

San Diego City Schools: Indicators of Coherence and “Planfulness”  
in Implementing Middle School, Standards-Based Reform

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This report from Education Matters is designed to inform the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation about the capacity of San Diego City Schools to thoughtfully extend and deepen its efforts to improve teaching and learning in the district’s middle schools so that all children have a) genuine opportunities to achieve at high levels, and b) with very few exceptions, actually achieve at those levels. The report is based on a consideration of a) evaluation data collected since the fall of 1998 when Alan Bersin and Anthony Alvarado began the current approach to reform, and b) the indicators the district identified in its document “Interim Outcomes for San Diego City Schools Program for Student Achievement by June of 2001.” Education Matters’ focus is on the ways in which the district has organized itself **strategically** to support principals and teachers through formal professional development, administrative assistance, and accountability. We have, in other words, considered the extent to which **the district has a strategic plan that is thoughtfully guiding its decisions regarding the implementation of standards-based reform.**

**Education Matters’ concludes that after two and one half years of evaluation research during the time in which the district has been implementing literacy reform:**

- **San Diego City Schools has a strategic plan guiding its decisions with respect to improving teaching and, thereby, student learning.** The plan rests on a consistent theory of instructional improvement that informs professional development and practice at all levels of the system. For students achieving at the lowest levels, the district’s “Blueprint for Student Success” details a specific set of intensive, multi-year interventions based on the same theory of instructional improvement. Importantly, the Blueprint also allocates resources to support the implementation of those interventions.
- **The plan and its components are well-known by every teacher, principal and central office administrator with whom we have spoken.**
- **Professional development at all levels of the system – teacher, principal, staff developer, and Instructional Leader – is targeted to support implementing the plan as quickly as possible.**
- **The district has feedback mechanisms to provide it with data to use in making adjustments to its strategies.**
- **The evidence collected during our site visits coupled with the proposal for implementing Year 2 of the Blueprint, 2001-2002, leads us to conclude that the**

**district will continue to move forward with implementing high quality standards-based reform in literacy and in other content areas.**

In order to support these conclusions, we rely on observation and interview data collected during the past two and one half years at Roosevelt and Bell Junior High Schools, Pacific Beach, Wilson, Mann, Pershing, and Farb Middle Schools, and on interviews with a sample of Instructional Leaders and other key Institute personnel. We turn next to a brief discussion of the status of the interim outcomes and indicators identified by San Diego as evidence of the progress of implementation. We end with a few comments about a) implementation of literacy strategies based on Education Matters' observations in November 2000 and b) the district's proposals for the second year of the Blueprint.

**Interim Outcomes and Indicators.** San Diego described seven interim outcomes and associated indicators to which they would be held accountable in implementing their program for student achievement.<sup>1</sup> Our data confirm that San Diego is addressing the outcomes. Neither district administrators nor teachers, staff developers and/or teachers report that they are as yet achieving these outcomes at high levels of quality. However, without question, all of the educators with whom we spoke were articulate about the ways in which they were addressing them.

1. **Middle school principals are instructional leaders in their schools.**<sup>2</sup> Interviews with principals and teachers reveal that, for the most part principals are a) spending considerable time observing in classrooms, b) focused on teachers' implementation of genre studies (the key Blueprint component for increasing literacy achievement, and c) involved with their staff developers in providing professional development for teachers. Principals have had multiple opportunities to learn about the literacy strategies their teachers are working to implement. This has enabled them to observe teaching and learning more expertly than in the past and to encourage their teachers to take "next steps" in implementation. During the 2000-2001 school year, as a result of Elaine Fink's work with Instructional Leaders (ILs), ILs are coaching principals to improve their skill at presenting professional development sessions and providing feedback to teachers. We present brief examples of how principals are enacting instructional leadership from three different principals to demonstrate what this leadership looks like in practice.

A. One principal in our sample described how she used what she learned by observing literacy/genre studies classrooms to a) identify needs, b) suggest summer readings for teachers, and c) develop back-to-school professional development. This principal reviewed with her teachers what she had learned

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<sup>1</sup>These Interim Outcomes were presented as Attachment II to the district's most recent funded proposal. We have arranged them in a slightly different order than that found in Attachment II for purposes of discussion.

<sup>2</sup>To avoid identifying individuals, we use "she" to refer to all principals even though there are male principals leading some of our sample schools.

from observing read-alouds and shared reading and explained how what she learned was linked to the back-to-school and future professional development. During the first two months of school, she observed in each teacher's classroom with the specific purpose of looking at read-alouds and shared reading to make sure that teachers were continuing to improve their practice. Teachers confirmed that the principal observed and then provided them with specific written feedback after each observation.

B. Another principal talked about her role in helping language arts teachers understand themselves as readers as a route to helping them understand their students as readers. She convened small groups of language arts teachers and modeled with them the reading strategies they were to use with their students. Using a common text, teachers identified strategies they used as adults to make meaning from the written words. They talked about “making connections, for example, one of the strategies they were trying to use with their students. The principal and staff-developer each modeled a read-aloud and a “conference” with a student. Then, teachers practiced conferencing with a “critical friend” sitting at the table to offer them some recommendations for next steps. The principal’s explicit goals were to a) help teachers think of themselves as adult readers, b) make them aware of the literacy strategies they used, and c) link what they learned to their work with students. By practicing peer “conferencing,” a strategy that teachers across our sample find difficult to implement, the principal was giving teachers an opportunity to practice as well as become coaches to one another.

C. A third principal talked about the ways in which she and her staff developer worked to inform teachers about what they were learning at their professional development sessions. She described how she and her staff developer meet on Mondays, after the staff developer’s Friday professional development, to talk about what the staff developer learned. Then, the staff developer meets with teachers and reviews what she learned, the direction in which the Institute is going, and the skills and the strategies she is supposed to work on with teachers. This practice grew out of the principal’s realization last year that teachers did not understand what the staff developers were learning and how it was tied to what she was asking them to do with their students. The principal reported that she, too, informs the staff developer and the teachers about what she has learned after her principal conferences. By engaging in these practices, the principal and staff developer keep the teachers informed, connect the levels of professional development, and support one another in moving forward with improving literacy instruction.

These examples demonstrate a few of the ways principals are working as instructional leaders in their school. Some are more expert than others, to be sure. But all of the principals in our sample could talk about the literacy strategies, the

range of ways in which teachers were implementing them, and the strengths and weaknesses of literacy instruction to date. Their knowledge of teachers and teaching and their own role as leaders of instruction was far greater than we had heard before.

2. **Role of central office staff has changed to support educational reform and to develop leadership.** The coordination of three critical roles: a) the leadership team of Superintendent and Chancellor for Instruction, b) the role of the Instructional Leaders, and c) the development of the Institute has focused central office administrators' attention on teaching and learning. As we have written in earlier reports, ILs focus their work on providing principals with individual and group-level professional development designed to increase their knowledge and skill with respect to instructional strategies and leadership.<sup>3</sup> During the last two years, central office, represented by the Institute staff, has made changes designed to strengthen the work of the ILs as well as that of the staff developers who provide direct support to teachers. We provide two examples.

A. Two years ago, ILs had little opportunity to be coached on their work with principals. They met among themselves and with Tony Alvarado, but this did not provide them with the kind of support they needed to improve their practice. To change this situation, in the summer of 2000, Elaine Fink, formerly Superintendent of District 2 in New York, was brought to San Diego with the express charge of developing a professional development program for the ILs. As a result, ILs now have opportunities to learn how to better lead their principal conferences. They are given advice on how to design and implement the conferences and then video tape their presentations and interactions with principals. Each of the conference videos is "de-briefed" with Elaine. In addition, ILs debrief their videos with one another. This strategy provides enormous growth opportunities to the ILs.

In addition, ILs have been "shadowed" by Elaine and provided with feedback about how to improve their school-based work. Some principals are eloquent about the value of having Elaine accompany their ILs on walk-throughs and can cite examples of feedback she provided to them that moved their understanding to a new and higher level. Other principals are less sure of the value of Elaine's participation. ILs, for their part, report that all of their professional development takes an enormous amount of time and can be quite stressful. Nonetheless, ILs agree that it is the kind of professional development they need in order to get better at their work.

B. Staff Developers had been disappointed that their professional development was often provided by individuals from within the district who had little

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<sup>3</sup>See Education Matters' August 1999 update for a discussion of the development and early implementation of the IL role.

knowledge of secondary schools. They appreciated the external consultants who came with knowledge of secondary school literacy, but regretted that the Institute itself lacked such on-site expertise. Last summer (2000), in recognition of the legitimacy of these concerns, the district appointed a middle level staff developer to take responsibility for the professional development of secondary school staff developers. The person selected, Wendy Ranck-Buhr, was well-respected by her colleagues and, so, came to the job with great credibility.

Both of these examples point to significant ways in which the district has altered the role of central office so that it focuses on supporting educational reform and developing instructional leaders at many different levels.

3. **Middle school teachers are teaching to standards in their classrooms.** Teaching to standards, in our view, is not teaching to the lists of content and performance standards posted in classrooms. Rather, it is implementing the kind of instruction necessary to enable virtually all students to grapple with and learn important content at high levels. That content and what students do to demonstrate their knowledge may be found on the standards charts that dot classroom walls. But, it is the instructional practices coupled with the content that matter most. In Education Matters' view, teachers are attempting the kinds of teaching practices likely to enable students to meet standards. The genre studies approach merges good instruction – readers and writers workshop strategies – with high quality texts designed to engage students' interests. Teachers are far from expert with the strategies, as yet, but most agree that the strategies are likely to lead to greater student accomplishment.

If one considers the Indicators delineated for this Interim Outcome in San Diego's document, it does not look like San Diego is meeting this goal. However, we would argue that the Indicators ought to be revised to reflect the link between the teaching strategies that the district is helping teachers implement and teachers' capacity to then teach to the content and performance standards. Without the strategies, teachers will never teach to high quality standards. A revision that considers pedagogy as a part of teaching to standards would better reflect the emphasis that San Diego has placed on instruction, as well as content and assessment, as the route to achieving at standard.

4. **Two-way accountability is operant with ongoing support for the principal as the instructional leader at their site.** As described earlier, ILs hold principals accountable for being the instructional leaders in their school. This means that principals must know how to support the implementation of the literacy framework, but also how to “coach” – provide professional development and feedback to teachers as they work to improve their practice. At the same time, the ILs are held accountable for providing high quality support to principals in the form of both group and individualized coaching to help principals get better at what they have to do. This means that ILs have also had to improve their ability to coach principals. As described in indicator #1, this year Elaine

Fink has been in charge with coaching ILs to become better at their work. ILs are expected to perfect their observation skills, their critical questioning skills and their ability to provide constructive feedback to the principals in their charge. This means that ILs have had to learn to adapt their work to the specific needs of each principal, differentiating their feedback to help each principal reach the next level. We have learned that principals have a great deal of support for implementing the practices for which they are accountable. At the same time, the ILs are also receiving extensive support for becoming more expert in the work they are expected to do.

5. **Middle level schools are organized so that sustained and directed student effort can yield high achievement for all students.** At the present time, San Diego's middle schools are organized to ensure that the lowest achieving students are taught under the best circumstances. Thus, they are in entry grade-level classes of no more than twenty students and their teachers have the most opportunity to interact with the staff developers. Genre Studies classes are taught in double period blocks that provide teachers and students with the time they need for their focus on literacy. Education Matters' observations and interviews with respect to these classrooms revealed that teachers are very pleased with the small class size and think it enables them to better implement genre studies. On the other hand, teachers of the next two grade-levels who also teach low-achieving students often have large class sizes and experience great difficulty trying to implement genre studies with as many as 35 students some of whom are also English Language Learners and/or students with Special Education needs. These teachers are not convinced that they can implement any literacy strategies with such large numbers of high-need students. The organization of the entry level, small genre studies classes appears to be having a negative impact on these teachers' sense of efficacy.

San Diego has implemented a high-risk strategy in organizing schools to address the learning needs of its lowest achieving students in small-size genre studies classes. The district is well aware of the gamble it has taken and it will ultimately rely on achievement levels, dropout numbers, high school course enrollment, and other data to judge the effectiveness of its strategy. There is reason to think, however, that a strategy that provides students who have the greatest learning needs with small classes taught by teachers who work closely with staff developers has a reasonable chance of success.

6. **Effective supports and interventions have been implemented for students having difficulty performing at grade level standards.** San Diego makes available to low achieving middle school students a range of supports and interventions designed to improve their academic achievement. These include, for example, after school, summer, and inter-session programs. However, Education Matters does not collect data on these supports and interventions and, therefore, cannot comment on their status. What we do know, however, is that the district is developing strategies to ensure that eligible students actually take advantage of the supports. During our November 2000 visit, we learned that the district was having difficulty persuading

all eligible students to participate in support opportunities. As a result, within the context of the Blueprint, the district developed a “learning contract” strategy, a way to notify parents a) that their child has a very serious academic problem that may lead to grade retention, and b) that the district wants and needs the parents cooperation and help in improving their child’s achievement. As one principal put it, the idea is to say to parents, “We have a problem here. We need to sit down and discuss how we're going to attack this together.” Schools were in the process of completing the contracts and planning parent meetings about them last November. We consider implementation of the “learning contract” to be an indicator of the seriousness with which the district is approaching students’ needs for effective supports and interventions.

7. **Staff development has changed to be an ongoing on-site model.** Education Matters’ last three update reports on middle school reform in San Diego detailed the literacy-focused, school-based work of the staff developers. Their in-class coaching work as well as their leadership of small group professional development sessions targeted to their schools’ needs supports teachers in implementing the district’s literacy reforms. Our site visit in November 2000 confirmed the importance of the on-site staff developers to implementation of the district’s work with its lowest achieving students.

However, it is clear that not all teachers have access to as much of the staff developers’ time as they would like. Staff developers are often stretched thin by the needs of genre studies teachers and by their new role as support for beginning language arts teachers. While this allocation of their time can be justified, it means that they are less available to language arts teachers at whose students are also low-achieving but who teach other grade levels . We note this because such teachers are enormously frustrated by their inability to successfully implement genre studies in their classes. This situation is particularly vexing at large middle schools and those that have significant numbers of ELL and special education students.

We want to note that the district also provides a great deal of teacher professional development during the summers. Such professional development provides teachers with opportunities to learn from some of the external consultants who provide professional development for the staff developers during the school year. It is important to note that summer professional development is linked to work during the school year by the staff developers who provide follow-up support and re-teaching of the summer professional development during the school year.

## **Conclusions**

The outcomes and indicators discussed above are central to the district’s reform strategy. Our data lead us to conclude that they are addressed in the work being done by educators at central

office and at the schools. In addition, Education Matters found evidence of classroom practices that demonstrate links between the outcomes and indicators and the implementation of instructional practices designed to help students achieve at standard.

Education Matters researchers observed twenty eight language arts classes during our November 2000 visit to the district. In each of the classes we saw teachers attempting the genre studies strategies. We saw, for example, teachers a) explicitly teaching students how to make inferences, b) using read-alouds to make transparent the skills that good readers use to get meaning from text, and c) engaging students in some form of accountable talk.<sup>4</sup> The strategies in use were a) those promoted by the Institute and b) similar from teacher to teacher. Without question, our observations revealed a coherence to literacy instructional strategies which should lead to coherence for the students as they progress from grade to grade and even across schools.

At the same time, teachers varied considerably in the skill with which they implemented the strategies. Entry grade level genre studies teachers, for the most part, demonstrated higher level implementation than their colleagues who taught other grade levels and/or had much larger class sizes. Students in these entry level genre studies classes were often able to describe the strategies their teachers used and why they were important.<sup>5</sup> Students could, for example, talk about text-to-text, text-to-self- and text-to-world connections as strategies their teachers taught them to help them become better readers.

The principals, staff developers and ILs with whom we spoke were fully aware of the variations in implementation and the need for even more on-site professional development than the district can presently afford. They were also aware that even with the additional student support provided by genre studies classes, some students will be retained at the end of sixth or seventh grade. Both of these realities challenge the district to develop new responses. The draft Blueprint (January 30, 2001) identifies how the district proposes to do this with respect to both of these issues.

- First, the district proposed the creation of eight Literacy Support Program Specialists. The draft Blueprint (p.4) describes the ways in which they would support each learning community in furthering implementation of the literacy strategies.
- Second, the district proposed the creation of after school enrichment courses to enable retained students to have access to content unavailable to them during the regular school day due to their enrollment in three-period literacy and/or two-period math blocks. For

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<sup>4</sup>Although guided reading was to be the focus for the year, teachers did not yet know how to implement independent reading and conferences. Without these components in place, ILs and others realized that teachers were not ready to take on guided reading. Everyone with whom we spoke seemed to realize that the Institute had tried to do too much too quickly.

<sup>5</sup>By design, our sample of students came primarily from entry-level genre classes.



example, sixth grade retained students would be enrolled in “Science Explorations through Literacy.”

These two proposals, and the Blueprint contains others, suggest to us that the district a) is aware of the strengths and weaknesses of its implementation, and b) is using what it knows to strengthen the work of improving student achievement. We think these proposals, along with the data describing the status of San Diego’s progress with its outcomes and indicators, provide evidence that district has a strategic plan that is thoughtfully guiding its decisions regarding the implementation of standards-based reform.