

**T**he strong and growing pressure to raise academic achievement for all students has focused educators' attention on student learning. More than ever before, teachers and administrators at all levels know they must do something to ensure that all students reach challenging standards.

But, *what* exactly must educators do to raise achievement? Accountability systems seem to assume that the desire to avoid sanctions will encourage

districts, such as the districts that have won the Broad Prize, have demonstrated substantial improvements in achievement and narrowed achievement gaps. But no district can say that every school in its borders is high achieving. And most districts are struggling to provide the right mix of policies and supports to ensure that every school succeeds.

How can districts create systemic improvement — improvement that affects every classroom? For seven years, a handful of Connecticut districts have tried to find out and have been supported by the Connecticut Center for School Change to do so. As part of the Systemic Instructional Improvement Program (SIIP), the districts have pursued strategies designed to yield large-scale instructional improvement and to ensure that every aspect of their operations supports schools and students.

After five years in the program, district officials took stock of their efforts. All of the districts could point to genuine systemic improvements and, most important, evidence of substantial student achievement gains. And in the process of pursuing this strategy, the districts and the center have learned a great deal about what it takes to bring about systemic improvement. At the outset, there was no road map, and everyone who was involved forged a new path. Their successes, as well as their challenges, provide lessons for themselves and for others.

#### **PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS**

Although the center didn't have a precise recipe to follow in its work with districts, it did start with some basic assumptions. The first was to focus on the district as the unit of change. While there has been increased attention to districts in recent years, when the center started this work in 2001, the district focus wasn't the logical or popular choice. Many reformers tried to bypass districts entirely by creating schools that would be free from district rules or involvement or by placing authority over schools at the state level.

These reforms reflected the widespread — and in many cases, legitimate

# Improving Student Learning Requires District Learning

A school improvement initiative in Connecticut points to lessons that can benefit all districts seeking systemic changes that support student learning.

**By Robert Rothman**

schools to do the right thing. But it's not at all clear that all educators know what will raise achievement for all students, particularly in schools that are struggling. After all, teachers want to do right by their students; if they were aware of effective practices, they would have employed them already.

Even less clear is what school districts should do to ensure that all schools are effective. Virtually all districts can point to a few schools that are successful and to schools that have made impressive gains. And some dis-

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—view that districts were dysfunctional entities that thwarted, rather than fostered, improvement. But the districts didn't go away. And a growing body of evidence suggested that districts could, and in many cases did, support large-scale improvement. (Annenberg Institute for School Reform 2002; Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy 2002; Togneri and Anderson 2003). Indeed, the evidence showed that, because of their scope, districts were essential to ensure that all schools, not just the few favored by freedom from rules, improved.

A second key assumption was that the goal should be improvement in instruction. Any other kind of improvement would not do. This, too, was a shift from conventional practice. Although the rhetoric of reformers suggests otherwise, schools and districts make changes frequently. They're constantly introducing new programs and policies. But such changes have seldom led to improvements in learning, because they've failed to address the instructional core (Elmore 1996). Unless changes affect interactions between students and teachers, they're unlikely to produce the outcomes reformers seek.

However, evidence from districts focused on instructional improvement shows that such changes can yield impressive results. For more than 10 years, Community School District #2 in New York City pursued a deliberate strategy of improving instruction at all levels. The district created new curricula and made massive investments in professional development to enable teachers to use materials effectively. The district also made sure administrators at every level saw their jobs as improving instruction and held everyone accountable for achieving improvements. And these efforts paid off — the district rose from tenth to second in the city in reading achievement and from fourth to second in mathematics achievement (Elmore and Burney 1997).

The center's director, Andrew Lachman, was a top aide to District 2's superintendent, Anthony Alvarado, and the experience there gave rise to the center's assumptions and led him and his colleagues to create SIIP to help



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## “What we learned was learning is a work in progress.”

— Eileen Howley, Farmington



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districts carry out systemic instructional improvement. Using a competitive proposal process, the center offered grants and technical assistance to five districts, ranging in size from 2,400 to 4,400 pupils, that demonstrated a commitment to pursuing the strategy. (Initially, the grants were for four years, but the center added a fifth year when the districts showed that additional time would help). Center staff members provided intensive, on-the-ground technical assistance, facilitating meetings and being “critical friends” along the way. They linked district leaders and teachers with a variety of external resources. And the center provided professional development and regular opportunities for assistant superintendents, directors of curriculum, and principals from participating districts to meet with one another and share ideas and learning.

In addition to improvements in teaching and learning the work helped bring about, district officials said being involved in SIIP was a tremendous learning experience that enhanced their own knowledge and skills. “I feel like I went back and got a degree,” says Rena Cadro, director of curriculum and grants in the Plainfield Public Schools.

### LESSONS LEARNED

Five years of work on changing virtually every aspect of district operations, from the classroom to the central office, yielded some important insights into what it takes to bring about systemic improvement. The districts and the center took many actions that produced important results, but they also did a number of things they would change if they had to do it over again. And they were able to make mid-course corrections to adjust from missteps and get back on track.

What were some of the lessons for districts and their partners?

***It’s teaching that matters.*** Although the districts tackled the full spectrum of their operations — from data systems to curriculum — their most powerful efforts focused on the classroom. The districts put in place numerous practices aimed at helping teachers and adminis-

### ARTICLE AT A GLANCE

Five Connecticut school districts, supported by the Connecticut Center for School Change, embarked on a program to spur districtwide improvements in student learning.

The districts learned eight important lessons during their initiative:

- It’s teaching that matters.
- Systemic improvement does not move in a straight line.
- Measuring progress at midpoint is critical, but challenging.
- External assistance is crucial.
- External resources need to be adapted to local circumstances.
- Accountability matters.
- Creating ownership and common language is critical.
- Improvement means breaking norms of isolation — for everyone.

trators see how instruction was occurring and to reflect on their own practice.

For example, the districts regularly conducted walkthroughs in which teachers and administrators observed classrooms to consider issues of professional practice, and they conducted intervisitations in which teachers from one school visited another school to observe instruction.

Linda VanWagenen, director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the Plainville Public Schools, says these practices proved enormously powerful in helping drive improvements in teaching. Information from classroom visits, combined with student achievement data, helped convince teachers of the need for change. “Triangulated data is difficult to argue with,” she says.

At the same time, these visits opened teachers’ eyes to new approaches and helped their own learning about instruction. As part of Plainville’s efforts, all instructional leaders from every school visited every other school in the district, and every teacher learned from the visits, she says. “We saw high school teachers peering in at elementary instruction and saying things like, ‘Why

don't we do that?" VanWagenen says. "That was one of the most powerful things we did."

**Systemic improvement does not move in a straight line.** Because there is no well-marked roadmap for systemic improvement, districts found they had to improvise when they confronted a roadblock. District leaders might have planned how to proceed over five years, but when the plans met reality, they often had to change.

Eileen Howley, former assistant superintendent of the Farmington Public Schools, says her district learned this lesson almost immediately. The district had developed a blueprint for using data to drive improvements. But, from the outset, officials knew they had to agree on and develop measures they would use in the new system before putting it in place. "We went in with a blueprint, but the blueprint, the minute we started, was obsolete," Howley says. "What we learned was learning is a work in progress."

Other districts found that their successes in bringing about improvements led to changes in their strategies. In Plainfield, for example, data from walk-throughs led to some new approaches, according to Cadro. "In the walk-throughs, the consensus at all levels was that students learn only when they are emotionally and intellectually engaged," she says. "The teams then began a discussion: how do we know when students are engaged? What causes them to become disengaged?" In response to these findings, the district bought copies of a book of strategies for engaging students. They handed out coupons at a district retreat that could be redeemed for the book; all the coupons were turned in.

"Throughout the change process, the focus on the future changed due to the learning that takes place along the way," Cadro notes.

**Measuring progress at midpoint is critical, but challenging.** The ultimate goal for all of the districts was improving student achievement. But as they were trying to improve instruction, how would they know their efforts would yield achievement gains down the line?

Defining the criteria for success was

one of the most powerful parts of the process of systemic improvement, says Eileen Howley. "The concerted and focused work of defining how you know you are successful was a key motivator," she says. "We spent a great deal of time having deeper conversations with teachers and administrators about how we will know if we are successful as a data-driven system. What does that mean? And we found that the existing rubrics were not clear enough. We had to go deeper into what that meant."

Assessing progress also helped district leaders understand school needs and improve their support for teachers and school leaders, notes Claudia Albert, former assistant superintendent of the Stonington Public Schools. There, the district developed surveys to gauge teachers' perceptions of progress. "They were home grown and had many faults," she says. "But there were pluses. They got us out into the district, closer to where the work was taking place. We got to act as consultants. That helped move our work forward."

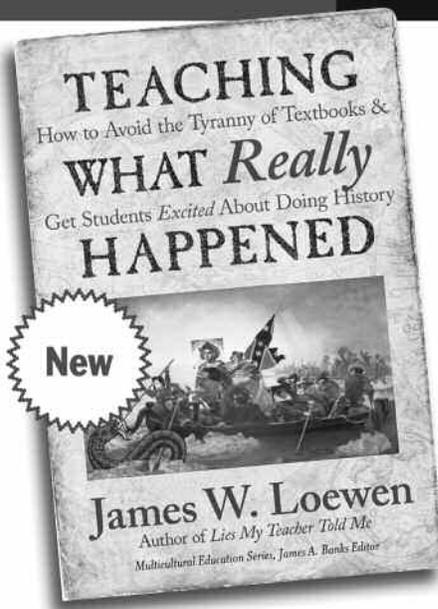
But Albert adds, "they demonstrated how hard it is to measure systemic improvement."

**External assistance is crucial.** In every district, the hard work of systemic improvement went on in schools and the central office. All agree that the assistance an external organization like the center provides is vital.

The center assisted the districts in several ways. First, the staff kept the improvement agenda front and center in the districts. As district officials freely admit, it would be easy to focus on the day-to-day exigencies of running a school district and put improvement efforts on the back burner. But regular visits by the center staff kept improvement efforts alive. And the grants allowed district officials time to step out of their day-to-day roles and focus on improvement.

"The external partner became a vital source for keeping the momentum going," says Howley. "I needed someone to come around and say, 'Where are you in the effort? Let's talk about

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what's getting in the way and what's helping.' One of the challenges in systemic change is remaining focused, because there are so many competing commitments."

The center also provided the districts with valuable resources that moved the agenda forward. For example, the center connected the districts with the Harvard Change Leadership Group, which provided research and expertise to navigate educational improvement. The Harvard group provided district leaders with a deeper understanding of systemic improvement and gave them a common language, according to Howley. "Raising those questions became vital to my personal understanding as a school leader and, ultimately, the understanding of the people I was charged to lead in this effort," she says.

The center staff members were also skilled facilitators who kept meetings on course, modeled effective collaborative work, and provided tools to help district leaders create teams and organize them effectively. "The center provided a continuous body of support for a small district with few resources," says Cadro.

**But external resources need to be adapted to local circumstances.** External resources might be important, but they'll be effective only if districts use them in ways that meet their needs. Resources can't be imported and simply plugged in to a local context.

Farmington officials learned this lesson when they sent a team to learn about a national program to help schools use data, notes Howley. Although the team had originally recommended adopting the method, district staff agreed it would be more effective if it were integrated into the district's existing systems.

"They wanted to come back and teach the national program way," says Howley. "The national program wasn't going to work 100% unless we integrated it into our system. If we tried to wholesale follow the researcher, I don't think it would have been nearly as effective as paying attention to the need to contextualize the work."

**Accountability matters.** As schools

in the No Child Left Behind era are finding, it is not always enough to expect teachers and school leaders to try a new approach because it might be the right thing to do. Sometimes, educators have to be accountable for implementing changes.

Stonington officials learned this lesson when they received a "wake-up call": low achievement scores. The dis-

trict had pursued a strategy based on capacity building, believing that if they educated teachers and school leaders in new approaches, they would put them in place and instruction would improve. But the wake-up call convinced them that capacity building alone is not sufficient. Schools must be accountable for implementation as well. And as a result, test scores went up substantially that year.

"Capacity building alone was not going to do it," says Albert. "You needed accountability far more than we had it."

One aspect of accountability is creating an urgency for change. By sending the message that the status quo was unacceptable, districts were able to convince reluctant educators to re-examine their practices, notes VanWagenen of Plainville. "Creating a sense of urgency for change is a very necessary component of continuous improvement," she says. "We had tried, 'We're all in this together, let's play nice, we know you want to improve.' We learned that's not really enough. Until there's a sense of urgency, folks will go on doing things the way they've always done them and getting the same kind of results they've always gotten, which weren't where we wanted to be."

At the same time, districts that focused first on accountability found they needed capacity building to ensure that educators knew what to do when the results showed the need for improve-

ment. "We fully recognized, unless we developed leaders, and developed their knowledge base, and their confidence with the use of data," the initiative would not move forward, says Howley.

**Creating ownership and common language is critical.** Systemic improvement can't happen with a small group of people. Everyone in a district must take ownership of the change effort and

## A disappointing professional development experience in one district prompted teachers to assume greater responsibility for their own learning.

do their part if the improvement is to succeed. Transferring ownership of a reform effort can occur in a variety of ways, and when it happens, it is powerful.

Consider Stonington's experience. There, the district had suffered what officials considered an embarrassing setback: A professional development session featuring a nationally known expert turned out to be a disaster. The expert was uninspiring and unenlightening, and the session didn't advance learning as officials had hoped.

That disaster, though, produced a surprising result. The following year, teachers decided to assume responsibility for leading the professional development session themselves. Thirteen teachers led sessions on student learning, 15 did presentations on technology, and 10 gave presentations on science, and it proved enormously successful. "Out of that came the notion, 'wouldn't it have been nice if we could have learned by doing?'" says Albert. "After the fiasco, teachers said, 'I can do it better than that national presenter.'"

Other districts learned they had to ensure that a broader segment of the teachers and administrators were involved in the changes. "A small cadre of us were trying to move this initiative forward," says Howley of Farmington. "It had to reside in the total leadership of the district. It actually shifted our plan."

Districts also found that creating

broad ownership is easier when the district has a common theory of action for change and a common vocabulary about improvement. The center helped create a common theory of action by aligning the work of SIIP with the work of a parallel network of superintendents. The leaders in the superintendents' network and the assistant superintendents involved in SIIP shared information and made sure their work was aimed at advancing the same goals.

At the same time, districts made concerted efforts at developing districtwide vision statements. "Creating a shared vision, and articulating that shared vision, is time-consuming but definitely worthwhile," says VanWagenen. "That vision lives. We created it in Year 1. If you go into classrooms, you see it not only on the walls, but in instruction."

**Improvement means breaking norms of isolation — for everyone.** After years of allowing teachers to close their classroom doors and create their

own instructional solutions, educators are finally finding ways to allow teachers to work collaboratively and learn from one another. Like professionals in other fields, teachers are increasingly visiting one another's classrooms, sharing their work, and developing common solutions.

But such efforts must be carefully nurtured, notes VanWagenen of Plainville. Although the district mandated that teachers visit other classrooms, teachers were initially reluctant to do so. "The norms of isolation and teacher autonomy can be broken down, but it is slow and difficult," she says. "Even though the superintendent mandated it, getting teachers to go into other teachers' classrooms has been like pulling teeth. But at last count, 87% of teachers did it."

Districts also found that teachers need professional development on how to work cooperatively in teams. In Farmington, the district surveyed teachers to find out how they worked

cooperatively, and the district found that it had to provide training to improve teachers' collaboration. "Simply putting people into groups does not constitute a team," says Howley. "We had to dedicate professional development time to teaming. You can't assume it without guidance and support."

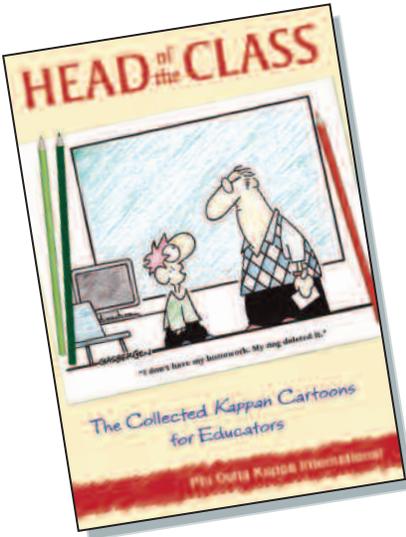
But teachers aren't the only educators whose work is traditionally characterized by isolation. Central office administrators and superintendents seldom get the chance to interact with peers and collaborate on improvement strategies. And in the rare instances when they do meet with colleagues, the focus is usually on something other than instructional improvement.

In SIIP, the center took steps to break down the isolation of central office administrators. The center facilitated meetings between staff members across departments who had few opportunities to work together. Staff members led walk-throughs to examine issues of instructional practice. They



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visited neighboring districts so administrators could meet one another and see other schools. And they convened regular meetings where assistant superintendents from all districts could discuss issues of common concern.

“This network provided a way to mitigate against the isolation of central office leadership,” says Howley.

## MOVING FORWARD

Center and district officials remain convinced that systemic instructional improvement is essential and that their efforts over the first five years of the program yielded important results. Most significant, all of the districts can point to improvements in student achievement. In Farmington, for example, the proportion of 4th graders at or above the state goal in writing rose from 77% in 2006 to 88% in 2007; in Plainville, the proportion of 6th graders at or above the state goal in mathematics rose from 49% to 60% over that period. Similarly, the proportion of Stonington 6th graders at or above the state goal increased from 63% in 2006 to 78% the following year.

All of the districts plan to move ahead with their strategies. As they move forward, though, the districts face important challenges. One is the issue of measuring progress. These districts made some major changes, and student test scores come back too late to tell them if their efforts are moving

them in the right direction. Districts need ways to gauge their improvements as they’re making them, so they can make corrections if necessary.

To assist these districts, the center is developing a set of indicators of systemic improvement. District officials will be able to watch these indicators to see if they’re moving toward systemic improvement. In addition, the center has commissioned a formal evaluation, which will provide more reliable evidence of progress that can help guide districts in the future.

But in the long run, districts across the country need better information about whether their improvement efforts are succeeding and, more important, whether changes in practice will improve student achievement. Such an assessment could also help district improvement become more widespread.

A second challenge the Connecticut districts face is a familiar one in education reform: sustainability. The reform literature is littered with stories of promising efforts that stalled or died because of a change in leadership or an erosion of support. Although the five SIIP districts maintained their efforts over five years, they did encounter some stops and starts, and they remain concerned that the efforts continue.

One tactic the districts tried to sustain the reforms was to provide continual professional development. While they might have hoped they could in-

roduce new ideas and then concentrate on implementing them, the inevitable turnover of principals and teachers meant new arrivals were unfamiliar with the new approaches. Providing continual professional development could ensure that the entire staff had the necessary knowledge.

Over the long run, though, the best way to sustain reform is to make the reform the way of doing business. There is some evidence that the Connecticut districts were able to do this, at least to some extent. Albert recalls that a former Stonington teacher — one who had resisted many improvement efforts for a long time — returned for a visit after leaving to teach in another district and showed how the improvement in Stonington had been ingrained in the district’s DNA. “There was never a discussion of what good teaching looks like [in the new district],” Albert quotes the teacher as complaining. “You’ve spoiled us all.”

“The message is out there,” Albert concludes. **K**

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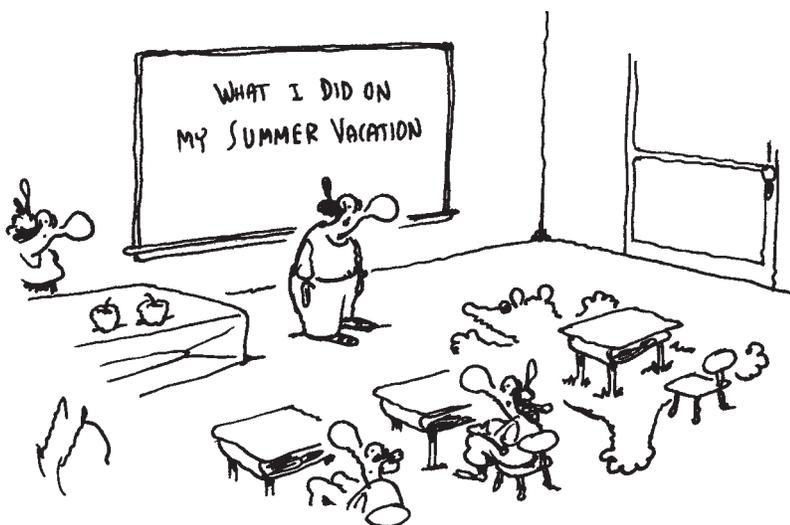
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“What happens in Yellowstone stays in Yellowstone.”

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