

Washington School Research Center



# Effective Practices for Hispanic Students in Washington State

*Lessons Learned from Texas Schools*

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**The Washington School Research Center (WSRC)** is an independent research and data analysis center within Seattle Pacific University. The Center began in July 2000, funded through a gift from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Our mission is to conduct sound and objective research on student learning in the public schools, and to make the research findings available for educators, policy makers, and the general public for use in the improvement of schools. We believe that sound data and appropriate data analysis are vital components for the identification of school and classroom practices related to increased student academic achievement.

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A Research Report From  
The Washington School Research Center



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# Effective Practices for Hispanic Students in Washington State

## Lessons Learned from Texas Schools

### INTRODUCTION

With the passage of HB 1209 in 1993, higher student achievement has become an expectation in all Washington schools. Evidence gathered to date reveals that while many schools are making progress in meeting the more rigorous standards, other schools are struggling to move ahead. Some of these struggling schools are faced with high levels of student poverty. Yet examples exist of schools with large numbers of Hispanic and LEP students that have defied these challenges and are meeting and surpassing the state standards. In our previous report, *Bridging the Opportunity Gap: How Washington Elementary Schools are Meeting Achievement Standards* (Washington School Research Center, 2002), teachers and administrators from a sample of 16 high-performing Washington elementary schools explained how they had been so successful. Clear patterns emerged from their responses, and primary factors that related to their success were identified. These factors were present in all or the vast majority of the schools studied and appeared to be essential elements of a successful and effective school. These factors included:

- A caring and collaborative professional environment
- Strong leadership
- Focused, intentional instruction
- The use of assessment data to inform instruction

The results of this effective schools study were disseminated state-wide, and staff development activities in the 2002-2003 school year were conducted by Washington School Research Center (WSRC) personnel. During these activities there were consistent questions in two areas: (1) What practices are most effective in middle and junior high schools? and (2) What practices are most effective for schools with high percentages of limited English proficient<sup>1</sup> students (LEP)?<sup>2</sup> Consequently, we immediately began plans

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<sup>1</sup> In this report we adhere to Texas' terminology and use "limited English proficient" to identify students for whom English is not their primary language. We acknowledge that Washington State increasingly uses the term "English language learners" to identify these students. However, for ease of reading we have chosen to adopt Texas' terminology and the phrase "limited English proficient" in this report.

<sup>2</sup> Most often this question was posed by the educators in schools with high percentages of Hispanic students, which is the largest concentration of LEP students in the state. Often the question was, "What practices are most effective for schools with high percentages of Hispanic students?" The implication of the question was that these students have limited English proficiency, although the question was not worded that way. This study focuses on schools with high percentages of Hispanic students, many with limited English proficiency.

for conducting similar research focused on middle and junior high schools and on schools with high populations of Hispanic students in the state of Washington.

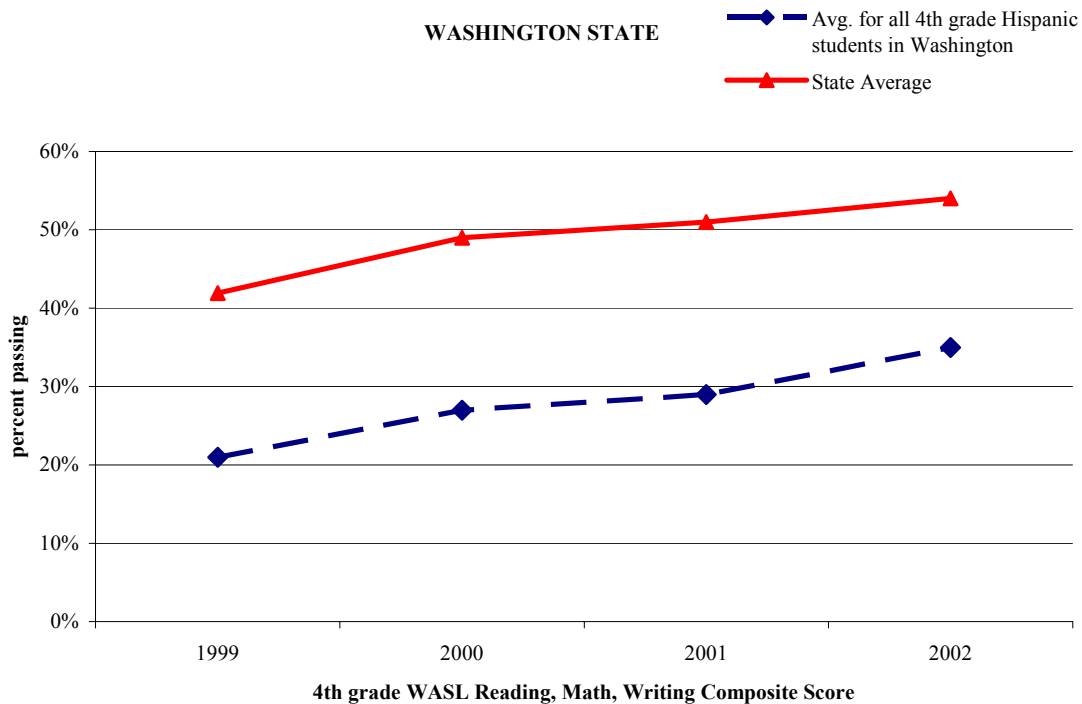
To identify successful middle and junior high schools, we replicated the selection procedure we previously used with the elementary schools. We used the percentage of students in a school qualifying for a free or reduced price lunch as a proxy for the poverty variable. To be considered for the middle/junior high school study a school had to have at least 25% of its students qualifying for free/reduced lunch. Those schools were then divided into two groups: (1) 25%-49% free/reduced lunch and (2) 50% and above free/reduced lunch. A composite score based on the schools' reading, writing, and math WASL was computed for each school to identify those schools with achievement significantly above the group average. In addition, *Just for the Kids* opportunity gap data were used to cross check this procedure. Unlike the elementary schools, the variability among the middle/junior high schools using this composite score was small, and we concluded that the differences between the highest scoring schools and the group means were insufficient to identify "highly successful schools." Therefore, our study of highly successful middle and junior high schools in this state was not feasible at this time.

The second question of concern, effective practices for schools with high Hispanic populations, also posed difficulties. However, the need for such a study was paramount since, as a recent state report noted:

Analyses of the results of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) found that as the level of LEP students in a school increases, the average WASL scores decline in every subject. . . .students not proficient in using the English language have a higher risk of academic failure. When children with little or no previous exposure to the English language enter the public schools, they are often unable to profit fully from instruction in English. Research has found that LEP students tend to have lower levels of academic performance in math and reading, higher rates of retention in grade, and much higher dropout rates than their English-fluent peers. (Bylsma, Ireland, & Malagon, 2002, p. 2-3)

This pattern of lower academic achievement for 4<sup>th</sup> graders is represented in Figure 1, and the gap is similar for the later grades. Hispanic students in Washington State have scored below the state average every year of the WASL, and the gap remains wide.

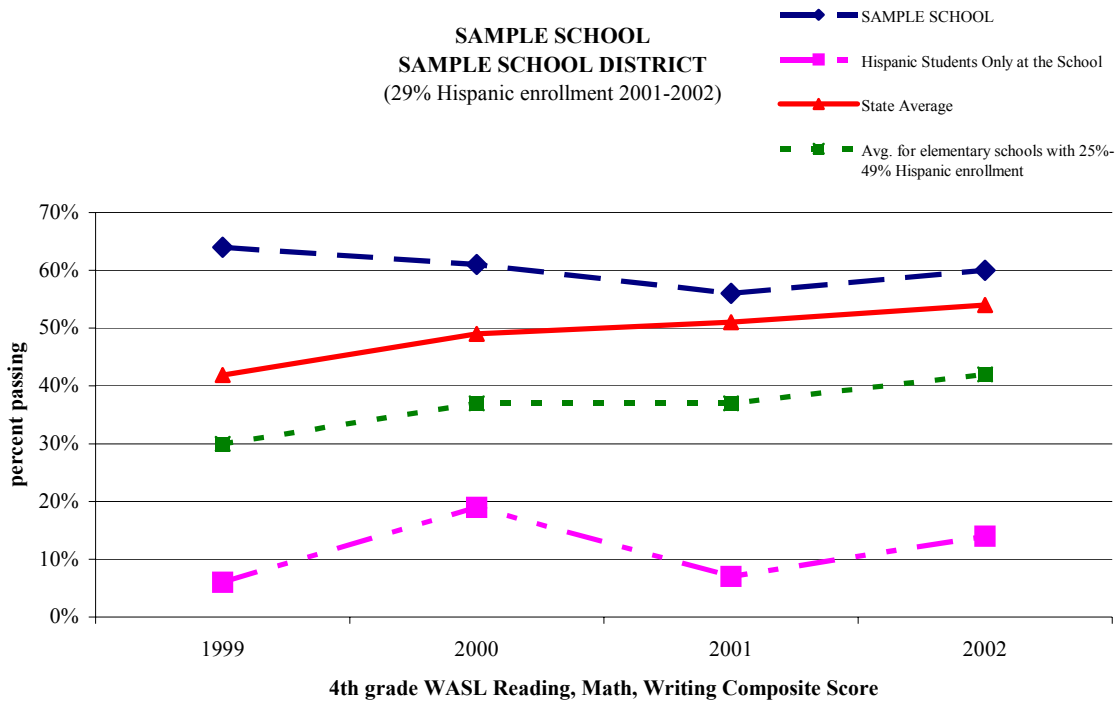
Figure 1



To study effective practices of schools with high percentages of Hispanic and LEP students, we attempted to identify schools that had both high percentages of Hispanic students and high *school-level* achievement. Although there were schools with large numbers of Hispanic students where the schools performed at a reasonably high level, when we disaggregated the data by ethnicity at these schools, it was clear the Hispanic students were not sharing in that success. The data shown in Figure 2 are representative of the schools' data we examined. The overall school scores are consistently higher than the state average and are higher than other schools with similar percentages of Hispanic students. However, when the data at the school are disaggregated, they reveal that only a small percentage of the Hispanic students are sharing in that school's success. Results were much the same in other schools with large Hispanic populations. As with the middle and junior high schools, for schools with high percentages of Hispanic students we were unable to identify schools for study that we could classify as "highly successful."

**As with the middle and junior high schools, for schools with high percentages of Hispanic students we were unable to identify schools for study that we could classify as "highly successful."**

Figure 2



## Identifying Models of Excellence

These results directed our search for models of excellence outside the state of Washington. Our examination of the literature provided a basis for understanding the factors that influence Latino achievement, including poverty, lack of participation in preschool programs, attendance at poor quality schools, and limited English proficiency (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2001). Our challenge was to find a state with schools that have been successful in overcoming or at least narrowing the achievement gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students.

**Our challenge was to find a state with schools that have been successful in overcoming or at least narrowing the gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students.**

One of the states with the highest percentages of Hispanic and LEP students is Texas. Because of our association with the National Center for Educational Accountability in Austin, Texas and the Texas Just for the Kids organization, we were aware that many of the difficulties facing Washington teachers were matched if not exceeded by educators in some Texas schools. We were also aware that many of these schools were experiencing high levels of success with their students at both the *elementary* and *middle/junior high* school levels. Because they could aid in our selection of schools and help facilitate our visits, we decided to conduct our study in Texas schools.

Research had already been conducted in seven such schools by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), providing valuable background to begin our work. The TEA (2000) found that collaboration and empowerment were important contributors to the success of LEP students:

Teachers feel that the administrators will support their instructional decisions and also provide them with the necessary materials to focus on the instructional needs of the LEP students. The collaboration of the teachers and the principals on instructional issues faced by LEP children is evident as teachers communicate on a regular basis with their administrators on the LEP children's progress. (TEA, 2000, p. 21)

The TEA also found that district support, focused professional development (both at the district and school level), a bilingual staff, and an integrated bilingual constructivist curriculum and instruction were integral to the success of the schools in the study.

The TEA was able to relate these findings to an earlier study of effective schools in general. They found that the "effective school correlates" identified in *The Effective School Report* (1998) were also present in these schools. However, the TEA noted:

When reviewing the seven study sites in the context of the correlates, the research team noted different dynamics and added dimensions that focused on the education of language minority children. These dynamics contributed to the transformation of the schools from being effective to being 'exemplary.' (TEA, 2000, p. 19)

The "effective school correlates" in the left column of Table 1 were integrated into Texas' successful LEP schools in very specific ways (right column). The TEA (2000) summarized their findings this way:

In the seven successful schools, the salient characteristics of research in second language learning [were] clearly evident. A school can have the best materials, best equipment, best buildings, best staff development, etc., but if teachers are not invested in the appropriate instruction and implementation of the program, success will be limited, and perhaps even non-existent. In the seven successful schools, the administrators and teachers are well-prepared to work with LEP children, are committed, and dedicate themselves to implementing the research-based practices for the success of language minority students. (p. 28)

**Table 1**

Effective School Correlate	Exemplary LEP School Example
Clear School Mission	“The mission statements [of the study schools] had clear instructional goals that focused on the achievement of LEP students . . . . The mission statements . . . clearly stated addressing the needs of LEP children” (p. 19).
High Expectations for Success	“The staff believes and expects students to perform at a high academic level . . . . All the students ‘belong’ to all the teachers, staff and administration . . . . Teachers . . . plan vertically and across grade levels sharing resources that will help the LEP students . . . . High expectations and affirmations are communicated often to the students, in English and in their native language. Students are recognized as being successful, whether they answer questions in English or in their native language” (p. 19-20).
Instructional Leadership	“Principals are effective communicators and can communicate the instructional focus and the practices and methodologies best suited for LEP students” (p. 20). All effective LEP school principals had been bilingual teachers and were bilingually certified. Several also had Masters Degrees in Bilingual Education.
Frequent Monitoring of School Progress	“Progress is measured in English and in the students’ native language . . . Particular attention [is] devoted to the progress of the LEP students . . . Monitoring of the native language [development] is part of the ongoing assessment process at the schools” (p. 20).
Opportunity to Learn and Student Time on Task	“Teachers at the seven study sites have structured schedules with appropriate times for instruction in the native language and English . . . The significant part of the instructional focus is the use of the students’ home language as a medium of instruction . . . There is a focus on TAAS strategies throughout the curriculum and these strategies are addressed in English and Spanish, depending on the instructional placement of LEP students” (p. 21).
Safe and Orderly Environment	“The ‘family’ atmosphere at the seven successful schools contributes to making these schools effective . . . . Administration, teachers, parents, and students have taken ‘ownership’ of the schools . . . . Parents repeatedly stated . . . that there is an ‘open door’ policy at the schools” (p. 21).
Home and School Relations	“Parents understand and support the basic mission of the school and they are involved in the school community . . . . Even though many of the parents are LEP themselves, they felt empowered because they know that the administration and staff value the culture of the community. The parents’ limited use of the English language did not appear to be a barrier to becoming involved in their children’s school. The parents are also being provided with resources to continue their development of both Spanish and English literacy skills, parenting skills and technology skills” (p. 21).

## Limitations of Cross-State Comparisons

We recognize that generalizing research results from Texas to Washington has its limitations and must be done with caution. Texas and Washington are two separate educational systems, each with its own set of contextual factors that influence school functioning. For example, Washington has a relatively strong teachers' union while Texas does not. Also, Texas has a more advanced accountability system than Washington. For these and other reasons it is important to recognize that research results in one state are not always directly applicable to other states.

In the case of Washington and Texas it is important to acknowledge that each state uses different types of assessments to measure student achievement and different methods for determining student academic proficiency. The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) is a challenging test for students. The WASL is a criterion referenced, performance-based reading, writing, math and listening assessment administered in grades 4, 7 and 10.<sup>3</sup> Students are challenged to apply content knowledge and process at high cognitive levels. For math and reading there are three levels of achievement reported: *did not meet standard*, *met standard*, and *exceeded standard*. For writing and listening there are two levels of achievement reported: *did not meet standard* and *met standard*. Presently, the “met standard” is generally considered to be a relatively high level of achievement.

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), is the assessment by which student achievement is measured.<sup>4</sup> The TAAS is a criterion-referenced test administered in grades 3 through 10 in reading, writing, and math. For many years the Texas Learning Index (TLI) has controlled the difficulty level of the TAAS and has been used to systematically increase the difficulty level of the test each year. There are two levels of achievement reported by the state: *did not pass* and *passed*. Additionally, Texas Just for the Kids created a third, more stringent level of achievement—*proficient*. Unlike Washington's “met standard,” some feel Texas' passing level is not a challenging measure by which to judge student literacy, content application and skill. To reach the *proficiency* level on the TAAS, however, requires a much higher level of understanding and the ability to apply knowledge in context.

**We recognize that generalizing to Washington from research conducted in another state has its limitations and must be done cautiously. At the same time, it would be a mistake to dismiss research findings simply because they are from another state and because different assessments and accountability systems are in place.**

<sup>3</sup> Assessments are being added to the WASL at grades 5, 8 and 10 in science.

<sup>4</sup> Our study was completed prior to the Texas system switching over to their new test: Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). The TAKS is designed to be even more criterion and performance based than was the TAAS.

These differences in the assessments make comparisons of performance levels across states very challenging. At the same time, it would be a mistake to dismiss research findings simply because they are from another state and because different assessments and accountability systems are in place. There are important similarities: Both assessments are measures of the respective state's essential learning goals; both states are faced with having to increase student achievement in a high standards environment; and both states are now required to raise the academic achievement levels of *all* ethnic groups of students in their schools. In addition, the Hispanic students in Texas schools face many of the same learning challenges faced by Hispanic students in Washington. In short, we readily acknowledge that differences exist between Texas and Washington schools, but we also believe that there are enough similarities that we can learn from their success. Therefore, the examination of successful general school practices in a variety of settings can be very instructive.

## SCHOOL SELECTION

The purpose of this study was to identify school practices associated with high levels of Hispanic student academic success in schools that were as similar as possible to Washington schools. Texas Just for the Kids school-level data were examined to identify both elementary and middle/junior high schools with high poverty, high Hispanic student populations, staff and student demographics similar to Washington schools, and with high levels of student achievement. Because the WASL “met standard” is considered by educators to be a rigorous achievement level and the TAAS “passed” to be less rigorous, Texas schools were selected based, in part, on the percentage of students reaching the “proficiency,” rather than the “passed” achievement level.

### School Characteristics

Schools were selected for the study based on the demographic composition of the schools and in cooperation with the Texas Just for the Kids personnel who were familiar with a number of the schools. Consideration was given to attempting to match the demographics of some of Washington’s schools serving Hispanic students. To this end, members of the WSRC met with OSPI personnel to assure a relatively close match. Eleven elementary schools and seven middle schools from Texas were selected for the study. These schools ranged from 51% to 96% free/reduced lunch status, 36% to 99% Hispanic, and 11% to 56% LEP. School characteristics are presented in Table 2.

The schools selected have been recognized in Texas for their high levels of student achievement, including high achievement levels from the Hispanic students. The percentage of all students and Hispanics students passing the TASS for 2002 is also shown in Table 2. Composite “proficient” achievement data for a six year period for each school compared to the state average is provided in Appendix A.

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**Table 2. School characteristics for Texas elementary and middle schools in the study**

Elementary Schools	Enroll.	% F/R Lunch	% Hispanic	% LEP	% Passing 2002 4 <sup>th</sup> grade English TAAS	
					All Students	Hispanic Students
Good Elementary, Irving ISD	837	83.3	83	69.9	86.7	85.7
Leal Elementary, Mission Cons ISD	606	94	99	37.7	87.8	87.8
Margo Elementary, Weslaco ISD	1351	89.2	98	45	94.3	94.1
Matthys Elementary, Pasadena ISD	871	73.5	87	51.9	91.1	90.3
Mims Elementary, Mission Cons ISD	923	53.3	95	13	95	94.8
North Alamo Elementary, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD	693	90.3	98	39.1	94.5	94.4
Russell Elementary, Brownsville ISD	905	99.2	96	42.7	93.7	94
Sammons Elementary, Aldine ISD	725	78.6	70	55.6	91.5	94.5
Thompson Elementary, Aldine ISD	1046	89.3	72	53.3	96	96.5
Townley Elementary, Irving ISD	782	51.3	46	31.3	97	97.5
Worsham Elementary, Aldine ISD	858	87.6	91	49.8	98.5	98.4

Middle Schools	Enroll.	% F/R Lunch	% Hispanic	% LEP	% Passing 2002 7 <sup>th</sup> grade English TAAS	
					All Students	Hispanic Students
Austin Middle, Irving ISD	1256	80.2	69	37.7	88.3	87.3
East Montana Middle, Clint ISD	813	93.7	96	44.8	87.4	86.6
Hambrick Middle, Aldine ISD	1048	85.3	73	18.2	96.8	96.5
Ranchland Hills Middle, Ysleta ISD	421	84.3	94	11.4	87.8	87.6
Sam Houston Middle, Irving ISD	758	59.6	36	19.5	90	88.9
South Houston Intermediate, Pasadena ISD	1001	72.5	81	13.9	82.4	81.4
Stell Middle, Brownsville ISD	992	96.3	94	21.7	85.6	85.2

## THE RESEARCH TEAMS

Research teams conducted interviews at each of the participating school sites. Members of the three teams included representatives from the Washington School Research Center (WSRC) and several Washington Educational Service Districts (ESD) and school districts. Team members included:

- Duane Baker, Director, School Information Services, WSRC (Team Leader and Project Director)
- Martin Abbott, Senior Researcher, WSRC (Team Leader)
- Heather Stroh, Assistant Researcher, WSRC (Team Leader)
- Ray Houser, Principal, Meadowdale Middle School, Edmonds School District
- Maria Henrikson, Director of Bilingual and Migrant Education, Kennewick School District
- Jeanette Bowers, Director of Instructional Programs, ESD 171
- Maria Elena Garcia, School Improvement Administrator, ESD 123
- Robert Beath, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, ESD 105
- Millie Watkins, Migrant Education Director, ESD 171

## PROCEDURES

The procedures used in studying the Texas schools were similar to those used in the effective practices study in Washington that resulted in the *Bridging the Opportunity Gap* report. Each of the 18 Texas schools received a letter inviting them to participate in the study. All schools agreed to participate. Site visits were scheduled, including a tour of the school and interviews with the principal, central office personnel, individual teachers and focus groups of teachers. Participants were provided with a list of interview questions prior to the scheduled visit. Each school principal was also asked to complete a questionnaire about the school to provide researchers with general information on the school's demographics, sources of outside funding, and curriculum (see Appendix B for these documents).

Interview and visitation protocols were very similar to the ones used in the previous Washington study. Prior to the trip to Texas, team members received training in using the interview protocol and in general interview procedures. The training took place in a group setting to help ensure consistency across groups. A central question guided the interviews:

*To what do you attribute your academic success over the last three to five years?*

Several follow-up questions regarding district support, state policies, classroom practices, and bilingual and ESL practices were used to explore responses to the central question more fully.

Site visits took place during the week of October 21-25, 2002. Each team consisted of three members and was led by a researcher from the Washington School Research Center.

## FINDINGS

The general research question being explored by this study was: *To what do educators attribute their school's strong TAAS success over the last three to five years?* Within and across these exemplary schools, responses from teachers and administrators were consistent and formed a number of clear patterns. Generally, schools were characterized as being strongly achievement oriented. According to the teachers interviewed, education is “revered,” and both school and home are united in emphasizing

**Education is “revered,” and both school and home are united in emphasizing the value of learning.**

the value of learning. This celebration of learning is realized through a clear and consistent process: The curriculum is driven by state-identified learning objectives, the school administration is unwavering in the pursuit of academic success, and teachers adhere to a closely prescribed academic program. The following factors were evident in most if not all schools and appeared to be closely tied to academic success.

### Factors of Success

#### High Expectations

Teachers and administrators attribute their success to rigorous and unyielding expectations. Neither language nor poverty are considered barriers to learning, nor are they accepted as reasons for lack of academic progress. These educators *expect* all students to master the curriculum and will do whatever it takes to see that they do. These high expectations are accompanied by an array of efforts to ensure that the expectations are met, and students and parents are expected to take advantage of them. Strategies and programs include extended day tutoring programs, Saturday school, parent contracts, reviewing math facts in the lunch line, “double-blocking” for core subjects, and using planning time to tutor struggling students. As one teacher noted, “We expect students to perform and they do. There are no excuses for not making it at this school.” Another commented, “We know it will take some students longer [but] we don’t allow excuses. We talk about the future with these kids . . . you may be my doctor someday.” A third teacher was more direct, “The children know there is no way out. No excuses.” These educators emphatically believe that success is possible for all students. A veteran teacher explained, “Teachers have shifted to another paradigm. It is always easy to make excuses. It used to be easy to blame failing on the students because of language or because they were poor, but now *we believe all students are going to succeed.*”

**A veteran teacher explained “Teachers have shifted to another paradigm. It is always easy to make excuses. It used to be easy to blame failing on the students because of language or because they were poor, but now we believe all students are going to succeed.”**

When asked how they had made the shift to higher expectations, teachers highlighted three things: (1) They clearly understand their task; (2) They frequently monitor student progress; and (3) They demand high levels of effort from everyone. It was clear to researchers that teachers and students know the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Also, both teachers and students at all grade levels referred regularly to Blooms Taxonomy when asking and answering questions. For example, researchers observed first grade students identifying thinking levels of questions prior to answering during teacher-led class discussion. In several schools teachers talked about staying after school with students who did not meet the standards for the week. In one school, teachers are required to stay after school and work with any student(s) who did not meet the standard on the six-week district assessment. Teachers are paid the curriculum rate of pay; however, staying after school every day is not optional. The expectation for student attendance is just as high. If a student is not at school on time, school personnel actively pursue the student. One staff member said, “If they aren’t here by 9:15, we go get them, call the parents, or call the police.” Once the students are at school there is little “down time.” In several schools students are drilled using language and math flashcards while eating breakfast, while walking in the halls, and while waiting in line to use the restroom. Furthermore, most schools have done away with recess to increase the amount of academic time available.

**“This is bell to bell instruction.”**

It is not just students who are held to high standards, however. The expectations for teachers are demanding as well. There is no ambivalence about the importance of academic achievement or the role of each player. Students will learn and be successful, teachers *will do whatever it takes* to ensure that students succeed, and leadership will create the optimal system to ensure that this happens. In many cases this means monitoring teacher attendance, checking lesson plans, providing internal substitute

**The high expectations extend also to the teachers. It was clear that there is little tolerance for teachers who are not prepared to come every day and give their all. If a teacher is not willing to go the extra mile “They won’t last very long,” according to one staff member.**

coverage or expecting teachers to participate in extended day programs. In one school, for example, awards are provided to both teachers and students for perfect attendance; when a teacher is absent it is publicly noted. Stated one, “There are no apologies for expecting more than a 40-hour week.” “This is bell to bell instruction,” said another. “There is no time wasted...it is created by a visible administrator.” An incredibly strong work ethic exists in these schools.

The researchers asked, “What if a teacher is not carrying his/her load?” It was clear that there is little tolerance for teachers who are not prepared to come every day and give their all. If a teacher is not willing to go the extra mile “They won’t last very long,” according to one staff member. “The administration takes them aside and tells them they have to get on board and if they still don’t, we make it uncomfortable because we all work hard and

expect everyone to.” In many cases teachers described how their unrelenting high expectations had driven some teachers away. As one teacher explained, “There isn’t anyone left in the building that doesn’t expect to work really hard. And if there was, we would ‘tell,’ and the AP would intervene . . . if you’re not into it you just transfer.” In these schools there is an unwritten but generally held notion that “either you’re with us or you’re not. If you’re not, you’re out.” As one principal stated, “If you’re not on the same page, you’re working in the wrong building.”

### **Data-Driven Instruction and Accountability**

Repeatedly, teachers and administrators stressed the importance of using data to direct instruction. Both at the school level and at the district level there is a high priority placed on monitoring student progress. For example, it is not unusual for teachers to be required to turn in weekly lesson plans that reflect benchmarks and classroom assessments. According to a teacher at one school, the use of data and the accountability requirements are welcomed. “It is viewed as a tool for making the right decision about what is necessary for student achievement.”

The district plays an important role in helping schools in their use of data. They provide schools with benchmarks for all subject areas that are tied to the state standards, and assessments are given every six weeks to measure progress in meeting these benchmarks. There is an expectation that all teachers will maintain continuous progress in meeting these goals. To that end, administrators regularly share results of the assessments with grade level teams so that interventions can be planned for struggling students. This might mean pulling a child out of a rotation (art, music, P.E.) for an extra block of reading or math, or providing tutoring services. As one teacher explained, “When we see a low score, we zero in on it.”

Individual schools provide more frequent teacher developed assessments as well. Several schools, in fact, measured student progress every three weeks and some every week to ensure all students were making satisfactory progress. Whatever the frequency of testing, teacher responses indicated that accountability is at the heart of their success. In fact, most teachers openly communicated they felt empowered by having access to meaningful data. “I don’t have any problem with the accountability the TAAS brings. It has made education better for a child of poverty and for minority children.” One district representative agreed: “The accountability movement in Texas has done more to help minority youth than anything else.” Likewise, there are few complaints among teachers that the standards are too high, that the assessments are too difficult (even for LEP students), or that they feel too much pressure. When asked about this, one teacher replied, “It’s not pressure, it’s what I need to

**In fact, most teachers openly communicated they felt empowered by having access to meaningful data. “I don’t have any problem with the accountability the TAAS brings. It has made education better for a child of poverty and for minority children.”**

do. I was hired to help students learn.” In fact, some teachers boasted that their standards are *higher* than those adopted by the state. The following comment by one of the teachers is reflective of the general sentiment in these schools:

“TAAS, TAKS, it doesn’t really matter what the test is. If we are doing our job these kids will be able to meet any standards . . .the test provides a focus. I know what to teach. I don’t think of the test as bad. It’s fair and consistent across the state. We prepare our students for graduation and college. It keeps me focused on what I have to teach, and it keeps the learning focused.”

### **Collaboration and Teaming**

High expectations, a clear task, data driven instruction, and accountability define the culture in these schools. This being the case, one might expect them to be regimented and mechanical. Team members were somewhat surprised to find, however, that quite the opposite was true. These schools were welcoming and supportive, and teachers and administrators knew students and parents by name. Many described the school as being “like a family,” and it was not unusual to see staff members personally greeting students and parents each morning as they arrived. While they demand a lot from each other, these educators are also intensely supportive of each other. They recognize that success depends on more than just good teaching and high expectations. “You’ve got to be a team player and a communicator,” noted one teacher, and this is encouraged in a number of ways.

Teachers spend a considerable amount of time in planning meetings, and at one school it was estimated that “we use 98% of that time for academic planning.” Teachers regularly share curricular materials, ideas for lessons, and student assessment information. They also determine timelines for essential skills, discuss student progress and ideas for improving instruction, and align curriculum. Horizontal and vertical teams communicate expectations and share best practices. They “constantly work together to plan subjects,” according to one, and they depend on each other’s insight and input. “At other schools you are on your own,” stated one teacher, “but at this school there is sharing and exchange of ideas.”

The high regard these schools have for teaming and collaboration is also evident in the way they support new teachers. Staff members at these schools realize that their emphasis on achievement can be challenging to new teachers. As one teacher shared with the research team, “When I first got here I felt very pressured to do my best; that I had to step up and do as well as everybody else.” For that reason, virtually all schools had a system in place to provide first year teachers with a mentor. In some cases this support is extended to veteran teachers transferring in from other schools as well. The process of nurturing and supporting teachers new to the building is viewed as an essential element of a school’s success. As one teacher admitted, “One thing that’s really different here is we have a lot of new teacher guidance. I don’t know if I would still be here if I didn’t have a mentor.” Moreover, mentoring programs such as these allow schools to maintain their

common focus by sharing philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning and communicating expectations.

### **Leadership Focused on Achievement**

Team members found that leadership played a key role in the success these schools have achieved. Teachers expressed a high degree of faith and trust in their principals, and principals were in turn clearly supportive of their teachers. While a number of schools had teacher leaders who helped facilitate the day-to-day work of the school, it appeared to be the principal who set the tone and expectation of success. “Our principal is a very nice man, but he is clear. His expectations are high,” said one teacher. Not only did these principals communicate high expectations, they modeled them as well. Principals were praised for being a “strong presence” in the building. “Principal leadership is key . . . it starts at the top and he is part of the family” according to one teacher. Principals are often the first ones to greet students in the morning and the last ones to say good-bye in the afternoon. They visit classrooms frequently and are highly visible in the halls and cafeteria. “He is the leader, but we are all part of the same team.” Principals step in whenever and wherever it is necessary. Stated one teacher, “He will take morning recess duty so the teachers don’t have to, he mops floors and picks up garbage . . . Teachers adore him.” “I can call the administrators and say I need you to

**Teachers expressed a high degree of faith and trust in their principals, and principals were in turn clearly supportive of their teachers.**

model a lesson because I don’t know how to do it, and they will come in and model.” Teachers also appreciate the fact that the administration places a high priority on supporting and sustaining the philosophy and work ethic of the school. If a teacher is not on board with the direction of the school, leadership will “move them on.” In terms of hiring new staff members one grateful teacher said, “He knows how to pick ‘em.” Another said of her principal, “She hires the best, gives them what they need, and then gets out of the way.”

Leadership does not rest solely with the principal, however. Assistant principals are actively involved in school governance, and there is an expectation that teachers will function as leaders as well. “We all share the decision-making,” said one teacher. “It’s a sense of responsibility we have.” In some cases, teachers provide curriculum support, identifying and sharing strategies, resources, and continuing education opportunities. Teachers also direct grade level and academic teams, and help develop professional development agendas. Everyone is involved in moving the school ahead.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development is an integral part of the culture of these schools and is an important factor in their success. A comment from one teacher summed up the perceptions of many: “Professional development is not an event. It is part of the daily routine.” Informal

**“Professional development is not an event. It is part of the daily routine.”**

**Interestingly, team members discovered it is not uncommon in these schools for teachers to provide substitute coverage for each other when they leave the building for professional development training.**

sharing of knowledge and strategies takes place constantly through collegial relationships. Teachers are seen as valuable resources and are encouraged to share their expertise with others. As an example, a building reading specialist keeps the rest of the staff up-to-date on effective strategies and materials, while another teacher with a strong background in science provides similar support in that area. Much of their informal professional development takes place as teachers plan with each other for benchmark tests.

In addition to the informal professional development that takes place at the building level, districts are also actively involved in providing

continuing growth opportunities for teachers. These opportunities are varied and might include instructional strategies, the use of assessment data, and curriculum training. Often this information is shared with building administrators who in turn share with individual teachers or team leaders in order to minimize the amount of time a teacher is out of the classroom. Interestingly, team members discovered it is not uncommon in these schools for teachers to provide substitute coverage for each other when they leave the building for professional development training. Rather than hiring a substitute to come in to teach a whole class, students are simply absorbed into other classrooms. This can be done because all the teachers are teaching the same thing in a coordinated schedule. All teachers receive information about math and reading expectations and are expected to incorporate this information into content lessons. In addition, many schools trained all staff in ESL and Gifted & Talented (GT) instructional strategies.

Teachers and administrators also attend workshops and seminars outside the district if (and only if) it is clear that the information will support their goals and result in increased student achievement. Teachers are expected to share what they learned with the rest of the staff through team leaders or grade level representatives when they return from attending such workshops or seminars. Rarely is professional development a matter of personal interest; rather it is related to building goals and student achievement.

### **Focused Curriculum**

Although not explicitly mentioned by all teachers, a focused curriculum clearly underlies the success of all of these schools. Many teachers and administrators explained that one of the reasons for their continued success is the fact they are completely clear about the curriculum they teach. There is no ambiguity about what to teach and when to teach it. Teachers follow specific timelines and assessment schedules to ensure that students meet the state standards. In one school, for example, teachers indicated that all the essential skills are outlined in monthly timelines. Teachers know what they should be teaching on a certain date and when their students should have it mastered. As a number of teachers noted, “We are all working in the same direction.” According to another, “Our calendar tells us where we are going to be that day.” Departments meet to sort out

plans and goals for meeting their timelines, and as much as possible students are made aware of standards, goals and timelines as well.

### **Parent Involvement**

Teachers and administrators in some of the schools mentioned parents as essential partners in their work with students. They believe it is critical to the success of the school that parents understand their academic expectations, the grading system, behavior guidelines, and the instructional program. This does not mean that parents are always on campus. It *does* mean that schools are intentional about including parents in the life and culture of the school. Because of this, home-school connections are typically very strong.

Some schools have coordinators on staff to ensure parents are kept up to date on school programs and requirements. In other cases it is the responsibility of the principal and teachers to connect with parents. Links between school and home are maintained through regular communications including phone calls, post cards, open houses, newsletters, conferences and support programs. “If these channels don’t work,” said one teacher, “we go out to their homes. We reach out to them. We are visible.” Some principals require teachers to keep logs of their parent contacts, which are reviewed on a regular basis. Progress reports are sent home at least every six weeks and in some cases more frequently. The result of such efforts is that parents *believe* there is value in education. They support and encourage their children to do well in school, and they support the efforts of administrators and teachers as well. These are strong partnerships and are a driving factor in the success of these schools.

### **Second Language Instruction**

Schools have implemented a variety of different programs to support students with limited English proficiency including, half-day programs, leveled ESL classes, classroom primary language instruction, and ESL support in regular classrooms. In many cases teachers are trained in the effective use of Gifted & Talented (GT) and ESL instructional strategies to meet the wide range of student needs. Since many teachers are ESL certified they are able to supplement whatever assistance students receive through special programs.

Approaches to serving the academic needs of LEP students vary. Frequently, students who speak no English are placed in the districts’ “newcomer” classes where they are taught in Spanish if that is their primary language. English instruction is increased as students gain English language competency. However, staffing this type of program is difficult in many districts given the shortage of bilingual teachers and difficulty in hiring bilingual staff. These schools actively recruit and develop bilingual staff. Once enrolled in an elementary or middle school, LEP students are typically assessed using a screening instrument measuring cognitive academic language proficiency, such as the *Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey*. Students are then placed in appropriate level ESL, primary language, or bilingual classes based on the results.

## Findings

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Elementary schools employ varying levels and combinations of bilingual, primary language, and ESL programs depending on the needs of the students served. Spanish language instruction was a part of the instructional design in all elementary schools we visited. Lessons are focused on language development *and* the mandated curriculum. Most Texas middle schools visited for this study do not employ a bilingual or primary language approach. Rather, they adhere to an ESL approach (often with some Spanish language support) with an emphasis on mainstreaming students into “regular” classrooms as soon as possible. Similar to the elementary schools, however, many teachers are trained in ESL and GT teaching methods and employ these strategies in both “regular” and ESL classrooms.

No matter what approach is used, LEP students are taught the same curriculum as their native English speaking peers with a strong emphasis on English language development. These schools recognize and attend to the needs of LEP students. They emphasize both academic rigor and English development. It is expected that these students will meet standards along with their peers. Although LEP students are exempt from the English TAAS/TAKS for three years<sup>5</sup>, they must take the Spanish-language version along with their peers.

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<sup>5</sup> As of the 2003-2004 school year, non-native English speaking students will only be exempted from English TAAS/TEKS for one year.

## SUMMARY and CONCLUSIONS

Washington State holds high academic standards for all students, and while some schools are steadily making progress in meeting these standards, others are not. Particularly troubling is the lack of progress being made by middle school students and Hispanic students. Our goal in conducting this study was to identify factors that contribute to academic success in middle schools and schools with significant Hispanic populations. While there were not enough of these schools to complete the study in Washington State, a number of such schools were identified in Texas. We chose to collect the data for the study directly from teachers, administrators and central office personnel in an attempt to understand the factors leading to their success.

Responses across schools and districts were consistent and were categorized by researchers into the most commonly noted factors for students' success: high expectations, data-driven instruction, collaboration and teaming, strong leadership, focused professional development activities, focused curriculum, and parental involvement. Teachers and administrators suggested that the high expectations they hold for students and for themselves are at the heart of their success. These educators are convinced their students can achieve at high levels no matter what their background. Excuses for poor performance are not given, nor are they accepted, and this includes *limited English proficiency*. Expectations are high for teachers and administrators as well. Teachers that do not take their responsibility seriously are not welcome in these schools. Hard work and commitment are expected from all. Data are used as a matter of course to inform and modify instruction. The overall environment in these schools is built on collaboration where teaming and sharing are part of the culture. Grade level teams, academic teams, and curriculum teams meet regularly to discuss student progress and to plan lessons and projects.

**These educators are convinced their students can achieve at high levels no matter what their background. Excuses for poor performance are not given, nor are they accepted, and this includes *limited English proficiency*.**

Another factor directly related to the success of these schools is strong leadership. Principals hold high expectations for their teachers, support their efforts, and provide direction and resources. They do not tolerate "slackers," a fact that teachers appreciate. Finally, professional development activities in these schools are ongoing and focused. Teachers are encouraged to share their knowledge and expertise, both within and beyond the school building. Districts provide professional development opportunities on a regular basis, and all continuing education efforts are expected to lead to improvements in teaching and learning.

The academic success enjoyed by these schools is in part a result of their efforts to teach a focused and aligned curriculum. There is no confusion about what to teach or

## Summary and Conclusions

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when to teach it. Timelines keep teachers on track, and cross-grade alignment ensures that students are ready for the next level of instruction.

In addition, there is a deep-seated conviction among these teachers and administrators that parent support is essential to their success, and therefore much effort is spent connecting school and home. Parents are made aware of academic expectations, curriculum resources, grading and behavior guidelines, and strategies for helping their child be successful. As a result they understand the school's instructional program and support the efforts of teachers and administrators.

Not surprisingly, ESL education is an essential element of each school's instructional agenda, and although their specific programs differ, the goal of ESL education is consistent across schools: to transition students as quickly as possible into English-language instruction. That, educators believe, offers second language learner children the best hope of learning and meeting standards.

**Nothing gets in the way of these teachers doing everything they can to make sure students are successful.**

These individual factors emerged consistently across schools and are certainly important to the success each has achieved. Still, it is important to point out that while these factors are clear and compelling, and while they do help explain what is involved in bringing students to standard, they appear to stem from a necessary and overarching belief system. This belief system represents, in many cases, an important philosophical shift among educators in how they understand and approach teaching and learning. These teachers truly believe that all children can learn. They have internalized the essence of school reform and feel a high degree of responsibility for helping their students succeed. When asked if this creates too much pressure for them, one teacher responded, "It's not pressure, it's what I need to do. I was hired to help the students learn." Nothing gets in the way of these teachers doing everything they can to make sure students are successful. While factors of success noted in these schools offer insight into specific explanations for a school's high performance, the belief system from which those factors stem is at the heart of their success. It is doubtful that a school will see anything more than short-term achievement gains without such a belief system that is understood and accepted by all.

In our earlier report on successful elementary schools in Washington we pointed out that the expectations in a high standards environment for elementary and middle level schools are much the same: clear learning objectives in the form of the state's essential

**"It's not pressure, it's what I need to do. I was hired to help the students learn."**

learnings, a high-stakes assessment, expectations that *all* students will achieve at high levels, and accountability. We also stated that the lessons learned from the elementary schools should be valuable to the state's middle-level schools. "In a high standards environment a new approach to curriculum and instruction is necessary, and successful middle and junior high schools will recognize this fact and adjust accordingly" (WSRC, 2002, p. 26). We were unable,

however, to identify highly successful schools in Washington State to study their practices. It is important to point out that in the Texas schools we studied *there were few, if any, distinctions between the driving forces behind successful elementary schools and successful middle schools*. There is growing evidence that at all levels academic success for *all* students is dependent on a deep philosophical shift in the educational beliefs driving practice and a drastic change in the professional environment that characterizes most of the state's schools.

**It is important to point out that in the Texas schools we studied there were few, if any, distinctions between the driving forces behind successful elementary schools and successful middle schools.**

## Implications for Washington State Schools

In an earlier section of this report we acknowledged the limitations of across-state studies of student achievement. At the same time, we maintain that there are lessons to be learned by examining successful practices with student populations elsewhere that are similar to our own and that are not being adequately served by the current system. Schools in Washington operate in a different political environment and are governed by different laws and policies. However, the findings outlined in this report strongly suggest a certain direction schools must go if their Hispanic students are to share in the academic success of their classmates. In fact, the findings suggest a direction schools should go if they want *all* of their students, regardless of ethnicity or LEP status, to achieve at high levels.

It is important to point out that the factors attributable to these Texas schools with high percentages of Hispanic and LEP students are basically identical to the factors attributable to the success of any school in Texas, regardless of the student population. They are also almost identical to the factors that we have found that lead to school success in Washington. In this sense, there is really nothing new in these findings. However, what is new with these schools is the *degree* to which they have implemented a high standards and high expectations philosophy in their schools, modified only to provide assistance for language learning.

In a previous WSRC report (2002) we summarized two models of education that can represent two ends of a continuum. Those two models are shown here in Table 3. We described schools with the characteristics on the left of the table as traditional or typical in their professional environments. Our research and this Texas research has shown that schools that have made the transition to the environments described on the right of the tables are the schools that are most successful in a high standards environment. This transition, however, is seldom an all-or-nothing affair. Our research has shown that successful schools in Washington are in the process of moving to the right, but they have not made the complete transition to the new philosophy. What the researchers saw in Texas was that these schools have taken the philosophy and ideas to their logical

conclusion. They have taken these ideas much further, and it is clear their Hispanic and LEP students have benefited.

**The factors identified in the Texas schools are also almost identical to the factors that we have found that lead to school success in Washington. In this sense, there is really nothing new in these findings. However, what is new with these schools is the degree to which they have implemented a high standards and high expectations philosophy in their schools.**

In Washington, this becomes a much more complex problem in many districts because of the large number of languages spoken. The implication of these findings is that if Washington schools in general must make some degree of second-order changes for their students to stand the greatest chance of success, schools with Hispanic and LEP students of any background must go even further in the process of adopting the high standards culture and environment. Part of this change must be an acceptance of language as a natural condition and not something that is to be used as an excuse. The Washington researchers were impressed in every school with the degree to which the Texas educators dealt in a matter-of-fact way with LEP students, in much the same way they did *any* other potential hindrance to student learning.

Furthermore, if teachers must change their thinking about LEP students, districts also must face their obligations to help the teachers work effectively with these students. In most of the schools researchers visited there were not large numbers of bilingual teachers. However, there were many teachers with GT and ESL training, and the district or school played a large role in that training.

Equally impressive to the Washington research teams was the degree to which the system held educators accountable for student learning *and* the degree to which teachers held each other accountable. Neither of these types of accountability is often seen in Washington schools. In fact, transfer, evaluation, and hiring policies often work against this type of professionalism. It seems improbable that Washington schools can make the necessary second-order changes without teachers and administrators working together to put student learning at the top of their concerns.

The fact remains that in Washington many schools have only begun to understand the implications of a high standards environment, and only a few of them have made major steps in changing their ideas and philosophy of education. Research conducted in Washington, as well as in other parts of the country, has shown that students are able to achieve at higher levels than many people thought was possible—and this

**What the researchers saw in Texas was that these schools have taken the philosophy and ideas to their logical conclusion. They have taken these ideas much further, and it is clear their Hispanic and LEP students have benefited.**

includes achievement by Hispanic and LEP students. The success of the Texas schools shows that it is possible, but it will require dramatic changes among teachers and within schools and districts.

**Table 3. Traditional vs. Standards-Based Model of School Culture**

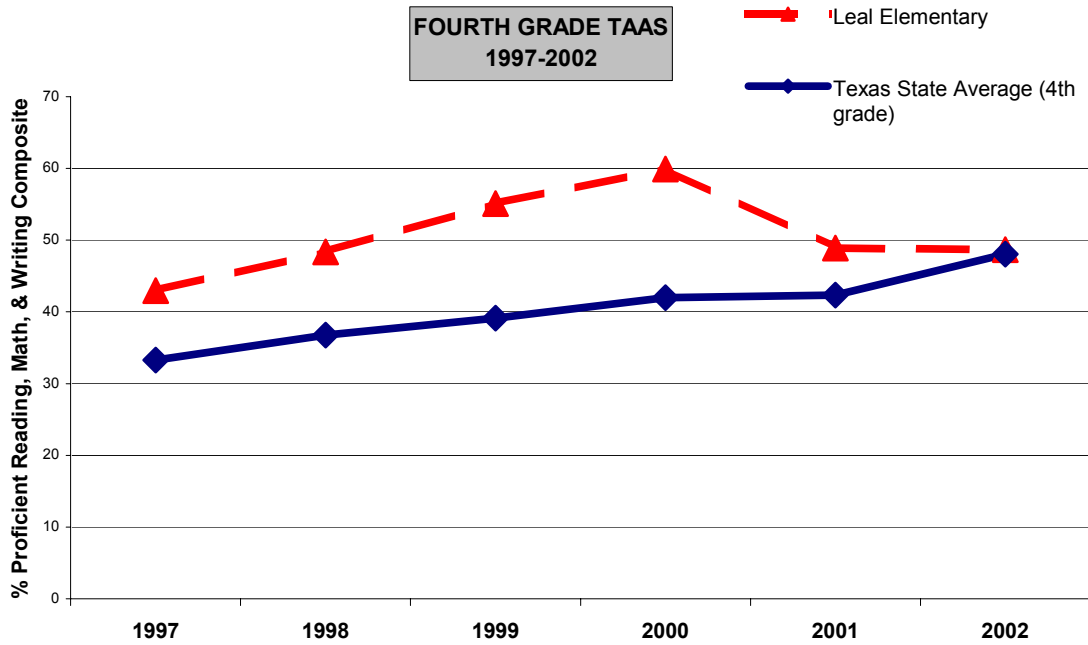
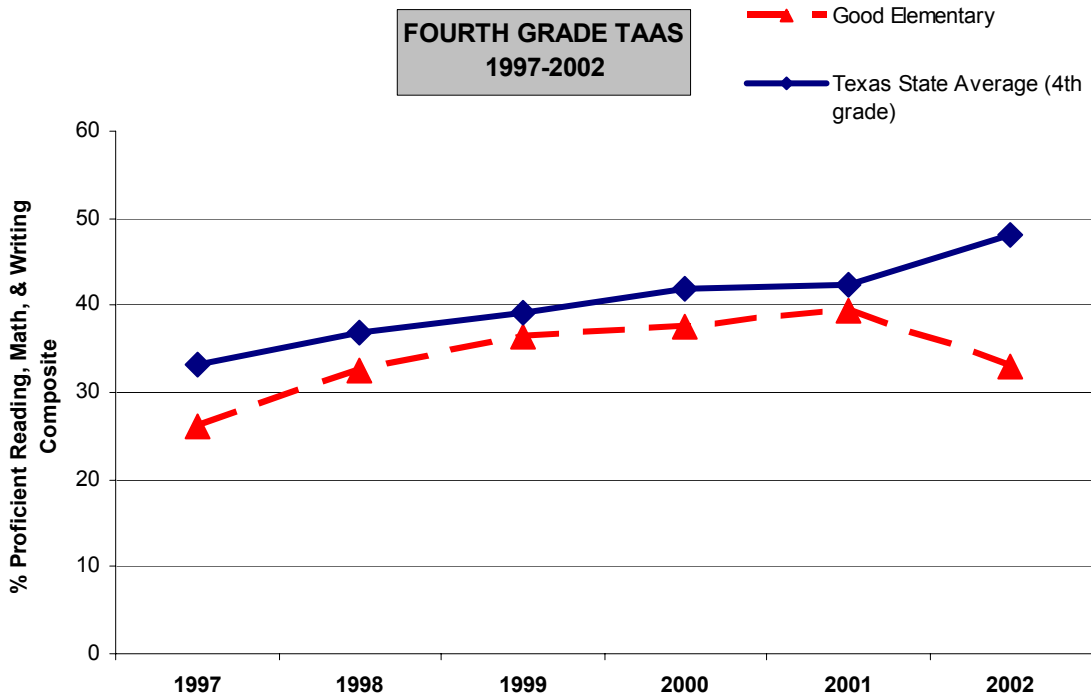
	<b>Prior or Current Model</b>	<b>Standards Based Model</b>
<b>Learning Goals</b>	General Diverse	Specific Uniform for state
<b>Curriculum</b>	<b>Between grades</b> Potential sequence gaps  <b>Within grade</b> Potential for considerable variation	<b>Between grades</b> Tight sequence  <b>Within grade</b> Limited variation
<b>Assessment</b>	Traditional generic basic skills and/or knowledge  May or may not be tied to district goals and curriculum  Periodic	Higher order skills (basic skills)  Closely tied to state learning goals  On-going
<b>Accountability</b>	<b>Teacher</b> Low accountability on what to teach  <b>Student</b> Social promotion  <b>School</b> Low accountability for student performance	<b>Teacher</b> High accountability on what to teach  <b>Student</b> Performance-based  <b>School</b> High accountability for student performance
<b>Professional Development</b>	Teacher controlled Individualized	Focused on building need Collective decision
<b>Teacher Role</b>	Independent	Collaboration

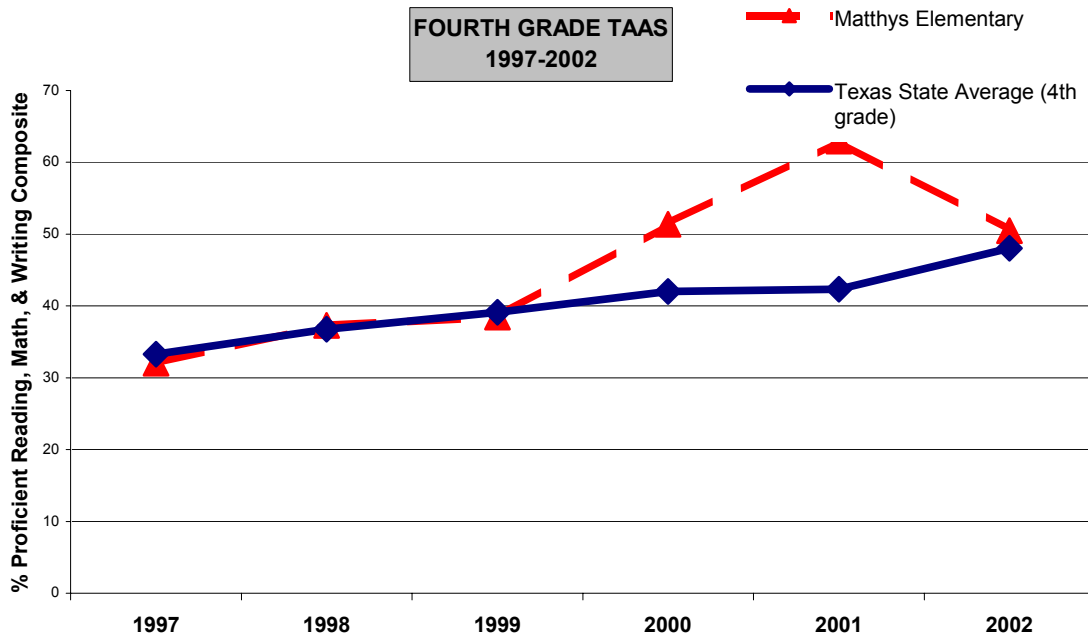
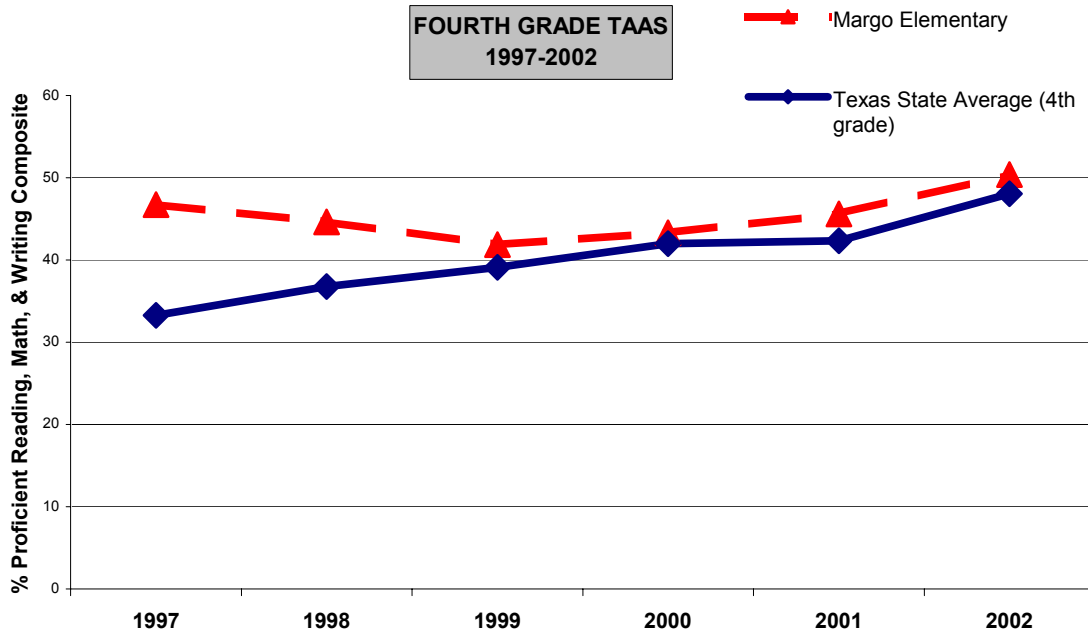
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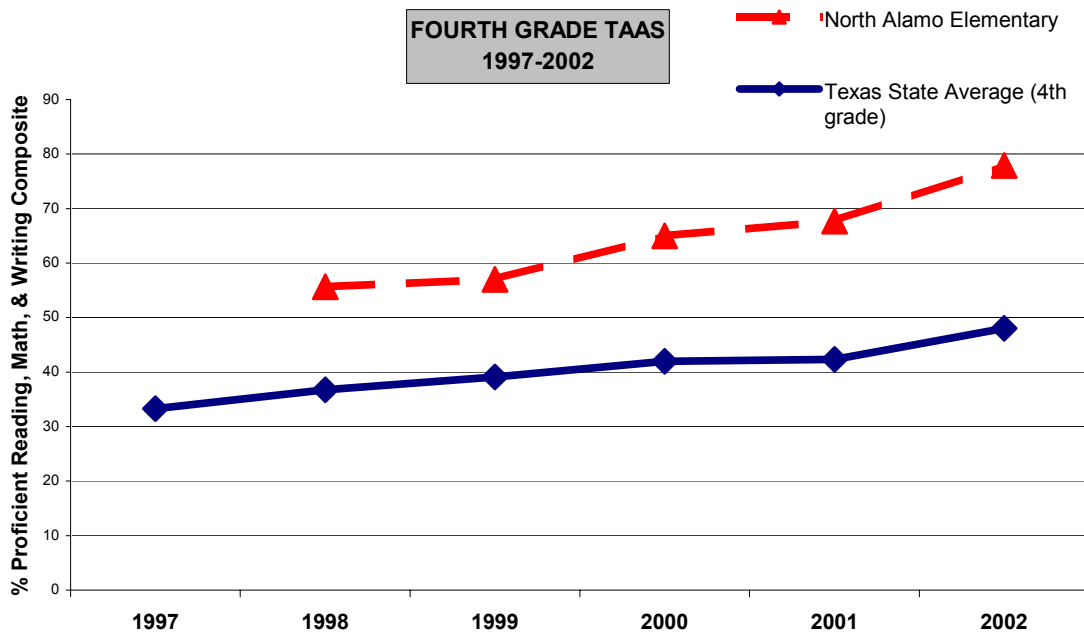
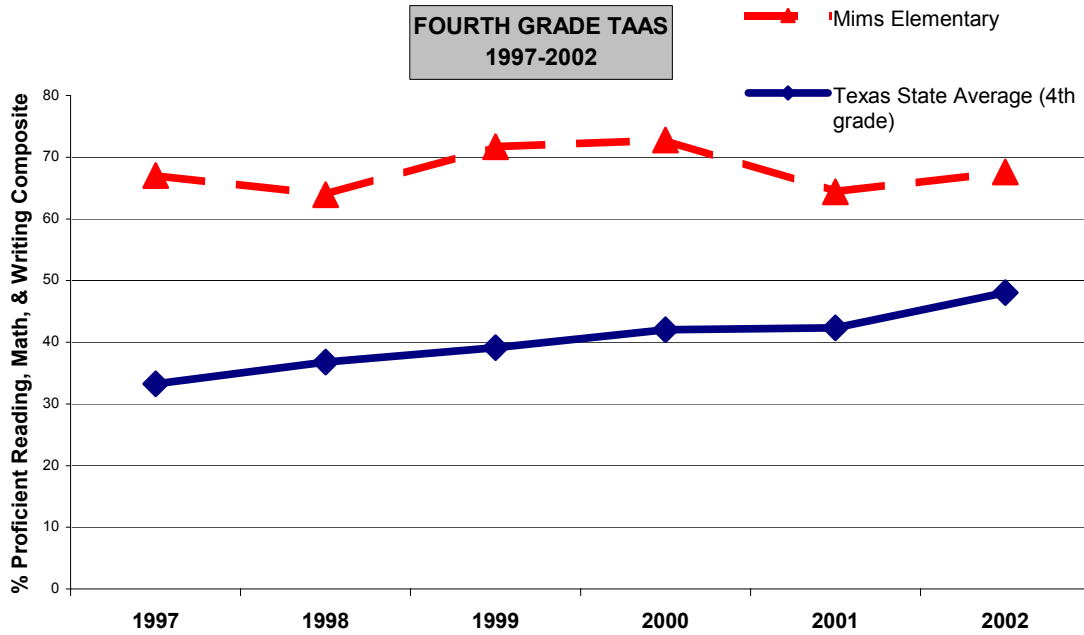
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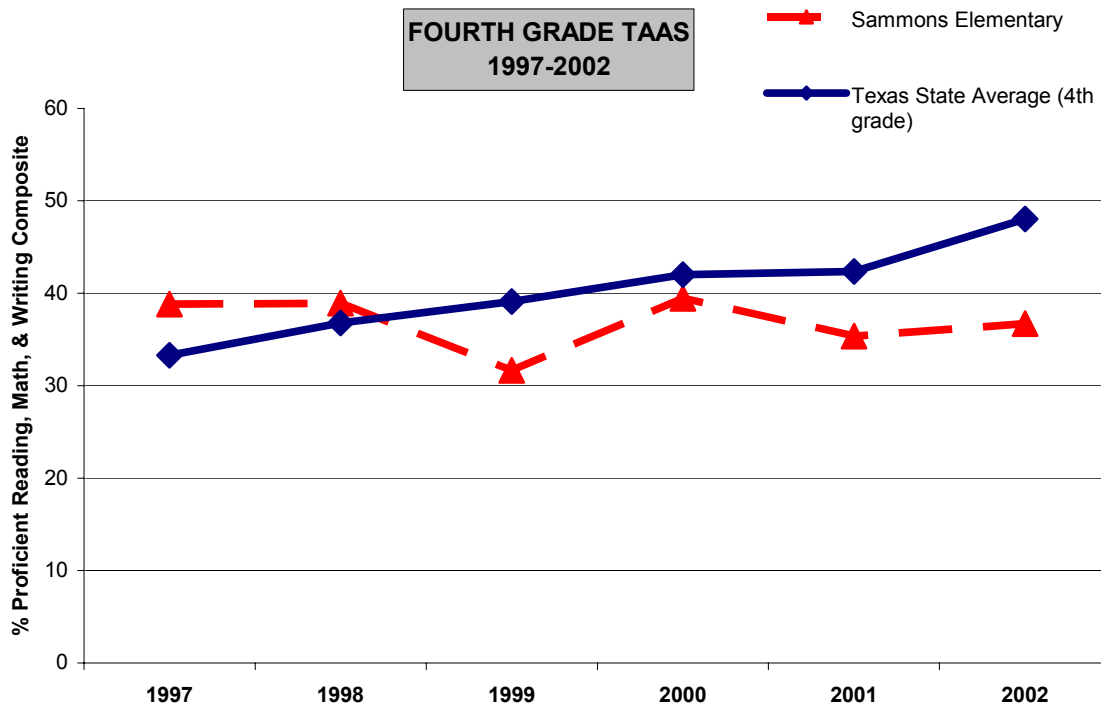
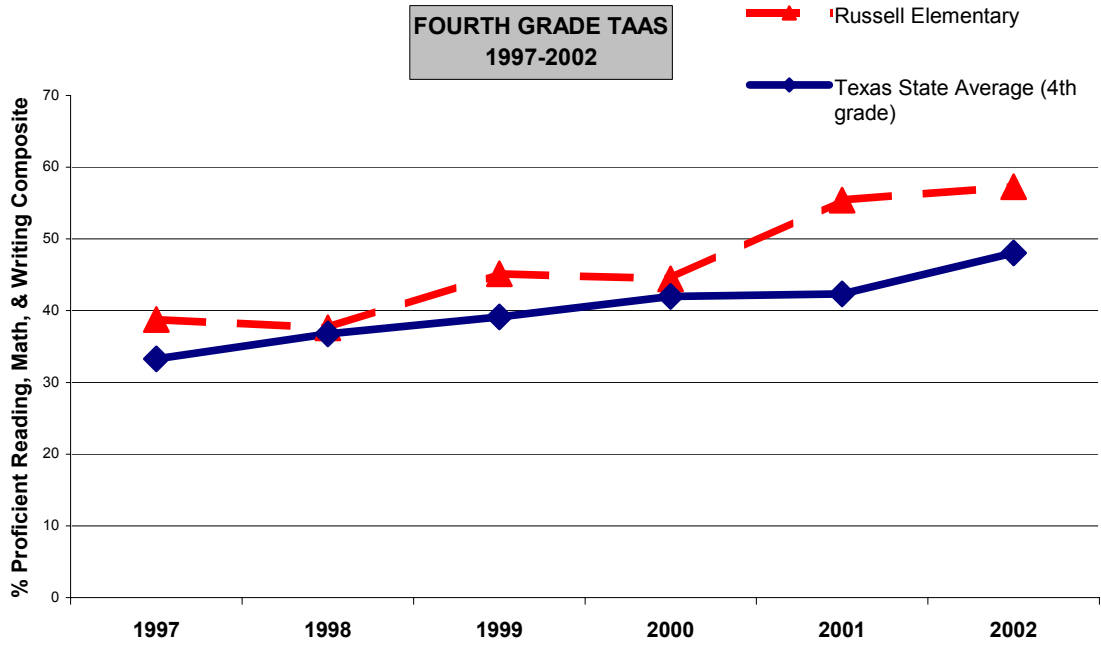
**APPENDIX A Six-year trends using Texas Just for the Kids composite, proficiency level data for sample schools**

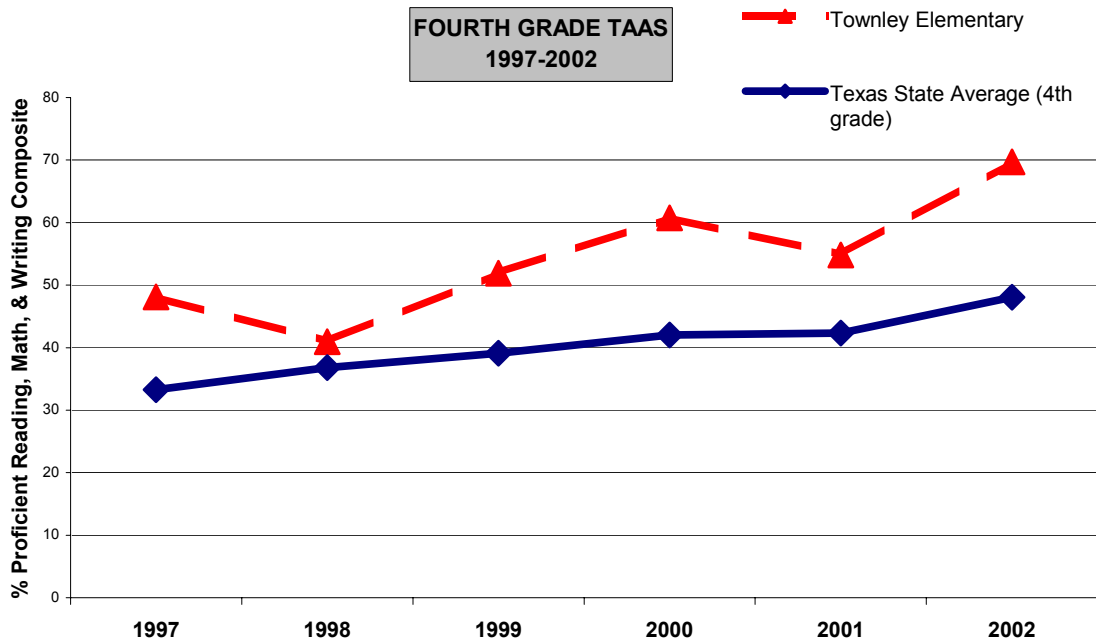
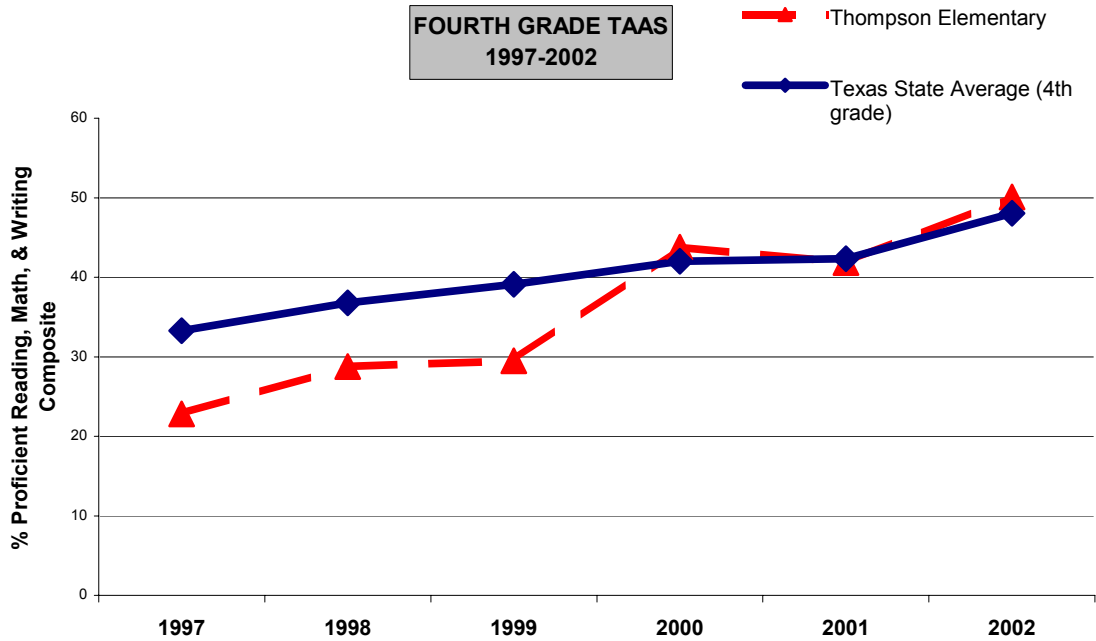
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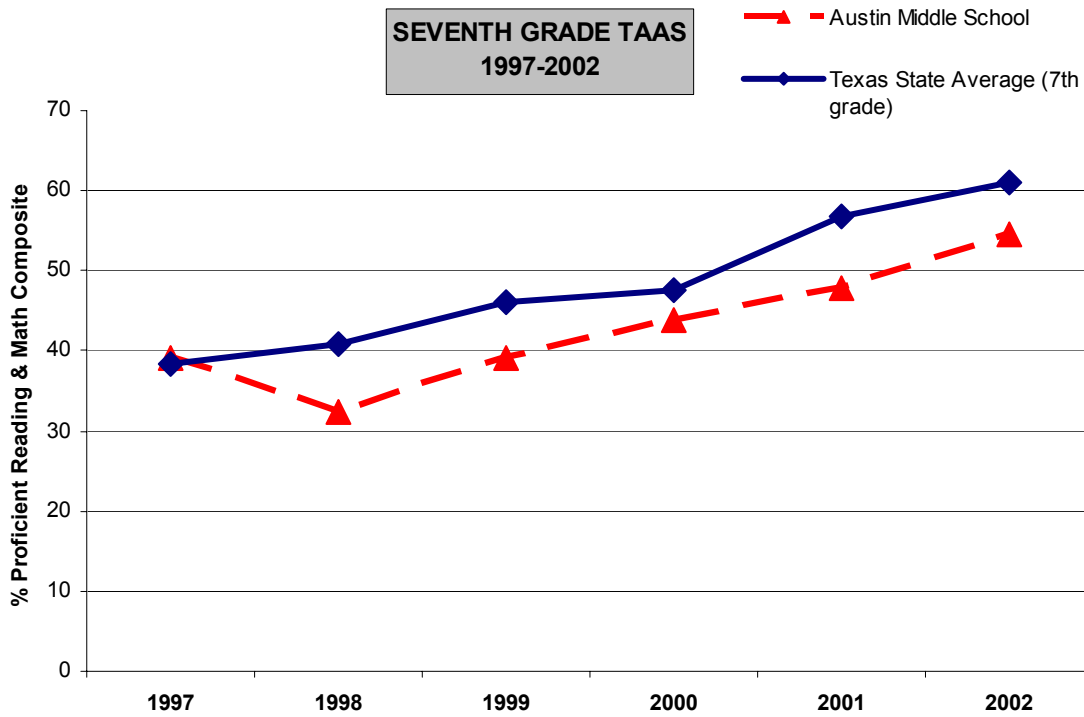
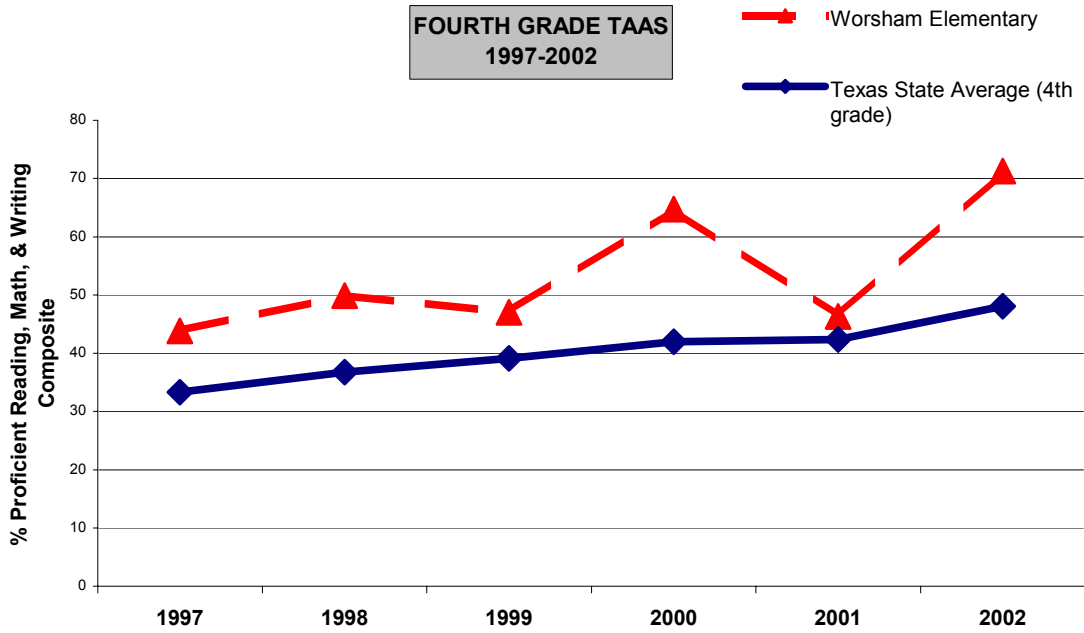


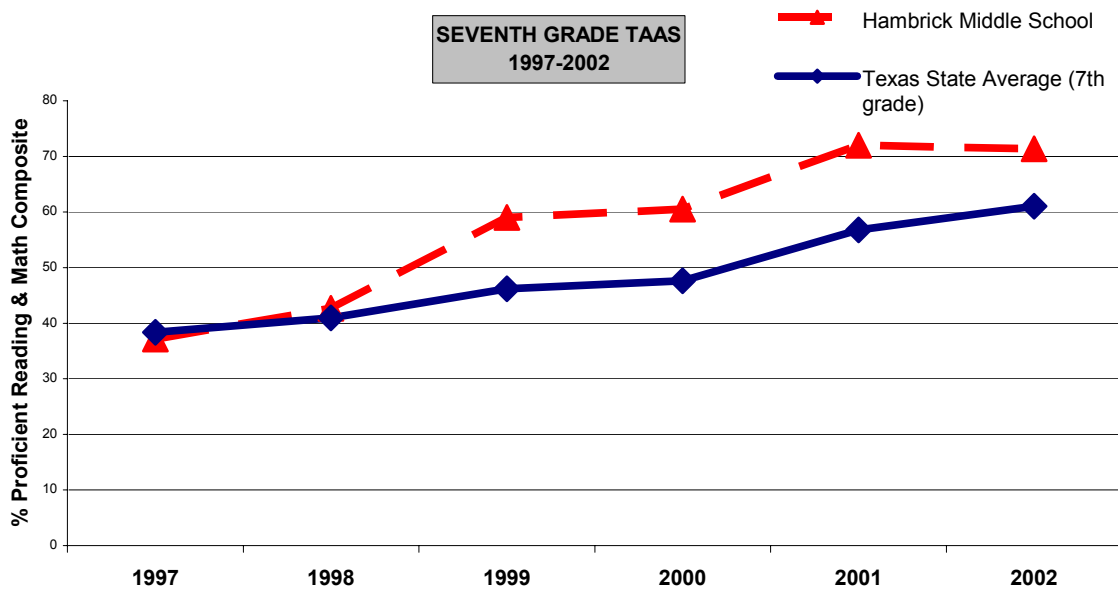
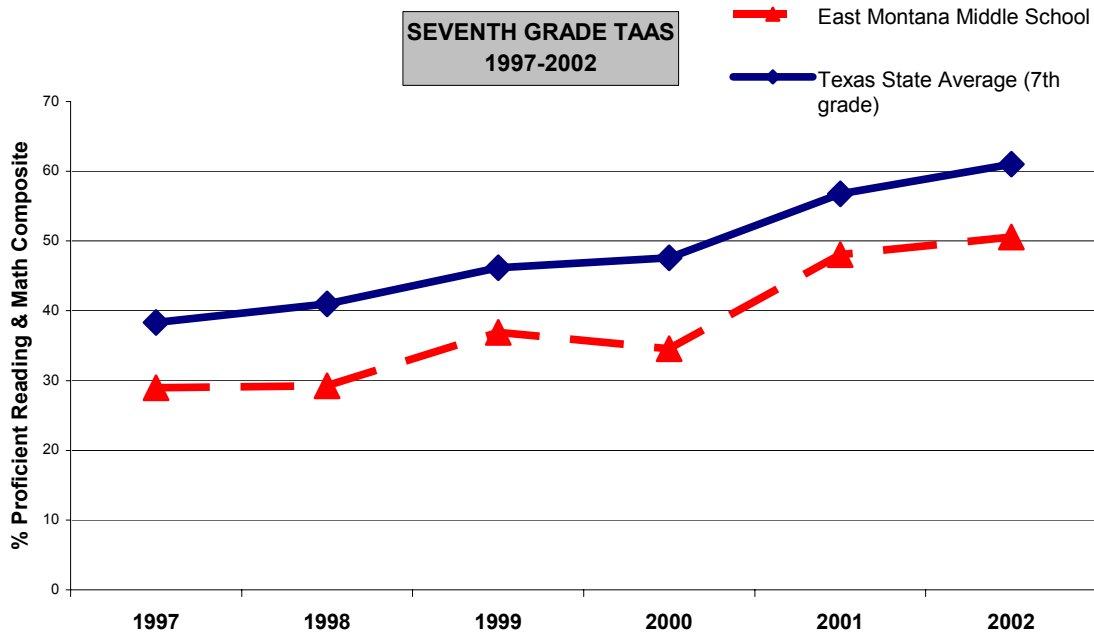


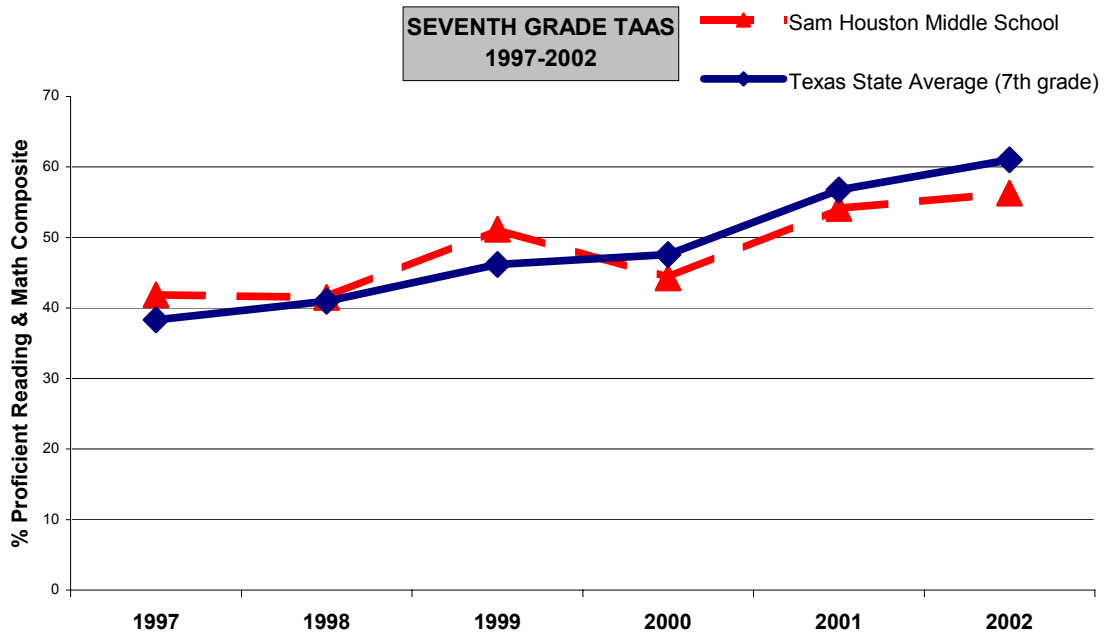
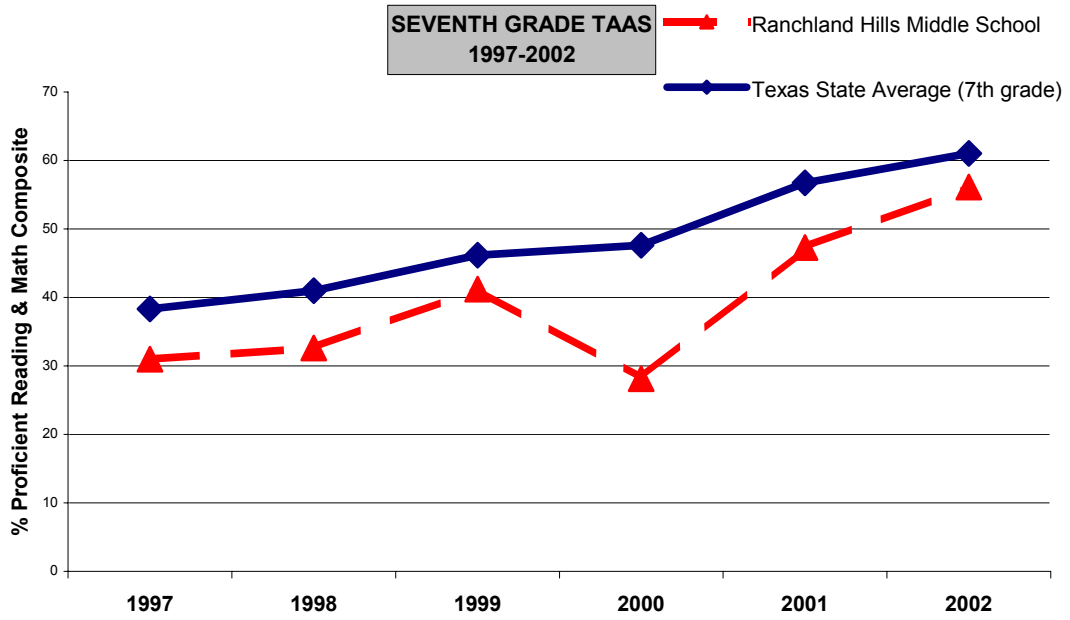


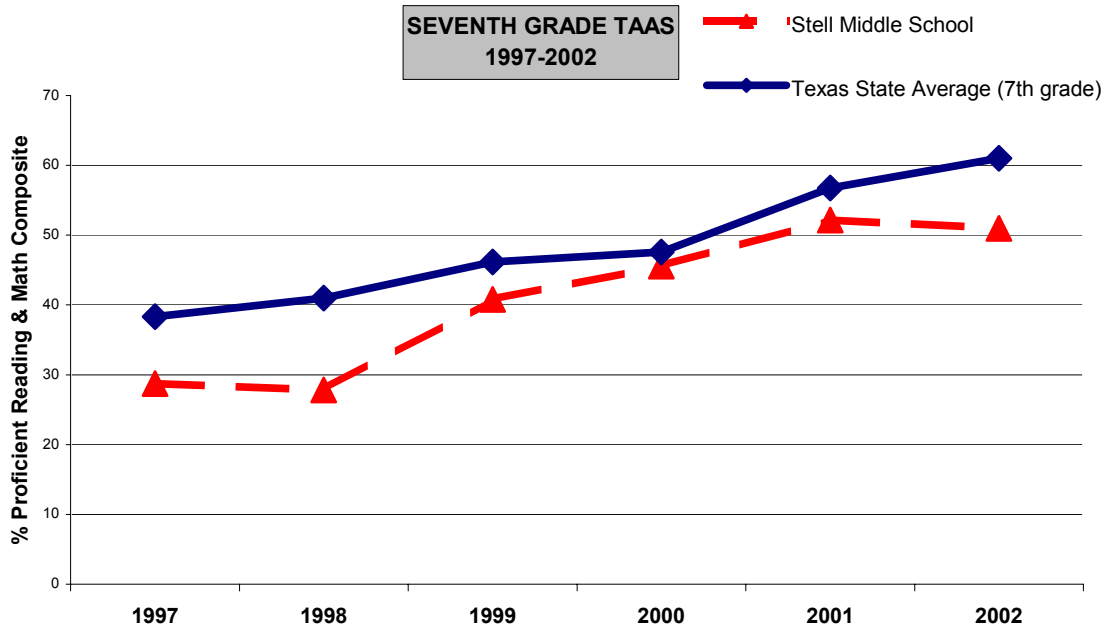
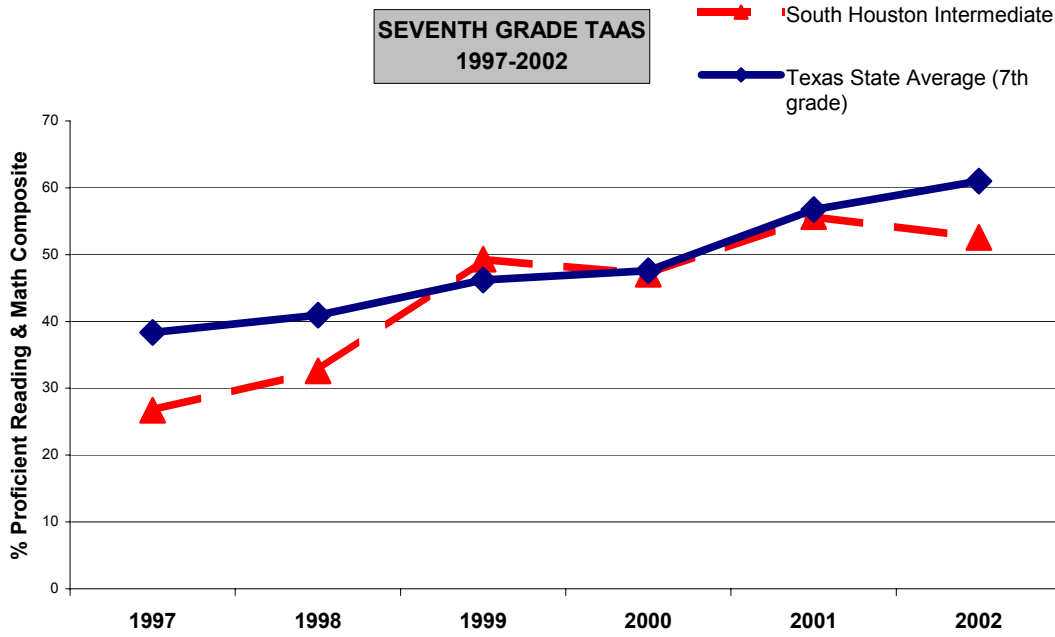












## **APPENDIX B Texas Study Sample Documents**

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September 6, 2002

«First\_Name» «Last\_Name», Principal  
«School»  
«Address»  
«City», «State» «ZIP»

Dear «Sir\_Name» «Last\_Name»:

We would like to invite you to participate our upcoming the Effective Practices Study sponsored by the Washington School Research Center in coordination with the Texas Just for the Kids program. The focus of our research will be to explore the school and classroom strategies being used by 16 high performing elementary and middle schools in the state of Texas that are being successful with high percentages of Hispanic students. Your school has been selected because of your success with your students and we believe your participation in this study will provide insights for us to help our students in Washington State.

Over the last year the WSRC conducted an effective practices study in which we hoped to include high performing schools with large Hispanic student populations in the state of Washington. Upon analysis of the data, however, we were unable to find schools where the Hispanic students were sharing in the success. At that time we decided to conduct a separate study identifying elementary and middle schools in the state of Texas that are consistently being successful with high percentages of Hispanic students.

We will be in Texas October 22 – 24. During our visit we would like to meet with you (the principal) for about 90 minutes. This would include a walk around your school and an interview. We would also like to meet with a group of 3-5 teachers for 45 minutes. We would be glad to pay for substitutes if needed. In addition we would be glad to work around your schedule to make this as convenient for you as possible.

Again, congratulations on your success with your students and thank you for considering being a part of our study. I will be calling to confirm your willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Duane B. Baker, Ed.D.  
Director, School Information Services  
Washington School Research Center

## Washington School Research Center Texas Effective Practices Study

### Principal Questionnaire

As part of the Effective Practices study, we would like to ask that you respond to the following items. If you need more room than is provided to attach a separate piece of paper. We can pick up your responses during our visit to your school, and would be pleased to answer any questions you might have about the items. Please feel free to call us prior to the visit if it would be helpful. Your primary contact at the Washington School Research Center is Julia Schumacher at (425) 744-0992.

Also included below is a short list of documents that we would like to review. If you could have those ready for us when we visit, it would be very helpful for the study.

Thank you for all of your assistance. We look forward to visiting with you.

1. Please list any external resources (\$) your school has received over the last 3 years

<u>Source</u>	<u>Purpose</u>	<u>Amount</u>
<i>Example:</i> Ford Foundation grant	Improve Literacy	\$80,000 over 4 years

2. How many teachers in your school? How many are new in the last three years?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. How long have you served as Principal at this school? \_\_\_\_\_

4. How many release days per year are provided for professional development activities? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you have a formal discipline program? If so, what is it called?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Please provide the following documents if available**

School Improvement Plan  
School Performance Reports

THANK YOU!





Washington School Research Center  
Seattle Pacific University  
3500 188<sup>th</sup> St. S.W., Suite 328  
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