitly tied to KIRIS assessment. They described attention to KIRIS as more all-encompassing during the second half of the year than they would prefer. Still, since they are available to meet teachers' professional development needs, they address KIRIS when they are requested to do so.

> In the fall, before everybody started sweating the test and the portfolios and the performance events, most of what I did was to go in and do model lessons, teaching algebraic concepts, doing hands on math manipulatives, things like that. But then we hit January and people started panicking and they started calling and asking for us to do stuff: help me with math portfolios! …Right now, people are going nuts over open response and I've been asked by two or three schools to do open response. They ask for open response prompts, which I have a collection of, and I'll just send them out or I'll take them out. And I've had teachers who'll ask me to come in and do a simulation of what testing would be like, and I'll do that for them…. For the performance events: I've got my problem solving events that I do. I think that is a way to combine the group work and the performance type thing. Also, they have to do some writing in it, so that can be turned in. You have your writing parts just like you would in the performance event, plus it can be turned into a portfolio entry.

---

[10] We do not provide examples to protect the identity of teachers who were helped in this way.

Overall, Clark Fellows try to help teachers broaden their content knowledge, increase the range of instructional strategies that they use, seek materials beyond the text, and pay attention to the needs of the students. They do not define themselves as primarily in the business of preparing students for tests, but they do help teachers and students hone their skills in that area. As we said at the outset, their combined knowledge and skill could be well-used in the service of standards-based reform. They are already working in aspects of that arena.

Overview: The School Support Resource Teachers' Work

Each middle school School Support Resource Teacher works with four schools. Unlike the Clark Fellows, each must be a generalist, providing services to teachers in all curriculum areas and to the school as a whole. With four schools in their portfolio, they can devote more time to each than can the Clark Fellows who serve all 24 middle schools. Because they were in their second year of working with their schools, teachers and principals familiar with their work were able to give many examples of how they had assisted with school-wide and individual issues. They had nothing but praise for their School Support Resource Teachers.

School Support Resource Teachers have as their prime role improving KERA implementation. When we speak of KERA in this context, we are speaking of the reform in its broadest terms, not only as attention to KIRIS assessment. With this in mind, School Support Resource Teachers:

1. help schools develop their Transformation Plans with a focus on KERA goals,
2. examine the resources available to and in the school and work to integrate and coordinate them,
3. do demonstration lessons and coaching,
4. provide teachers with materials they might request, and,
5. provide other professional development to the schools.

Each year, School Support Resource Teachers assist principals and teams of teachers in completing a school needs assessment from which they develop their School Transformation Plan. The School Support Resource Teacher helps the school use its KIRIS curriculum report in this process to inform curriculum decisions and determine academic priorities. During the school year, School Support Resource Teachers help the schools monitor STP implementation.

In addition to this built-in role with the STP, School Support Resource Teachers provide direct help in classrooms with curriculum and instruction. We heard stories of how they helped with the teaching of personal narrative, for example, and how they supported a teacher who was trying cooperative groups. They co-teach, do demonstration lessons, and observe and give feedback as teachers request. Their goal in all of this work, as they describe it, is to help teachers with their immediate questions and, in the process, facilitate their developing engagement with on-going professional development. School Support Resource Teachers do

not want to provide "quick fixes" or "magic bullets." They want to create habits of mind that will lead teachers to continue to inquire into their own professional development. As one School Support Resource Teacher reported:

> I've never been a real believer in the magical lesson theory, that I have any magical lessons that will change everything. So, I try to work in a planning role for teachers so that we have some follow-up and some planning beforehand.

School Support Resource Teachers, like their Clark Fellow counterparts, also work with teachers on issues of discipline, but this is not a major focus of their work. When possible, they take an instructional orientation to the issue:

> Sometimes I work with teachers who may be having a difficult time with classroom management. Sometimes we're called in to just provide assistance, you know, provide strategies and just give some feedback to teachers…Obviously if the instruction and the work is engaging, then some of that [discipline] is going to be taken care of because students are not bored and they're engaged in their work. [But] there still are students who are going to be more challenging to reach.

School Support Resource Teachers say that they are concerned, first and foremost, with increasing teacher and student learning. They believe that is the route higher KIRIS scores; it is not to be found solely in test taking strategies, although they certainly assist in this area. It is to be found in better pedagogy.

> The message I try to push when I'm working with, especially, the language arts department is in order to become better writers you need to read. And in order to teach writing you need rich models and those are found in literature. So we have a conversation all the time about connecting literature and writing. And also teaching strategies that will help kids become more critical readers,…because I think we're assigning reading but we're not necessarily teaching reading…[we need a] change in instructional strategy.

Together, the Clark Fellows and School Support Resource Teachers are a valuable resource for teachers, principals, and the district. In the past year, they often "paired up" to coordinate their work and provide more unified professional development at the schools. Their impact over time is likely to be significant given their clear focus on improving teaching and learning. The combination of generalists and subject matter specialists provides a broad set of resources to the schools. The School Support Resource Teachers, in particular, given two years on the job, believe they can see the ultimate impact of their work if they are able to continue it.

> I think we still are doing some band-aid things, you know. We're still doing some things that are going to have short terms effects, but I do see, especially

> with the curriculum work that's going on, I think that is going to produce lasting change in classrooms. We talk about that a focus for us is to really help teachers implement KERA. If that happens, then you're going to produce systemic change in the classroom because it requires a major overhaul in some cases, you know, of the kind of instructional strategies that teachers are using. So I see that as maybe KERA is the mandate, but it allows me to get at real important issues in terms of instruction and engaging kids and offering a more challenging learning environment.

School Support Resource Teachers are hard workers and optimists. Their orientation is toward improving teaching and learning, not toward producing high test scores. The same is true of the Clark Fellows. The test scores matter, but they are indicators of learning, not the learning itself. School Support Resource Teachers and Clark Fellows have an orientation to reform that meshes well with standards-based reform. As we said earlier, the district could harness their knowledge and skill to forwarding that effort.

> My sense is we can align curriculum with national standards or whatever, and we can teach this content, this set of concepts and skills and whatever, but it's the way that we teach kids [that matters]. Reform has to happen in the classroom and it's not going to happen with an aligned curriculum alone. We also have to align instructional strategies. We have to have clear performance standards for kids and they need to be aligned as well with national standards in terms of performance at that level. I think that's the challenge.

As everyone else with whom we have spoken in central office would agree, that is the challenge. Louisville would do well to put its School Support Resource Teachers and Clark Fellows to the task of meeting that challenge.

A BROAD LOOK AT CURRENT TEACHING AND GRADING PRACTICES

As part of our data collection in March 1996 we observed 40 teachers for approximately 30 minutes each. Our purpose in observing during this baseline data collection visit was multifaceted. First, we observed in order to have a common classroom experience to use as the start of a discussion about teaching during the interview. Second, we observed teachers to develop a picture of the range of pedagogy currently in use in the schools. We do not imagine that what we saw is all that there is; nor do we assume that the teachers we observed only teach in the ways that we saw. In fact, we asked teachers to talk to us about the range of teaching strategies they might use with the class we observed to augment our knowledge of their pedagogy.

Third, we observed in order to have knowledge on which to base our selection of a sample of teachers to include in the evaluation. Our intention is to follow nine teachers in each school;

within that sample, we want to have some teachers who currently use inquiry strategies implied by the standards and others for whom those strategies might represent a significant change in practice. Baseline data on teaching practices enable us to select a sample of teachers and observe the influence of standards on teaching over time.

When we spoke with teachers about the classes we observed, we asked them to tell us about how they grade students' performance at the end of a marking period and on individual assignments. We asked this question in order to have baseline data about the criteria teachers currently use. This information is essential if we are to draw conclusions in the next year about changes in grading and/or assessment that occur due to standards-based reform. Our questions about grading led to discussions of what made content more or less difficult for students to learn, and more or less difficult for teachers to teach. In this context, teachers talked about issues of diversity that influence their teaching as well as their decisions about grades. They talked about the impact of students entering achievement levels, literacy skills, and special education status as factors that influence their grading practices.

In this section of the report we present an overview of the teaching strategies we observed, and the kinds of grading practices teachers report using. At the end of the section, we will connect these findings to the subject of standards-based reform and attention to KIRIS outcomes.

Classrooms Across the schools. Our four sample schools include a wide range of organizational practices. They have multi-age and single age teams, teams that are grouped, for the most part, heterogeneously, and others that are quite homogeneous. Within and between schools, we saw a wide range of teaching strategies. We saw children sitting in rows while the teacher lectured and we saw children working in a variety of grouped structures. We saw children who were more and less enthusiastic about the arrangements in which they found themselves. In three of the schools, children were well-behaved in class even if they did not appear to be enthusiastic about the content. Teachers rarely seemed to have problems with discipline. In the fourth school, this was not the case. Children were well-behaved primarily in the highly structured classrooms. We highlight the following points from our baseline observations.

Ë There were few interruptions to instructional time in these schools. Rarely did we hear an announcement over the PA system; similarly, there were few requests to send children to the office, or the nurse or the library, for example. We know that these kinds of interruptions occur frequently in many schools.

Ë In three of the four schools, one could practically hear a pin drop in classrooms that were teacher led. When children were working in small groups, the volume of noise was manageable and children seemed to treat each other respectfully. Much of the time, when we walked around the room to observe small group work in these classes, children were doing the assignment -- talking about the book or trying to solve the math problem.

Ë In contrast, primarily in one school we observed many classes in which significant numbers of students seemed not to be participating in the learning activities. In whole group lessons, their heads were on their desks or they sat up but did not participate even when teachers encouraged them. In classes with group work, we saw entire groups that were engaged in conversation or activity that bore no relation to the assigned work. In other cases, one or two students did the work and others did little if anything.

Ë There were classes that gave the appearance of discussions, but, in fact, teachers sought one or two word responses from students and pursued no ideas in depth.

Ë Children's opportunities to understand the material, to have their thinking clarified, to ask questions and get thoughtful answers, did not depend on the organizational structure of the classroom. It depended on the teacher's role in providing such opportunities. For example, we saw children in classrooms that were fundamentally teacher led -- the whole class sat as a group, the teacher asked questions, children put a problem on the board or read a passage. But, in a number of these classrooms, children were asked to explain their answers and their thinking and they were encouraged to listen to one another. By contrast, there were activity-oriented classes in which children were doing hands-on activities and talking to one another, but where there was little opportunity for them to clarify their thoughts or identify their misunderstandings. There appeared to be no correlation, in other words, between classroom organization and opportunity to learn. Learning did or did not happen in all sorts of classrooms.

Ë We saw several classrooms in which teachers were connecting science or social studies content to experiences in children's lives. These focused on issues of ecology and the role of the Constitution in preserving individual rights, for example.

Ë We saw teachers using what might be called "performances" to have children synthesize and demonstrate their learning. Usually, these took the form of individual or group presentations in front of the class. We heard children read poems they had written, and do group presentations on a topic they had researched together. We saw children in science classes working at small experiments to gain the concepts the teachers wanted them to learn. Again, we cannot comment on the quality of the work given short duration of our observations. We can say that in some classrooms children seemed enthusiastic about their work and presentations; in others their presentations were lackluster and minimal.

Ë We saw some classes in which children connected with the special education program were well-integrated into the mainstream class and getting assistance from a second teacher in the classroom. In some cases, we did not know which was the special education teacher and which was the mainstream teacher given the smooth overlap in their roles.

What does this very general picture of classroom practice mean for standards-based reform in Louisville? It suggests that there is a strong foundation from which to build. These schools

do not have profound discipline problems and they have teachers who employ a range of teaching strategies. Teachers are eager, as we noted in an earlier section of the report, to bring greater coherence and coordination to their content areas. To that end, some have already begun to have serious conversations about content. We imagine that they would be willing to have similar conversations about performance standards. Teachers in these schools are teaching, but they are not satisfied with what their students are learning. Their scores on KIRIS assessments are low and teachers' own standards for grading suggest that they cannot rely on high academic achievement as criteria for their own assessment. This is likely a troubling situation. Direct conversations about the connections between teaching and student learning, expressed in discussions of performance standards, might move the teachers and subsequently, the students to much greater achievement.

Teachers' Approaches to Grading

Even if performance standards eventually guide teachers' approaches to assessing/grading students' work, assigning scores or grades is unlikely ever to be merely a mechanical task.[11] It will always be more than totaling the scores on tests or other performance indicators, and adding in the number of homework assignments completed. Grading is an opportunity for teachers to provide feedback to students on the quality of their academic work and on the quality of their work habits. Almost every teacher with whom we spoke alluded to the complexity of grading.

Of course, some grading decisions are relatively straightforward. Teachers give short answer tests and count the number of correct answers; they assign points for completed homework assignments. But teachers also grade more open ended work: creative writing, research reports, and essay test responses. And, at the end of a unit of work or a grading period, they accumulate the students' work and make decisions about summary grades that intend to provide information about the student's overall work in the class. Although they do this all of the time, the teachers with whom we spoke in Louisville, like teachers all over the United States, did not report having a uniform set of criteria for their grading decisions. This does not mean they are without criteria; it means that their criteria are not easily articulated and that teachers within the same school need not share common criteria. There has been no need for teachers to develop a consensus about grading; it has been a matter for individual discretion. However, even if the absolute standards for the quality of work expected might vary among teachers, the factors that go into their decisions are quite similar. That is to say, even if it is more difficult to get an A from one teacher than from another, both are likely to value the same features of students' work. What are those features?

---

[11] In this discussion, we use the term grading to include a wide range of teacher assessment practices. We do this because the term is familiar to teachers and it is the term we used in our interview questions.

Teachers in three of the four schools said that **effort** was the prime factor influencing their decisions about grades. They gave second place to **completing** the work, a factor connected to views of effort. Third place went to the **quality** of a finished product. We heard about quality far less frequently than we heard about effort and completion. Most teachers reported that they had not yet developed explicit, detailed criteria that they shared with students.

The following comments accurately reflect the emphasis on effort that we heard when teachers spoke about grading.[12] They come from teachers in all four disciplinary areas, from teachers who taught in teacher centered and in student centered ways. We present eight typical comments to stress the strength of this finding.

> Total absolute effort. Even the low child, if they are working, if they turn in all the journal entries, if they turn in all assignments, if they try really hard, they can get an A. In the same sense it's not fair for me to give an A to the high achieving child who is being lazy, who is not pushing himself, who is not doing the things that I'm asking him to do to push himself. They don't deserve the A. Now, if I compare the two papers, they probably would. One might be a proficient and the other is a novice. But that's not what I'm grading in here. I'm grading on them working to get better.
>
> I emphasize mostly that they participate, they try, and they do the work. If a person is willing to do all that, you know, if they're willing to try and do the work even if it's not A work or even if it's not passing work every time, if they're doing the work, if they're turning it in, if they're trying it, they're going to pass. Now if they want an A, then they're doing the work above and beyond what they have to do just to get done, you know, they're putting that extra effort in there. But to pass, you have to get everything in. And I mean, even if it's not quality. If they're getting it all in and they're trying.
>
> I don't know that I can tell you he has to do these three things to get an A, but he's got to attempt what I ask him to do, and when I say perform, for me most of it is doing something. I have a lot of written work. I'm not saying I never touch paper and pencil and books, I certainly do. But attempt the work. When I ask them to do a performance event they need to attempt it and get through their performance event. Attendance is big. Participation.
>
> Mostly effort. Mostly effort. If the student is really putting it in, if they're really trying, they're going to get close to an A, if not an A. If they're really

[12] A very few teachers reported emphasizing the quality of students' work in their grading decisions. They did not discuss adjusting grades for effort or achievement level.

trying, because … [they lack] those skills. They don't have the same background and knowledge and that was real evident today just walking from group to group. You could see that some kids were real familiar with certain words and some kids were not. And I think just working to their optimum, the hardest thing then is to figure out what a child's optimum is.

A big part of it is effort on homework, not necessarily correctness of problems. There does come a point where correctness does count. But when we're first beginning an area, their graded on effort. They can get an acceptable grade by having all their homework done all the time, participating in class, and passing quizzes. I don't think it takes a lot to get a B. That's my understanding. Kids always think it's harder than what you do. But I think a lot of effort. And where kids fall down, is not bringing back their homework.

I am a subjective grader in the sense that if you are giving me everything that you can give me and I'm convinced of that, then even if your work is not as good as I might like it to be, if I think it's the best that you can possibly do, then you're going to do okay, grade-wise. I don't think that we can, especially with these kids, that we can put them all at the same academic standards. There are children who are more gifted in some areas than others. But I expect your best effort. I expect you will do things when they're supposed to be done. I expect you to be responsible for your work.

Right now for a kid to get an A in my class they basically are doing the assignments. For those kids that I know that struggle with it, if they've attempted it and I get some sort of printed product to show that they attempted it then, you know, I'll go ahead and give that kid the benefit of the doubt. They did try. But for the most part those kids that really care about their grades and want to learn, those are the kids that are going to turn everything in and those are going to be the kids, you know, who make an A.

You know, I do give tests on the content, whether they've learned it or not and, you know, we have some type of, you know, creative, you know, like we'll build something or we'll do some type of project and the completion of these projects will be a grade. You know, and I do try, you know, I take into consideration, you know, the ability of the child and the difficulty of the task that they have, you know, decided to put upon themselves. So, you know, that someone who just decides to do something really easy will not get an A any easier than someone whose picked something harder and maybe was not as successful.

These comments might be unsettling in any circumstances because they decouple assessment of student work from any criteria about its absolute quality. They seem especially disturbing in

light of the standards focus of KIRIS and the teachers' energetic approaches to preparing students for those assessments. It sounds as though there are two distinct and disconnected educational philosophies at work in these schools. Classroom assessment criteria address teachers' desire to reward children for working hard whether or not they succeed. KIRIS assessment addresses some absolute level of achievement and that approach to assessment seems to be at odds with and completely separate from the teachers' daily practice. We understand the dilemma that teachers face when they contemplate giving low grades to students who work hard; they fear discouraging them from further effort; they fear requiring more than the child may be capable of producing. Furthermore, teachers are engaged in face-to-face, year-long interactions with students and grades can influence those continuing interactions. KIRIS scores matter to teachers, but they do not influence the human relationships between students and teachers. Still, these teachers' orientation to grading suggest that they are not yet thinking about standards-based reform in their classrooms even though they work in the context of KERA and KIRIS.

In contrast, teachers at Johnson Traditional talked about using rubrics and stressing the quality of student work when they spoke of grading. Their rubrics often specified in considerable detail the components required of an assignment. These comments suggest that teachers are more familiar with the idea of performance standards and with alternative assessment than are their colleagues in the other schools.

> They get the rubric out front. This piece that we are working on now, we developed the rubric yesterday in class and said these are the things you're going to be looking for and here they are. And so this is not a surprise, this is what you have to have for your grade. And it will be written up with point values assessed when they get it tomorrow, but they will have it up front ahead of time…And what it involves is usually an integration and a pulling together of ideas. They have to have five facts about the historical time period, but within that they have to weave in a story line, a personal narrative for what's going on. So there is an integration of more than just regurgitation of facts.
>
> We have a grading scale here at Johnson. I go by the grading scale. We do portfolio pieces, open response questions, homework grades, pop quizzes, test grades, participation. All that goes into account.
>
> Well, it's a matter of really a matter of completing what's assigned in a high quality manner….[Sometimes] they might have the wrong answer and get nine points credit, because they had the right processes and made some small error. And that sort of thing. So that I wouldn't beat into them, they have to show me what they're thinking … (inaudible). Because then if I see your thinking process, if it's not logical or it's not moving in the right direction, or whatever, then I can help you see how you've gone astray.

> In this one we'll look for sequence of events in proper order, using transitional words … I always grade it on spelling and other grammar, sentence structure, paragraphing properly, and also proper sentence. And that's what I'll be looking for in this one. In the persuasive paper they had to use statistics and they had to anticipate what the other side would say, anticipate objection. And then they had to make sure that the point of the paper was clear to the reader, the audience is always considered in all the papers.

Some of the difference in these comments may well come from the orientation of Johnson as a traditional school that children and parents select. Nonetheless it should not explain the vast difference in teachers' comments.

We did speak with teachers who were just beginning to use rubrics. They are moving in the direction of elaborating their requirements and standards for student work, and their criteria are not yet fully developed. Teachers in the early stages of using rubrics and performance standards seem to focus on the activity more than on the academic content to be learned as we can hear in this teacher's remarks.

> Well, I had a rubric. And basically it was very loose. They knew what they had to do. They had to have a poster, everybody in the group had to speak. We talked about, you know, looking at your audience, speaking loud enough to be heard. They had to have a propaganda technique or a couple of techniques. They had to turn into me their rough script. They had to have prop that would enhance it. I was also letting them do some peer evaluation because they had a scoring sheet. I tried to keep it simple. There were only five things to look at for each group. They had to analyze a poster, how well the group spoke, those types of things. And the rubric tells them how they will be awarded points. But, in my mind, if they participated and they tried, I mean, there's nobody who's going to get a failing mark.
>
> Well, to me, an excellent presentation would be that they present their problem, tell the group, the classroom, what the problem is or the question is that they're going to address. And then in their presentation, where they're presenting the materials, you know, the body of it should be explaining or addressing the issues that they said they were going to explain. And all students should be actively involved and they should have a visual.
>
> Well the thing is that all of these go into this rubric and most of the time they're all evenly rated and the kids will average those grades to get a final grade that goes on the report card. And what that does is if a kid does come in here and participate yet doesn't do any homework or anything else they're still passing with a D or so, because I just can't justify giving a kid a U just because they're not doing homework. If they are coming into class and they do know what's

going on and I know, they get a D.

If standards-based reform leads to the use of performance levels as criteria for assessing student work, that shift will require a large conceptual as well as practical change. And, we imagine, it will raise a number of ethical as well as practical questions for teachers. On the ethical side, teachers may wonder how fair it is to grade students' work on the same standards when they are so different from one another in previous achievement and/or capability. They may wonder how to represent great student growth in achievement when it cannot be reflected in a higher performance standard. They may wonder whether some children will constantly fail because they cannot achieve the acceptable performance levels. And, teachers may wonder how they will deal with the consequences of reporting low standards to students and their parents.

Since Louisville is just at the start of its approach to standards-based reform, these are not yet issues for teachers in their own classrooms. We know that they are issues with which teachers grapple when they consider their students' KIRIS scores. As the district moves forward with the reform, it might consider the implications of standards-based assessment and the kinds of professional development and community education that might need to accompany the reform.

As the district moves forward, it might also consider whether classroom assessment might be a fruitful place in which to begin work on standards. The School Support Resource Teachers and Clark Fellows are capable of taking on work in this area; they have the trust of the schools and they are considered to be competent professionals. The discrepancy between standards-based assessment on KIRIS and teachers' current practices might start a productive conversation.

CONCLUSION

The Status of Standards-Based Reform.

In this report we have described our understanding of standards-based reform in Louisville at the time of our baseline data collection visit. We noted that we are not sure what the district intends to do with this approach to reform. We raised questions about the place of standards-based reform in the larger context of Kentucky state reform, and we pointed out the potential for moving forward given that context. Teachers are already engaged in enlarging their pedagogical repertoire with the close-up support of the School Support Resource Teachers and the Clark Fellows.

Louisville's work to date on content standards could become integral to standards-based reform. With these standards, the district has responded to teachers' and parents' request for clarification of what should be taught at certain grade levels. This accomplishment could be tied to the development of performance standards and a shift in orientation to learner outcomes. We wrote in our proposal to the Foundation:

> Content standards could also be a way to *coordinate* and make coherent what is taught in a district that has already adopted new teaching strategies. Content and performance standards together could help the district, students and parents understand what students are expected to know and be able to do at certain points in their schooling. They could lead to consensus about important learning outcomes.

It may be that Louisville's prior reform work has set the stage for this next phase of standards-based reform.

Next Steps in the Evaluation.

When we return for our next site visits, we will again pay attention to the progress of reform at the district and school levels. At the district level, we will inquire about the development of performance levels and about local assessment issues. We will inquire into district sponsored professional development, asking teachers and others for their responses to the Middle School Institute and associated follow-up activities. We will be interested in general in how Louisville decides to continue its standards-based reform work.

At the schools, we will follow a sample of teachers selected from our initial site visits. We will make decisions about which teachers to include in collaboration with the principals and the teachers. This year, in addition to observing and talking to teachers about the role of standards in teaching, curriculum and assessment, we will also talk to small groups of students about their experience of academic learning. We will want to know what they think is important about what they are learning, what they know about how their work is graded, for example, and what they have to do to achieve well in school. Of course, we will also pay attention to the role of the principal in forwarding reforms at the schools.

The goal of our evaluation is both to document the progress of standards-based reform and to provide timely and useful information to the Foundation and to the district. We hope we have accomplished this purpose with our baseline data report. We look forward to continuing to learn about standards-based reform in the Jefferson County Public Schools.