

Washington School Research Center

# From Compliance to Commitment

*A Report on Effective School Districts in  
Washington State*

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Research Report #6  
November 2004

**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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The Washington School Research Center



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## Acknowledgments

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# FROM COMPLIANCE TO COMMITMENT: A REPORT ON EFFECTIVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN WASHINGTON STATE

## INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, educators have been working to improve student academic achievement in Washington State schools. Although progress was slow for many years, some schools and districts are now experiencing high levels of student achievement. Because this report focuses on 10 districts in Washington State, and because the findings center around a commitment to the principles of the state reform movement, it is helpful to briefly review the basic elements of the last decade of reform.

First, it is relevant to note that the educational reform movement has its roots in business and was launched following the Secretary's Commission on Achievement of Necessary Skills (SCANS) reports in the early 1990s. By 1993, the state legislature passed House Bill 1209 into law. Soon after, the state superintendent of public instruction appointed Dr. Terry Bergeson as the executive director of the Commission on Student Learning. The task of the commission was to determine the "essential knowledge and skills" necessary for students to be ready for the "world of work" in Washington State. With the Four State Goals<sup>1</sup> set, teachers from around the state convened by Subject Area Committees (SAC) to determine the minimum standards for students in the various content areas. Once the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) were set, the Commission on Student Learning was disbanded. OSPI then began to develop benchmarks and frameworks to support the development of the essential knowledge and skills identified by the state's educators.

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<sup>1</sup>Goal One: (Skills) Read with comprehension, write with skill, and communicate effectively and responsibly in a variety of ways;

Goal Two: (Knowledge) Know and apply the core concepts and principles of mathematics; social, physical, and life sciences; civics and history; geography; arts; and health and fitness;

Goal Three: (Thinking) Think analytically, logically, and creatively, and to integrate experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems; and

Goal Four: (Application) Understand the importance of work and how performance, effort and decisions directly affect career and educational opportunities.

By 1996, the state began to pilot the use of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) to measure the *essential* skills. During this time, lawmakers introduced accountability legislation designed to hold schools accountable for school reform efforts and student achievement. This legislation, however, failed to pass the legislature. In its place, the legislature funded OSPI to develop a process to support schools in the reform. In 2004, OSPI launched similar efforts to support reform at the district level for districts that were failing to meet federal achievement targets under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.

Over the life of the reform, schools and districts have experienced various levels of success in raising student achievement as measured by the state assessment system (WASL). As traditionally structured, American schools have found it more difficult to educate some students than others. In Washington State, as in most other states, the single best predictor of student achievement at the school level is the percentage of students on free or reduced (f/r) lunch status (Abbott & Joireman, 2001). This fact has made comparing school-wide performance problematic, let alone comparing district-wide performance. Therefore, it has been difficult to identify the schools that are most successful at helping their students reach high standards because the comparative success and progress of a school must be considered in light of the demographic challenges facing a school or district.

The Washington School Research Center (WSRC) has been interested in studying schools in the state that distinguish themselves by having relatively challenging student populations yet are making remarkable progress as measured by the WASL. It is clear that some schools are experiencing high levels of success (WSRC, 2002). The question of this reform movement is, “Is it possible for success to be wide spread?” There is little disagreement whether there are highly effective teachers in some schools, or whether there are highly effective schools in some districts. However, heretofore the question remained, “Are there highly effective districts in the state?”

In this study, we examine the practices of districts that have been successful at meeting Washington’s learning standards despite demographic challenges like high percentages of free/reduced lunch. Our purpose was to add to the growing body of research in this state that identify the characteristics of effective districts and the value they add to school reform. This study marks the emergence of a number of districts that appear to be successful beyond “pockets of excellence.” The districts in this study had significant numbers of elementary schools performing beyond predictable achievement levels. Researchers selected districts using elementary data only, because no model districts could be found when middle and/or high school data were considered.

## DISTRICT SELECTION

The selection of study districts began with a preliminary screening of all Washington State school districts in the OSPI database by researchers at the Washington School Research Center. After preliminary analyses, it became clear that no districts would emerge as “front runners” or “gap setters” if secondary WASL scores were considered (7<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup>). Therefore, the initial selection criteria centered on 4<sup>th</sup> grade WASL achievement and included the following:

- Percent of the district’s students eligible for free/reduced lunch (f/r)
- Number of elementary schools in the district
- Composite score created from the average percent passing of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade WASL reading, math, and writing assessment<sup>2</sup>

WSRC researchers examined five years of data (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003) in order to identify school districts that demonstrated a consistently high composite (reading, writing, math) passing rate on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade WASL or a strong positive trajectory of passing rates with the latest year (2003). Researchers used the following general criteria to choose the study districts.

- 25% or more free/reduced lunch (district level)
- Two or more schools with a 4<sup>th</sup> grade in the district
- District-level 2003 composite score at least one standard deviation above the average for all districts with at least 25% or more f/r
- At least three-quarters of the schools in the district were above the mean 2003 composite score for all 4<sup>th</sup> grade schools in the state
- District composite scores on an upward trajectory or consistently high
- Complementary 3<sup>rd</sup> grade ITBS composite scores
- Districts met AYP both for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and for the district overall. Districts met at least 85% of the AYP categories; many met 100%

Due to the practical constraints of funding, time involvement of researchers, and the extensive number of interviews required, the goal was to identify 10 districts for participation in the study. The result of the above noted process was a final list of the following 10 study districts:

- Bellingham Public Schools
- Central Valley School District
- Federal Way School District
- Lynden School District
- Medical Lake School District

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<sup>2</sup> Researchers created the composite score in order to identify districts relatively strong in all three areas, rather than districts that might only excel in one of the areas.

- Nooksack Valley School District
- Spokane Public Schools
- Tumwater School District
- West Valley School District (Spokane)
- West Valley School District (Yakima)

Although not selected on this basis, the districts represent an equitable distribution of Eastern and Western Washington locations; rural, suburban, and urban settings; and large, medium, and small districts. The following graphs summarize each district's 4<sup>th</sup> grade WASL composite assessment scores for the last five years (see Figures 1 – 10). Also included in the graphs are two comparison lines: the average 4<sup>th</sup> grade composite score for all schools in the state, and the average 4<sup>th</sup> grade composite score for all schools in the state in districts with at least 25% or more f/r.

Figure 1. Bellingham School District

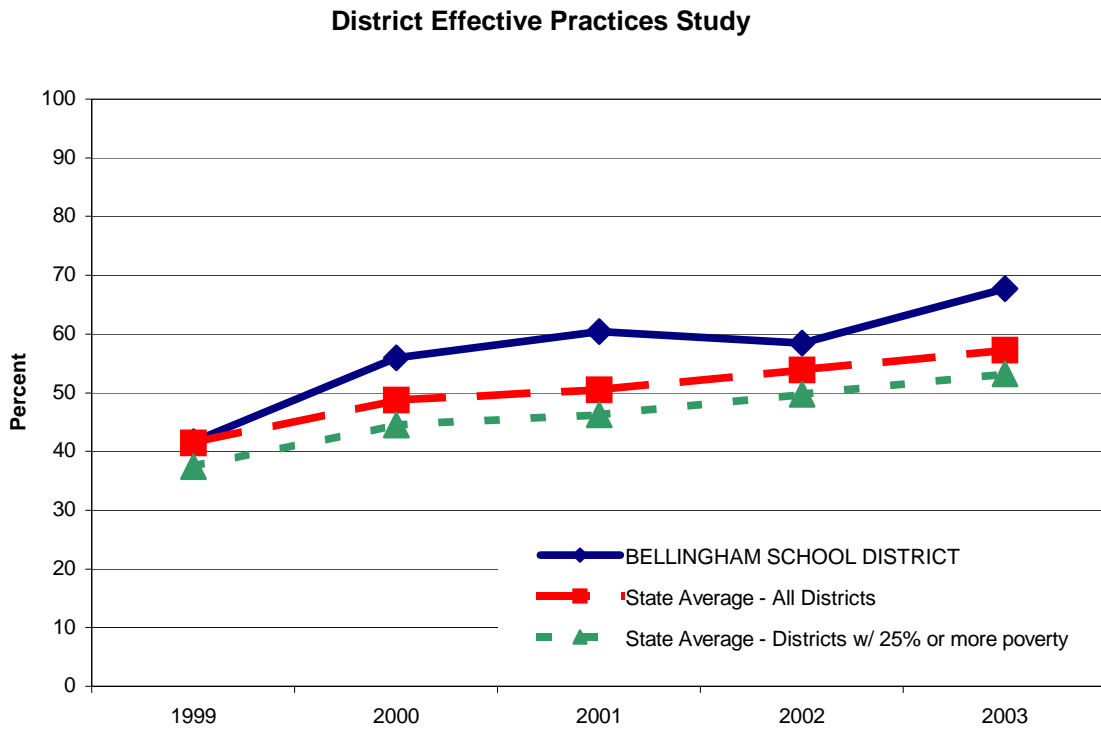


Figure 2. Central Valley School District

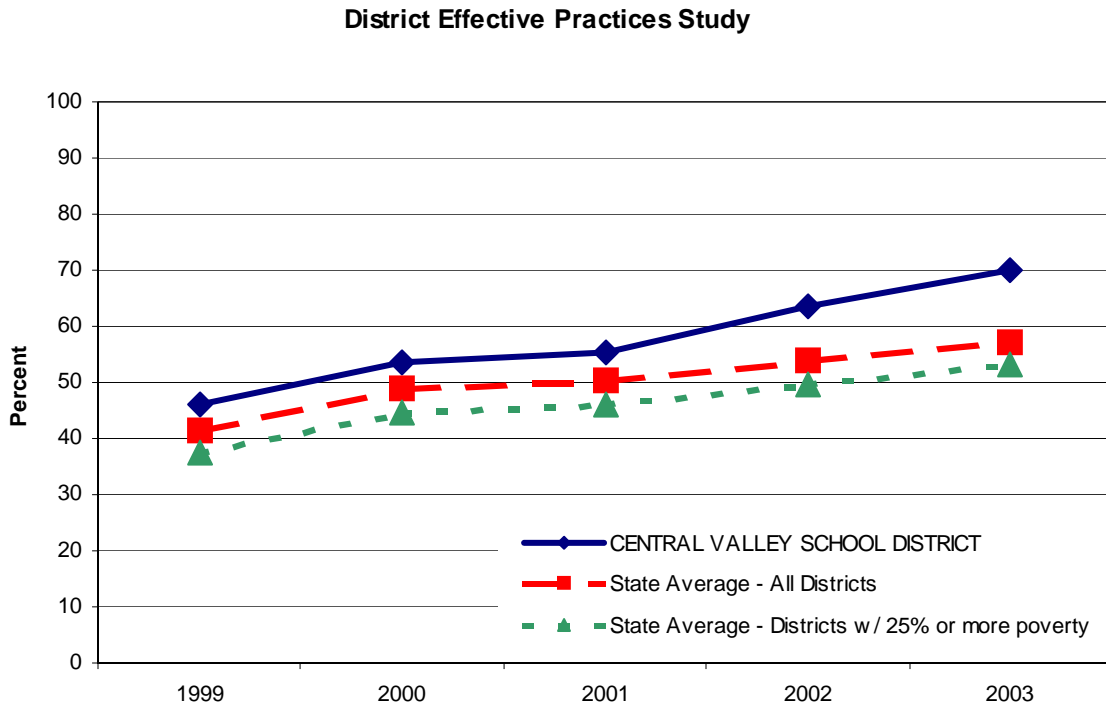


Figure 3. Federal Way School District

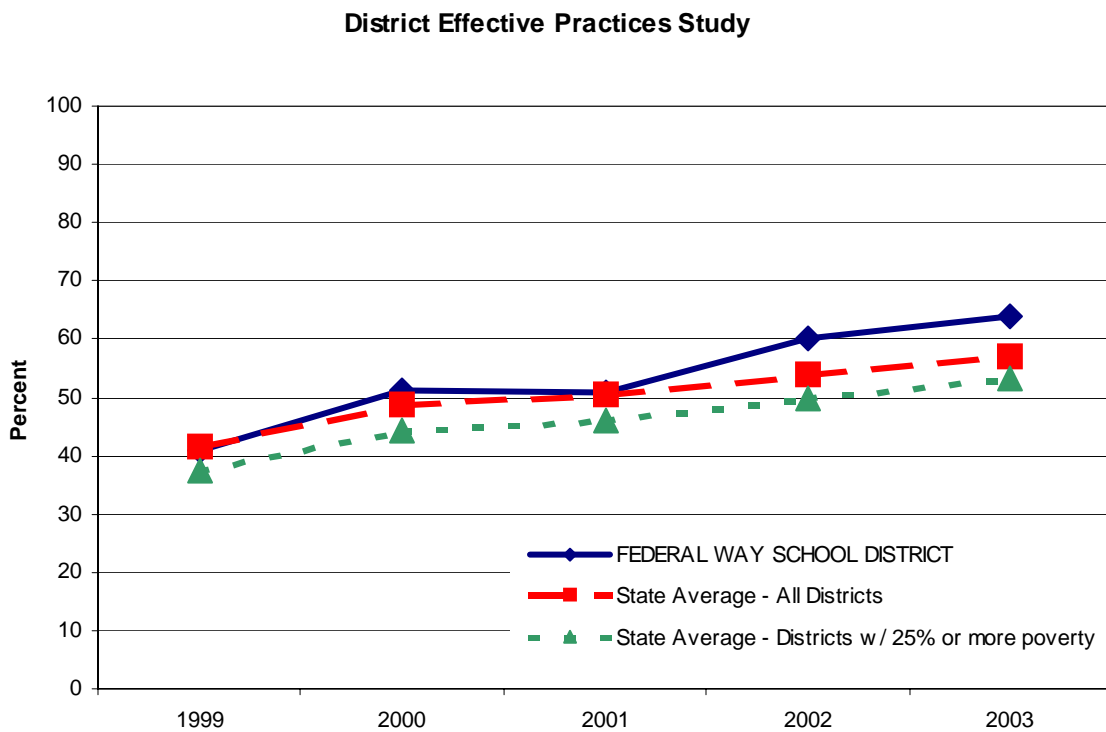


Figure 4. Lynden School District

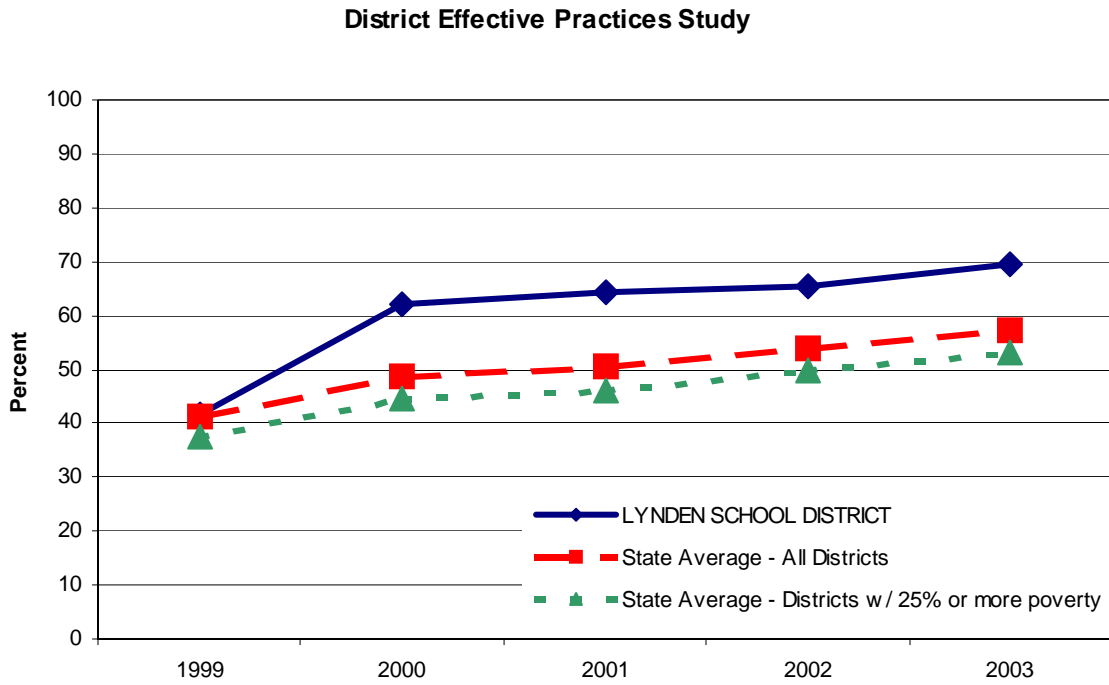


Figure 5. Medical Lake School District

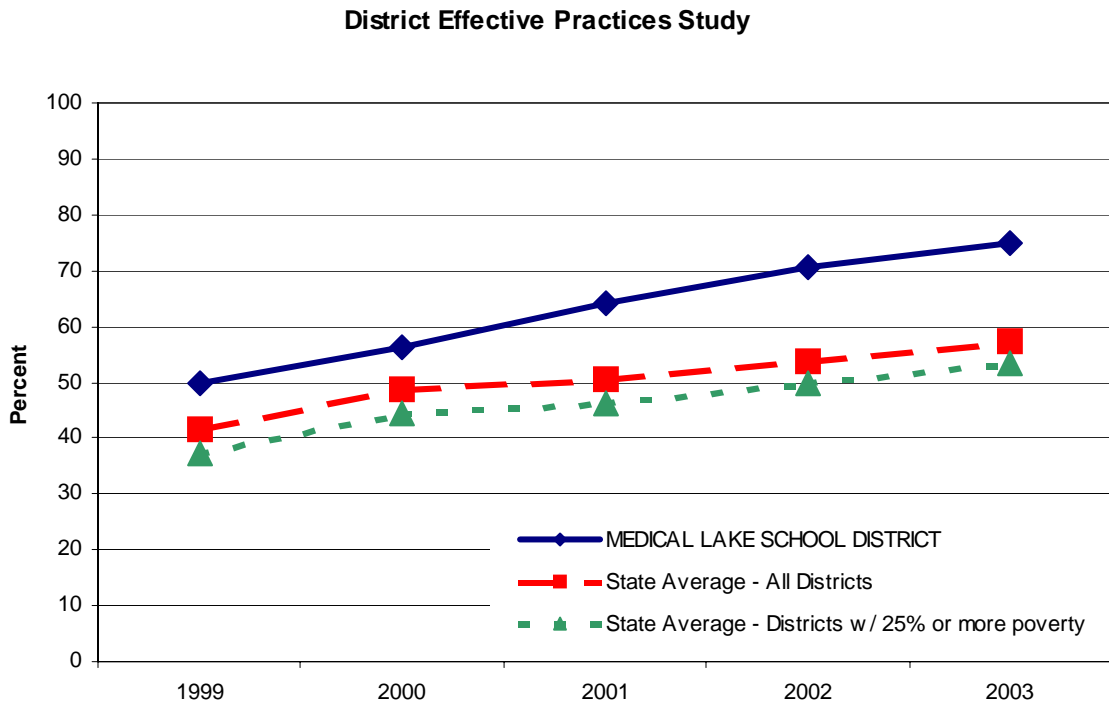


Figure 6. Nooksack Valley School District

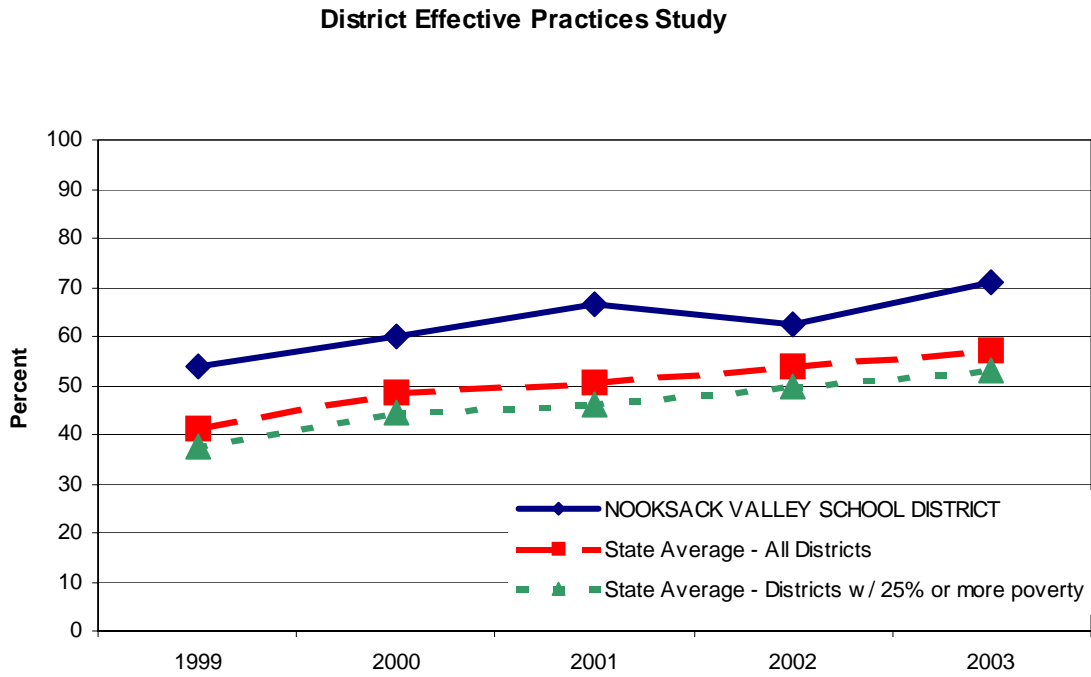


Figure 7. Spokane School District

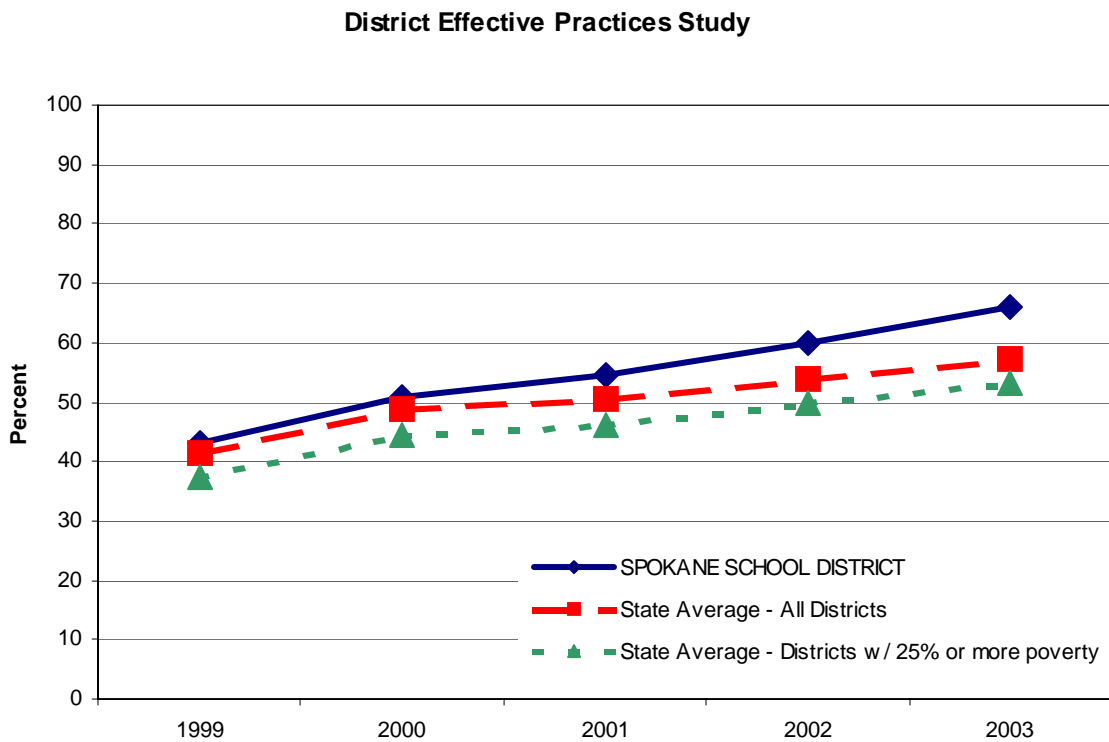


Figure 8. Tumwater School District

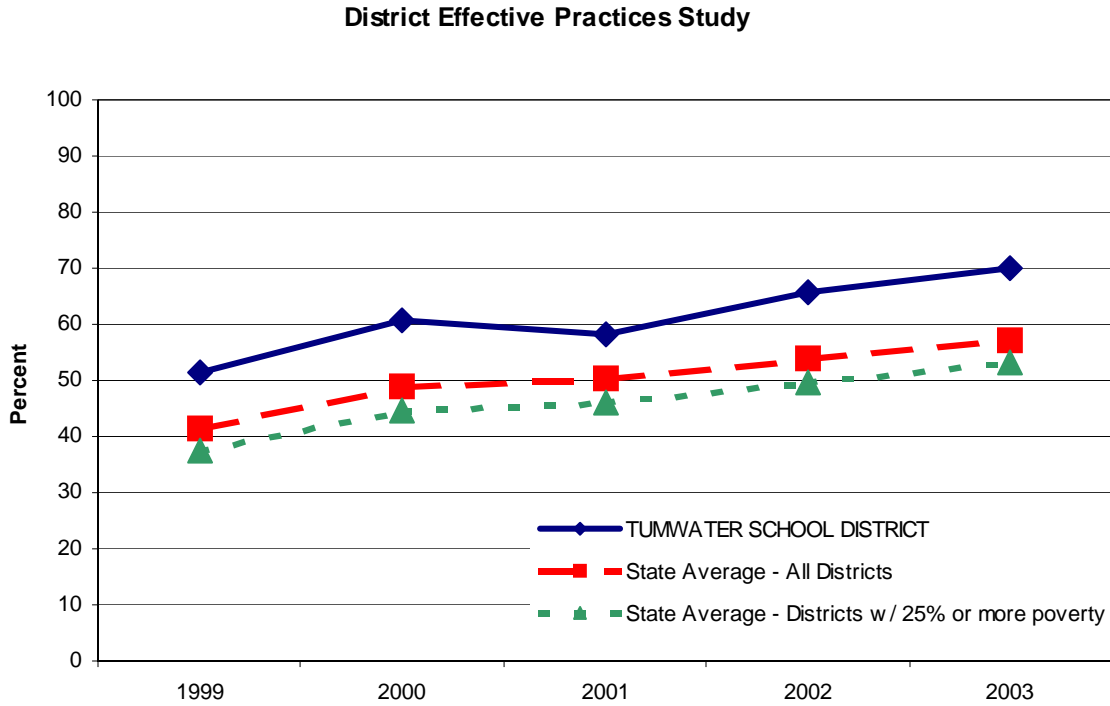


Figure 9. West Valley School District (Spokane)

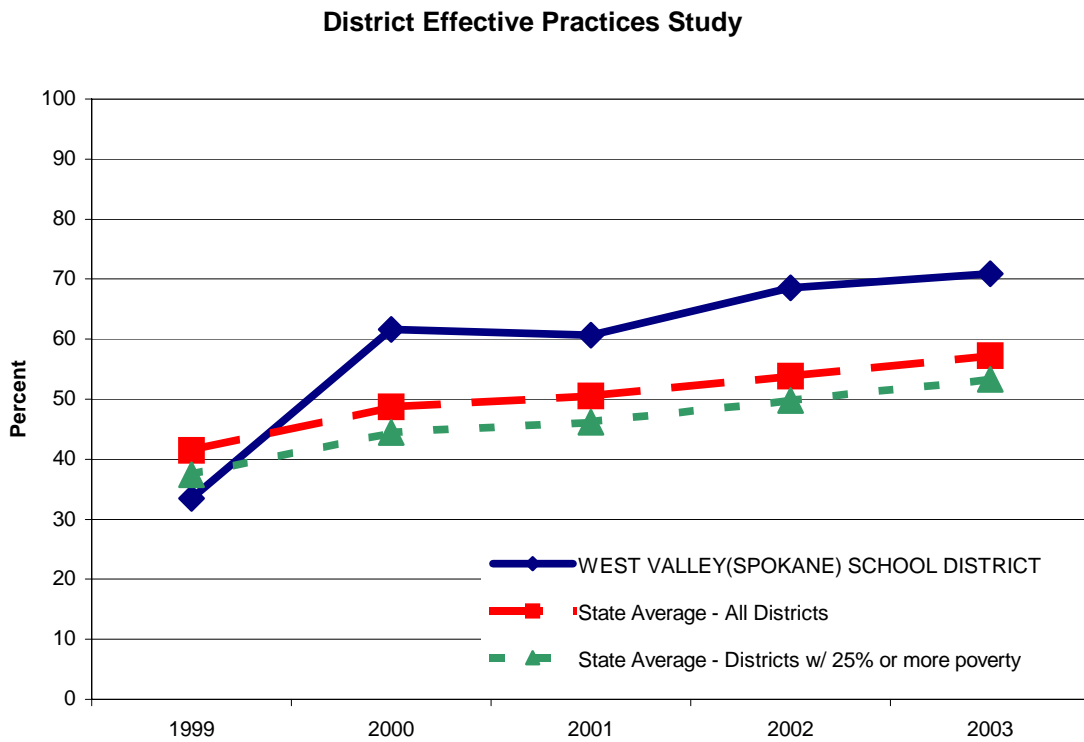
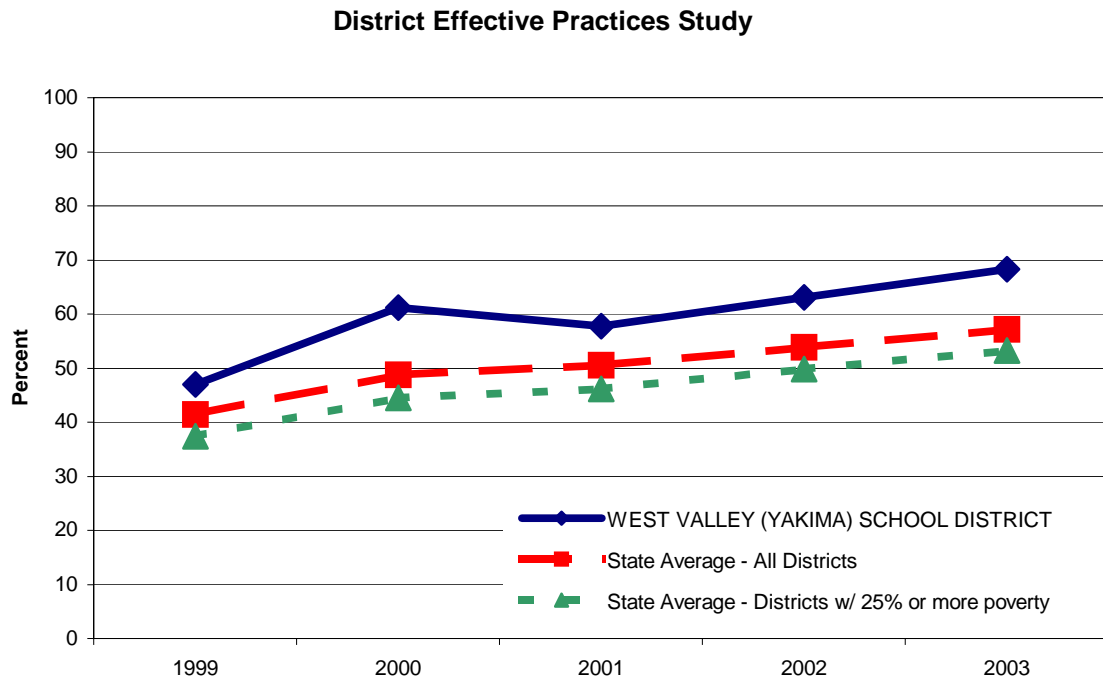


Figure 10. West Valley School District (Yakima)



## RESEARCH TEAMS

The Washington School Research Center commissioned three research teams to perform intensive interviews at each of the study districts. Teams were comprised of researchers from the Washington School Research Center, and representatives from OSPI, ESDs, universities, and various school districts throughout the state. Each of the three teams included at least one representative from the WSRC, OSPI, and an ESD. Team members included the following:

- Duane Baker, Director, WSRC (*Team Leader and Project Director*)
- Martin Abbott, Executive Director, WSRC (*Team Leader*)
- Heather Stroh, Assistant Researcher, WSRC (*Team Leader*)
- Ray Houser, Principal, Meadowdale Middle School, Edmonds SD
- Steve Scott, Counselor, West Valley School District
- Alison Olzendam, Director, Education & Technology Networks, WSU
- Deborah Gonzalez, Executive Director, Puget Sound ESD
- Rob MacGregor, Assistant Superintendent, OSPI
- Cathy Fromme, Director, Comprehensive School Reform, OSPI
- Sue Shannon, Senior Researcher, OSPI
- Kathy Bartlett, Director, Special Education Learning Improvement, OSPI
- Spencer Taylor, School Improvement Specialist, ESD 171
- Suzanne Bond, Associate Professor, SPU
- Lisa Bjork, Associate Professor, SPU
- Lois Davies, School Improvement Specialist, ESD 171
- Bob Risinger, Superintendent, Omak School District
- Candace Gratama, Senior Research Associate, The BERC Group

## PROCEDURES

Members of the WSRC contacted study districts by letter (Appendix A) and invited them to participate in the *effective practices* study. WSRC officials then made follow up phone calls to the superintendents of each district to confirm their willingness to participate. All districts accepted the invitation. Once district leaders confirmed their involvement in the study, they organized interviews and focus groups at the district and school levels. The project director sent information to the districts ahead of time about the nature of the interviews/focus groups, which related to their district and/or school's success in reaching and maintaining high levels of student achievement in reading, writing, and math between 1999 and 2003.

Once research team membership was confirmed, team leaders provided training in interview procedures to study team members. In addition, the project director led a one-day general meeting of all members to discuss the objectives of the study. Researchers then conducted interviews and focus groups with district and school personnel, asking the same open-ended questions:

1. To what do you attribute your strong WASL success over the last three years?
2. What role did the "district" play in this success?

Research team members referred to written protocols (Appendix B) to ensure a standard approach to the interviews and focus groups. The protocols also listed some areas of interest (e.g., teacher collaboration, professional development) to be explored when interview responses were limited and after the use of general prompts.

Team members conducted interviews with district office personnel, school board members, principals, and teachers. Research teams conducted one-day visits to each district in May 2004. When substitutes were required, the WSRC paid for substitutes in order to allow time for teacher interviews. Sample interview protocol and district focus group schedules are provided in Appendix C.

## FINDINGS

When educators from across 10 districts were asked to reflect on the role of the district in raising student achievement, they offered a number of explanations. For example, shared decision-making, alignment of programs, and using data to inform instruction were among the reasons given for district success in raising student achievement. Initial analysis of the interview data uncovered no simple steps to district effectiveness, although six important themes emerged. These themes, or *characteristics of effectiveness*, include:

1. Commitment to school reform
2. Ownership for student learning
3. Distributed leadership
4. Collaborative organizational environment
5. Focus on adult learning
6. Trust and relationship-building

While these characteristics were not evident to the same degree in all districts, they surfaced repeatedly during interviews with central office administrators, principals, and teachers such that they formed unmistakable patterns. These characteristics and their more specific manifestations are remarkably similar to the primary conditions for success that were identified in our previous study on effective elementary schools in Washington State (WSRC, 2002). These included a caring and collaborative professional environment; strong leadership; focused, intentional instruction; and the use of assessment and data to inform instruction. And while it made sense that effective schools and effective districts would share some of the same conditions of success, the current study was designed to explore the role of the district in greater depth. That being the case, the research focused on determining to what degree the district, as an organization, added value to the work being done in the schools. This is an important question given previous research showing that in some cases, individual schools are successful without, or in spite of district “support” (WSRC, 2003).

The research findings, as presented in the following discussion, reflect a vast majority of the districts studied. However, because of the specifics of the selection process, there were districts where it was difficult to pinpoint any value added by the central office; rather, their accomplishments appeared to be more directly related to the successes of individual schools.

The most important factor in district effectiveness is the degree to which the central office has philosophically aligned itself with the culture of school reform and student achievement. Evidence of this philosophical position represented second-order thinking (WSRC, 2003), and permeated all levels of the district organization. Furthermore, this philosophy was manifested in six *characteristics of effectiveness* that were common to most of the districts.

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## Commitment to School Reform

It is generally true that in these 10 districts there was a clear understanding and a deep and unwavering commitment to the tenets of school reform at the district level. Student learning, (although not necessarily the WASL), was the primary focus of their efforts. In some cases these districts made an early commitment to the Essential Learnings and to the WASL and have stayed the course ever since. More important than getting on board early, however, was the fact that district personnel recognized and accepted the depth of the changes necessitated by the school reform movement. At the district level, it was understood that much of the work involved changing beliefs about teaching and learning. There was an understanding that first-order, structural changes are important, but not sufficient, to ensure that all students meet standard. There was an understanding that the work cannot be accomplished solely by the classroom teacher. And there was an understanding that district personnel, along with principals and teachers, must be held accountable for the successes and challenges that occur in the classrooms. One district administrator acknowledged as much when he stated, “It is totally about student learning. It is a sustained, relentless focus on student achievement from the superintendent on down.” Evidence of this understanding and commitment to school reform was found in four areas: 1) focusing on instruction; 2) using data to inform and assess; 3) aligning the system to support the efforts in the classroom; and 4) narrowing the focus of the teaching and learning agenda.

**Focus on instruction.** A majority of educators, including those from the district office, discussed the necessity of focusing their reform efforts on student learning and classroom instruction. They have concluded that setting high expectations is not enough; teachers need to be trained and supported in using instructional practices that allow those high expectations to be met. According to one principal, “Staff meetings have shifted from management issues to academics – reading, writing, and math.” And there was considerable evidence to suggest that in these districts, the central office shares responsibility for student learning. A school board member stated, “The district’s main role is to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. Instruction is critical.” Likewise, a central office administrator noted, “District office folks have a common vision that at the heart of change is the classroom, and we support and influence that.” And although the WASL is the most obvious check-point for the effectiveness of classroom instruction, several interviewees reported that those are merely “measuring points along the way.”

A school board member stated, “The district’s main role is to improve teaching and learning in the classroom.”

**Use of data.** Further evidence of the understanding and commitment to school reform and student learning in these districts was found in their emphasis on the use of data to inform and assess the teaching and learning process. Schools have been faced with a standards-based accountability system for nearly a decade now, and many building leaders have become accustomed to using data to help improve student achievement. What is unusual in these districts, however, is the greater involvement on the part of the central office. One district administrator observed, “There is district-wide, ongoing

professional development on how to read your WASL scores . . . training for everyone, business staff, transportation, bus drivers, cooks . . .” Principals, counselors, and teachers also receive training in using data. One teacher’s comment about the emphasis on data was telling: “We have shifted from slapping some reading instruction on these kids and hoping it works, to using assessments to drive instruction.”

The “clamor for data” in one district is a direct result of a decision made at the central office to acknowledge and support its importance. At the behest of the central office, district-wide focus teams were developed and trained for the purpose of gathering and analyzing student data; subsequently, these teams were asked to lead their colleagues through the process. Although there was some apprehension and resistance in the beginning, these focus meetings have now become institutionalized in the district.

**Systemic alignment.** These districts are intentional about aligning the system to support classroom teachers and about holding the entire system responsible for ensuring that students are successful – from the central office to the classroom teacher. In one of the districts, it was reported, “All elements of the system are being managed to mutually support each other. This can easily be seen in the professional development, strategic plans, curriculum and program guides, and common language.” According to one of the central office administrators, “All parts of the system are working together to improve student learning.”

In another district where the focus is on literacy, a common understanding of effective instruction and assessment that aligned with the state standards was identified. From there, a literacy guide was developed. After this direction had been established, all interference was set aside. Professional development focused on literacy, and the report card was changed to support the district’s literacy goals. Teachers developed literacy benchmarks, and they worked in grade-level teams to plan and assess. The entire system has been aligned to support a district-wide focus on literacy. According to the superintendent, “[There is] high coherency from the board to the classrooms – kids are meeting standards in reading, writing, and math. The way we are going to get there is by focusing on the classroom.”

These districts are intentional about aligning the system to support classroom teachers and about holding the entire system responsible for ensuring that students are successful – from the central office to the classroom teacher.

Alignment does not necessarily rule out flexibility, but it does serve as a filter for decisions about resources and programs. According to one superintendent, “Everything we do has to fall within a sense of our theme, our scheme of things. If there is a million dollar grant that doesn’t fit that scheme . . . we won’t take it because it’ll take you off on a different target.” And in another district with a literary focus, the superintendent explained that “Literacy became the filter through which all decisions were made” including hiring, resource alignment, and staff development.

These districts are serious and intentional about systemic alignment of programs and resources. In one of the larger districts, for example, “The common focus does not change . . . when an element of the district gets in the way, it is changed.” As a central office administrator explained, “All roads end in the classroom and all resources are aligned to support the district focus, from the selection process of new hires to the allocation of funds.”

**Narrow focus.** Finally, interview data suggested that district effectiveness is due in part to their willingness to narrow the scope of their work. In one district, for example, the district imposed a five-year moratorium on curriculum adoption in an effort to allow teachers to *focus* on student learning. Teachers have since been able to avoid the drain of time and energy spent in learning and teaching new materials. It was a bold move by district office officials and one that demonstrated a clear understanding and commitment to raising student achievement by narrowing the scope of what was required of teachers. At the classroom level as well, the focus is clearly on student learning. As one district administrator explained, “No one is circling in their own orbit.” Teachers in these districts are clear about the focus on student learning and are willing to “consciously abandon activities in their classrooms that do not help students reach the targets.” Stated one teacher, “[It’s about] efficacy . . . we need to be purposeful and efficient in what we teach. It can no longer be ‘This looks like something fun to teach’.”

“This is a sustained, relentless focus on student achievement from the Superintendent down.”

## Ownership for Student Learning

In these districts, not only is there commitment and support for reform, but also systemic ownership of reform. It is understood that *everyone* in the organization is responsible for student learning. Teachers may be the ones in the classrooms on a day in and day out basis, but building and central office administrators are partners in the teaching and learning agenda. One central office administrator noted, “Everyone knows their role in helping achieve the strategic plan because where the rubber meets the road is in the classroom. We need to know how we fit in to support that.”

In most of these districts, the central office was viewed as a supporting force rather than a distracting one. The culture is one of understanding, responsibility, and success owned by all. As one superintendent commented, “The problems of the classroom are the problems of the district.” Evidence of shared ownership was found in the fact that in these districts, school board members and central office administrators are in the schools often and are continuously asking questions about student progress. Central office administrators are often viewed as instructional leaders and not merely site managers. They spend time in the schools, they understand and discuss curriculum, and they stay abreast of what happens in classrooms. If progress is not being made, they work to find additional strategies and resources; they are *part of the process*. In one district, for example, central office

Our superintendent is passionate about kids and their learning.

administrators and principals “are visible in classrooms, reading the school’s strategic plan, determining the instructional focus, and looking for evidence that the plans and expectations are being followed.” If they are not, according to one board member, “the superintendent will know first. Plans that were weak received open and brutal feedback even if it meant some hurt feelings.” The ownership and involvement displayed by these superintendents cannot be overstated. As one principal noted, “Our superintendent is passionate about kids and their learning. He is persistent like the bozo (sic) balloon clown . . . he is all about results.”

For their part, teachers are expected to share ownership by opening their classrooms to others. “Classrooms are no longer allowed to be isolated “cottage industries” in this district,” observed one of the interviewers. As a result of walk-throughs, model and lab classrooms, and coaching assistance, the classroom has become more open and transparent, and everyone owns student learning.

### Distributed Leadership

Another compelling characteristic of effectiveness in these districts was the degree to which the central office expected, encouraged, and supported a model of shared leadership. Time and again, educators in these districts reported ways in which they are given a voice in the decision-making process. According to one teacher, for example, “The leadership has been distributed effectively to those who are where the action is: in the classrooms . . . schools have leadership teams in place in each building. Teachers are encouraged *and expected* to become the experts in areas of teaching and learning and are given support to do so.” In fact, in these districts there is supportive leadership at every level of the organization. A sense of efficacy is promoted in the unmistakable understanding that it is everyone’s job to promote student learning. An example of distributed leadership in one district was described as follows:

From the beginning, teachers owned the process. In 1993, the assistant superintendent was hired to head assessment efforts. Teachers report that it was clear they needed benchmarks and assessments. Being a small district, staff members looked for expertise in this area, and the assistant superintendent and a representative group of teachers created their own benchmarks because no one else had them. Many believe that the success they have had was due to this process . . . None of this was policy driven or from the school board. The big concepts were Board endorsed, but these efforts were from the bottom up.

The extent to which leadership is shared is dependent to some degree on how the superintendent perceives and carries out his or her role. In these districts, superintendents were willing and able to allocate leadership responsibilities across the organization in order to improve student learning. According to one superintendent, “It’s about the empowerment of the people you have . . . I kind of get it rolling, and then I step back.” And as one of the researchers noted, “The superintendent is not a figurehead of the district . . . there has been shared leadership for a long time, which has allowed and

expected teachers to be involved in decision-making and [to] have ownership in the process and the product. *Everyone* is involved in leadership teams in his or her own building and/or across the district.”

“The leadership has been distributed effectively to those who are where the action is: in the classrooms . . .”

Districts have accomplished this by providing structure, direction, and support to the school improvement process, and yet allowing individual buildings the autonomy to move the process forward according to their own perceived needs. One principal confirmed the wisdom of this strategy: the district gave school leaders freedom over action plans, recognizing that each school served different clientele. And there were numerous instances where interviewees discussed the vertical sharing of ideas. According to one district administrator, “This is a grass-roots district, not a top-down district. The principals bring ideas to us, and we have learned how to support them. We let them tell us what they believe will make a difference in their schools, and we let them run with it.” Further evidence of principal empowerment was found in one district where each principal is given responsibility for a content-area district goal, and then they are responsible for providing leadership around that goal throughout the year, including providing professional development. One of the principals described the process in the district as “very collaborative . . . not top down.”

Teachers also assumed leadership roles. “*We are* the district,” stated one teacher. “Teachers are running the district with the support of the administration.” Another pointed out that “We are encouraged to be leaders in areas that we are passionate about. We all have different areas, and we are all open within a framework of school missions and plan.”

## Collaborative Organizational Environment

The importance of collaboration in moving a reform agenda forward was clear in these districts. Without a doubt it was one of the key characteristics of effectiveness. Repeatedly, educators from across these districts discussed the benefits of working in a cooperative and mutually supportive environment. In most cases, collaboration was modeled at the central office, which set a tone for collaboration across the organization. Although it was not always easy, administrators in one district realized important benefits from their collaborative efforts: “What got us through was having a strong central administration that was aligned and [that] supported one another and valued one another. We could not do each of our pieces without each other. We stuck it out through the tough times. We had to be able to deal with conflict, ambiguity, and have resiliency and persistence.” In another district, the culture was described as one where “working for the common good is an essential component” of their success.

“You need to create a system where people give and accept help.”

This is evident at all levels and with all entities, from the school board to the teacher’s union. Important pieces in this collaboration are the common focus of the

district, modeling by administration, open communication, involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making, and a high level of respect . . . One specific example is found in how new staff members are hired. They are hired as members of the school district as a whole and immediately plugged into a Professional Learning Community.

It used to be that people didn't talk about teaching and learning during the day. It is not an isolated practice anymore.

A principal in that same district commented, "The culture is such that the conversations are going on all day. It used to be that people didn't talk about teaching and learning during the day. It is not an isolated practice anymore." And a board member stated, "There are no territories. We work together." While central office personnel made a practice of modeling collaboration, they also made efforts to facilitate district-wide teaming and sharing. The following is an example of cross-district collaboration:

The district has created several means to ensure that staff members from different schools interact and collaborate. Principals meet together, district staff members regularly meet with building staff members, and principals regularly lead across-district grade-level teacher meetings focused on issues of interest and concern. Teachers in this district reported that they collaborate very well at the school level and that they have opportunities to meet others across the district. Stated one teacher, "We get frustrated with the training we get these days with all the new expectations for changing curriculum, but we have learned to go to each other. We know how to talk to one another about curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and the best information I get is from the other teachers in the district."

In addition, it is typical in these districts for principals to meet regularly, and not solely for the purpose of discussing management issues. In one district, each elementary principal has an area of focus in reading, writing, or math, and they offer training to staff members district-wide. At the classroom level as well, teachers are encouraged to share in grade-level teams and to collaborate over student and school issues. Administration supports this by providing teachers with time to meet. A principal stated, "The isolation has been taken out of teaching," and a teacher described efforts in their school as a "united front" where teachers want to share ideas with each other. "We are really receptive to working together and learning from one another."

"There are no territories. We work together."

Educators in these districts have found power in working together. One school board member summed up their efforts to create a culture of collaboration by reflecting that "You need to create a system where people give and accept help."

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## Focus on Adult Learning

An important factor in the success of nearly every district has been their emphasis on professional development and adult learning. Learning together and continuously is viewed as a critical part of the educational enterprise, and not just for students. Teachers are viewed as more than employees who “fix the kids.” Rather they are recognized as adult learners who need to be continuously “re-tooled.”

Interview data revealed numerous examples of ways in which teachers and other school personnel were supported as learners. These included site-embedded professional development activities; coaching programs; and model, lab, and studio classrooms. As it was described in one district:

“When I saw my principal learning and growing as a leader, it motivated me to do the same.”

Every adult [in the organization] is a teacher and a learner, and the culture places a high value on adult learning . . . A system has been intentionally developed where staff members are encouraged and expected to grow their expertise in areas about which they are passionate and then to share their knowledge with their peers. An example of this is the district “university” and studio classrooms. These are peer-taught classes in which adults in the district can earn continuing education credit and learn how to improve instructional practices. The superintendent and assistant superintendent model this by teaching and attending classes . . . The learning and sharing through collaboration has truly made this a professional learning community.

Administrators are considered learners, too. One central office executive stated, “We believe we’re all learners in the system.” They constantly work to be better at what they do by seeking feedback, by being coached, by keeping up with the latest research, and even by allowing their colleagues to observe them in action and give them feedback. In one district, for example, administrators are publicly coached as they conduct meetings. This provides immediate feedback to the leader and also increases the willingness of others (teachers) to receive coaching assistance. In some districts, teachers have the opportunity to participate in model classrooms, where “expert teachers” model best practice. Teachers are also encouraged to work as partners or in teams for their professional growth.

Teachers and principals have positively received the systemic emphasis on adult learning. Principals see supervisors as coaches rather than as evaluators, and teachers are more likely to view their principals in that light as well. According to one teacher, “When I saw my principal learning and growing as a leader, it motivated me to do the same.” Another stated, “Supervisors are not here to put you down. They are here to help you grow.” Again and again, teachers shared similar sentiments:

Learning together and continuously is viewed as a critical part of the educational enterprise, and not just for students.

- In this building, we have teaching partners – you can't do it alone. We have developed teams that are like-minded, and . . . they are supported to work together.
- Walk-throughs are not threatening. It is collaborative communication. I can grow professionally . . .
- Adult learning is exciting and painful. We want to grow, we want to learn. I think it goes from the district down and back up again.
- There is a culture of learning at all levels.

## Relational Trust

In effective districts, a strong emphasis is placed on relationships, open communication, and trust. There is a sense throughout these organizations that the district is committed to improving student learning and that central office personnel will stand behind their words and actions. Central office administrators are visible in the schools, they are open to feedback, and they are receptive and respectful of the needs and contributions of staff members. This culture of trust permeates the system such that principals, teachers, and classified staff feel safe entering into professional relationships. One researcher described it as “a climate that appears to exist from the top leadership to

There appears to exist an assumption in these districts that principals, teachers, and support staff are capable professionals who can be trusted to fulfill their responsibilities willingly and completely.

the building staff.” According to one superintendent, “You must have a climate for people to disagree. It shouldn't be a culture of fear, otherwise you are suppressing the way to move forward.” In fact, the superintendent plays an important role in establishing an open and trusting environment, as noted in the following description: “The superintendent's attitude is to trust that people can do the job, and he avoids micromanagement. There is no big ego with the superintendent. Trust is found at all levels. . . .it is even evident at the board level.”

The fact that communication and trust are valued and modeled is not lost on teachers. As one pointed out, “The inclusion of staff in training, problem-solving, and goal-setting is purposeful and sincere . . . the climate of trust has grown in the whole environment.” And a principal stated, “We have great respect for our colleagues and support staff – so we relinquish control.” There appears to exist an assumption in these districts that principals, teachers, and support staff are capable professionals who can be trusted to fulfill their responsibilities willingly and completely.

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## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

As Washington elementary schools implement a comprehensive reform agenda in order to raise achievement for all students, it has become clear that some schools are having greater success than others. It has become clear as well that some *districts* are enjoying more success than others. In this research we attempted to determine the reasons for their success; that is, what is the “value-added” by the district in driving school change?

In assessing the reasons for their effectiveness, educators from 10 districts across Washington State offered a number of explanations. Six predominant characteristics of effectiveness emerged from the interview data, and included: 1) a commitment to the reform; 2) ownership for student learning; 3) distributed leadership; 4) collaborative organizational environment; 5) adults as learners; and 6) trust and relationship building. Discussions of these characteristics were similar across districts.

As important as these characteristics of effectiveness appeared to be, however, of greater import was the culture and philosophical orientation of the district office. In these districts, central office personnel had accepted the intent of the school reform initiative. They were not simply compliant to school reform mandates; they were committed to the improvement of student learning. In most instances this was no quick and easy process; indeed, several school personnel described it as “long and painful.” According to one, for example, “We spent a year or two just on beliefs. It was a long process of continuously going back to what we believe. What do we mean that all students can meet standards? Everything that we have done since, we have gone back to these belief statements . . . it was hugely important but painful.” A board member from one district explained, “We are spending time discussing what we believe is the purpose of education. What are we going to defend at all cost?” And a principal commented, “It’s not about facilities or books. It is about a belief that we can do this.”

They were not simply compliant to school reform mandates; they were committed to the improvement of student learning.

Further examination of the interview responses revealed that these re-cultured districts held certain assumptions about school reform and about teaching and learning. There is an assumption that collaborative, trusting relationships are more productive than adversarial relationships. Furthermore, there is an assumption that the entire organization must be involved and hold responsibility for student achievement: as several interviewees noted, student learning is everyone’s business, from the superintendent to the transportation department. In these districts, central office personnel were aware of the deep and systemic nature of school reform. They displayed a unified commitment to supporting the work of the schools, they used the language of outcomes, and they claimed ownership and responsibility for student performance. As one district administrator noted, “The problems of the classroom are the problems of the district.” The re-cultured districts have been intentional about aligning programs and resources to support student learning; in most cases this has meant that the focus of their work has narrowed considerably.

Given what we learned from these districts, we can speculate on how they compare to other districts around the state. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that substantive school restructuring is more likely to take place in districts where there exists a vision and understanding of comprehensive school change. Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002) noted, for example, that “A consensus among the political leadership regarding the direction and goals for reform” (p. 67) is critical to a successful reform agenda. There is also some research linking de-centralized decision-making to school improvement efforts (Lake, McCarthy, Taggart, & Celio, 2000; WSRC, 2002). Furthermore, it has been proposed that district policies “must provide appropriate levels of flexibility, support for improvement, and incentives to stay the course with a promising plan, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches” (Lake et al., 2000, p. 33). A speculative comparison of what might be found when comparing re-cultured districts with other districts is found in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparisons of a Typical and a Re-Cultured District Office

<b>Typical District Office</b>	<b>Re-Cultured District Office</b>
Less understanding of school reform	Greater understanding of school reform
Less commitment to school reform	Greater commitment to school reform
Lack of support for WASL	More support for WASL
Inadequate performance is school problem	Inadequate performance is our problem
Top down decision-making model	Collaborative decision-making model
Directive leadership model	Distributed leadership
Adversarial relationship with union	Collaborative relationship with union
“We / Them” orientation	“All of us together” orientation
Close supervision/ lack of trust	Empowered supervision/ trust
Limited communication	Open, collaborative communication

Effective districts, then, share certain *characteristics* such as a commitment to using data, support for adult learning, and distributed leadership. However, according to interview data, these characteristics alone do not ensure that more students will meet the learning standards. Results of our work suggest that these districts have made a deep and more systemic commitment to raising student achievement: they have taken responsibility across the organization, at both a philosophical level and a practical level, to improve teaching and learning. From the superintendent to the business office to the transportation department, central office personnel in these districts have taken ownership and responsibility for student performance.

## CONCLUSION

### What This Research Suggests

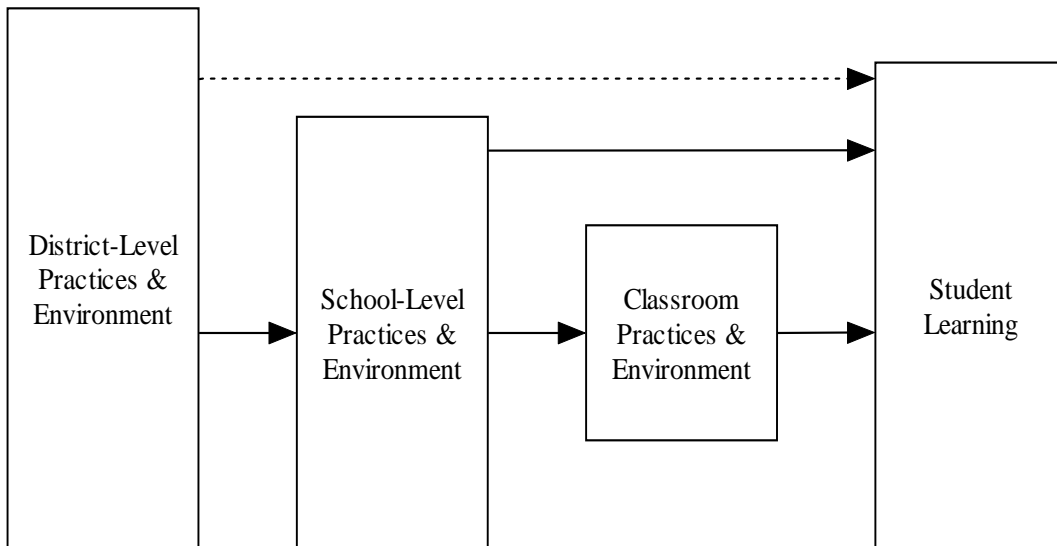
This research suggests that effective districts are characterized by a certain culture: The central office understands and facilitates school reform by creating an environment where learning, collaboration, and trust are nurtured and where there is a single-minded focus on student achievement. In most, but not all of these effective districts, the central office does, in fact, add value to the work of improving student achievement. In the eyes of teachers, building administrators, and central office personnel themselves, the district office does not diminish, but rather contributes to the work of raising student achievement. The primary reason for this, according to our understanding of the data, is that in these districts the central office has embraced both the reality and the intent of the school reform agenda in Washington State. The central office has made it their business to understand, to “own,” and to support the overarching goal of a standards-based learning environment. In a few districts, this culture existed at the outset of the reform initiative in 1993, and their focus and commitment to student learning has “stayed the course” over the past 10 years. In other districts, there has been a re-culturing of sorts, where central office personnel have come - over time - to understand and accept the depth of the school reform agenda. In either case, where the culture of the district office is philosophically aligned and committed to the tenets of school reform, there appears to be a greater likelihood that the entire organization will achieve success. Hence, the central office can serve as a driving force in raising student achievement, not as a barrier to school reform.

### Implications for Washington School Districts

Although districts were selected based upon elementary school performance, initiatives within the districts were not limited to the elementary schools. It is quite probable that within districts where all or nearly all elementary schools are experiencing high levels of student achievement, secondary school student performance may follow. This will remain an ongoing interest of the WSRC as variances of student achievement emerge at the secondary level.

The greatest implication of this research is that it suggests that the *district* can apparently be an effective unit of change. For years educators have assumed the school was the unit of change and that reform efforts must focus solely and/or largely on school and classroom restructuring. This research suggests that school level reform efforts although necessary, may not be sufficient for wide spread student success. Figure 11 provides a composite model of change that describes the study districts. These districts not only attempt to have an indirect impact student learning through their impact on schools, they communicated a direct responsibility for student learning as well. This study suggests that the “district” can add value to school level improvement efforts. When a high level of student achievement was attained at most or all elementary schools in the research districts, much of the success was credited to district factors as well as to the schools.

Figure 11. Composite Model of Change for Study Districts



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Appendix A      Letter to Superintendents

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April 2, 2004

[Superintendent Name]  
Superintendent  
31405 18<sup>th</sup> Avenue South  
Federal Way, WA 98003

Dear [Superintendent]:

The Washington School Research Center at Seattle Pacific University is conducting a study on effective school districts in Washington State. Over the next two months we will visit 10 high performing districts for the purpose of identifying the common characteristics of successful school districts.

To select districts for this study, the staff from the Washington School Research Center examined data on 293 school districts in Washington State. We selected districts for this study based on several factors, including the socio-economic status of the students in the district and the overall success of students on the 4<sup>th</sup> grade WASL from 1999 through 2003.

Using these and other criteria, your district has emerged as one of the top districts in the state, and we would very much like to include you in our study. This research would consist primarily of a one-day visit to your district, during which time we would request you, your administrators, and your teachers participate in interviews and focus groups. There will be no expenses for your district associated with your participation, and we will be happy to compensate you for substitutes so that teachers are available for focus groups.

We consider the work you are doing with students extremely important and effective. The results of this research will be made available to all educators in the state, and we hope it will help further the progress of school reform. Please consider this as a recognition of the fine work you are doing in the [Selected] School District and a chance to share your successes with others.

You will be receiving a phone call from me in the next few days to discuss your willingness to participate in this study and to provide you more details about the process. I look forward to talking with you about this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Duane B. Baker, Ed.D.  
Director, School Information Services

Appendix B      Interview Protocols

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## Interview Protocol

The protocols that follow include open-ended questions and a number of subject areas to keep in mind. If these areas are not addressed by the open-ended responses, even after general probes are used, some of the suggested questions might be helpful.

The purpose of probes in interviews is to enable the person being interviewed to be as informative as possible in their responses. They are neutral prompts that encourage additional information, but do not suggest specific answers. Some examples of probes are “How is that?” or “In what ways?” and so on. The protocols below include some follow-up questions that might be helpful for obtaining further information when probes do not result in covering the areas.

### General Tips

- Start each interview/focus group with a statement ensuring confidentiality
- Plan for 45 minutes for a school leadership team focus group
- Focus Group size – 6 –10 people (best is 8)
- When interviewing, remember we are qualitative researchers
- This is basically an inductive approach
- Don’t be too focused in questions—ask general, open-ended questions
- Utilize common statements to ‘get them going’
- Use 2 or 3 open-ended questions...
- Use same questions at each site; major questions, followed by minor ones

PROBE (i.e. *what things have you been doing in the past that allow you to...*; use follow up questions (i.e. ‘*You haven’t mentioned...*’)

### **I. Central Office Instructional Personnel Interview**

1. To what do you attribute the strong 4<sup>th</sup> grade WASL success over the last three years?
2. What role did the school leadership play in this process?
3. How did the central office contribute to this success?
4. How are resources allocated to the schools for improved student achievement?
5. Is there a formal or informal accountability system for teachers and principals in the district?

### Final Question

Is there anything else you would like to add?

## II. Principal and Leadership Team Focus Group

### Introductory, open-ended questions

1. To what do you attribute your strong WASL success over the last three years?  
(This question will be sent prior to the interview)
2. As Principal, what role did you play in this process?
3. How did you, individually or as a group, contribute to this success?
4. What role did the district play in this process?

### Specific areas for follow-up questions

The use of WASL or other assessment data

(How have you used WASL results at School?)

Changes over the last 5 years

(How has your work as Principal changed from 3 years ago?)

(How is the school different now than 3 years ago?)

Nature of the curricula

(Which features of your curricula have been important?)

Teacher collaboration

(To what extent do teachers from different grades discuss learning goals/progress?)

Professional development

(Do you have a plan for how professional development is used at – School?)

Teacher accountability

(Do teachers have a system for keeping track of student achievement?)

School governance

(How has the governance system been helpful, or not helpful, in the success here?)

District office

(Has the central office been helpful in your efforts?)

Parental involvement

(How would you describe parental involvement at School?)

Morale

(How would you describe the morale at School?)

### Final Question

Is there anything else you would like to add?



**Appendix C      Interview Methods, Outcomes, and Schedules**

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## Interview Methods, Outcomes, and Schedules

### Method: Observations, Interviews, and Focus Groups

1. All team members will participate in the district-level leadership team focus group (90 minutes).
2. Team members will then split up to interview various other district level officials (45 minutes)
3. Team members will conduct paired interviews/focus groups with the principal and leadership team members if possible (60 minutes)
4. Conduct a tour of school if time permits

### Post-Interviews

1. At the end of the day, there is to be a team debriefing on site for 1-2 hours.
2. Identification of main themes/observations from interviews

### Outcomes

1. Each member submits summary of interviews/observations to team leader within 7 days of visitation (2-3 pages summarizing finding around identified themes)
2. Team leader summarizes all reports (integrating her/his own observations) and submits 3 - 5 page report (per district) to project leader
3. Project leader integrates all summaries and produces final report

### ***Logistics***

1. Project Leader will notify all districts of their selection in the study
2. All districts will be asked to identify a site coordinator to manage the logistics of the research visitation.
3. Team Leader will communicate all relevant information to team members
  - A. Contact central office (site coordinator) to identify interviewee and arrange times and places
  - B. Contact site coordinator:
    - i. -Arrange interview times
    - ii. -Inform principals about the study and focus groups
    - iii. -Request arrangements for teacher focus group
    - iv. -Request artifacts
  - C. Convening additional face-to-face meetings or conference calls
4. Travel and lodging arrangements are up to each individual team member

## Time Schedule for District Visitations

### Sample – Small District

<b>Sample District May ???</b>	<b>Team A</b>	<b>Team B</b>	<b>Team c</b>
Time			
8:00 – 8:30	<b>Superintendent and Central Office Focus Group</b>		
8:30 – 9:00			
9:00 – 9:30			
9:30 – 10:00			
10:00 – 10:30	<b>School Board</b>	<b>Central Office</b>	<b>Central Office</b>
10:30 – 11:00	paired interviews	paired interviews	paired interviews
11:00 – 11:30	<b>Elementary #1</b>	<b>Elementary #2</b>	<b>Elementary #3</b>
11:30 – 12:00	principal and leadership team focus group	principal and leadership team focus group	principal and leadership team focus group
12:00 – 12:30			
12:30 – 1:00			
1:00 – 1:30			
1:30 – 2:00			
2:00 – 2:30			
2:30 – 3:00			
3:00 – 3:30			

**Sample – Medium Size District**

<b>Sample District May ???</b>	<b>Team A</b>	<b>Team B</b>	<b>Team c</b>
Time			
8:00 – 8:30	<b>Superintendent and Central Office Focus Group</b>		
8:30 – 9:00			
9:00 – 9:30			
9:30 – 10:00			
10:00 – 10:30	<b>School Board</b>	<b>Central Office</b>	<b>Central Office</b>
10:30 – 11:00	paired interviews	paired interviews	paired interviews
11:00 – 11:30	<b>Elementary #1</b>	<b>Elementary #2</b>	<b>Elementary #3</b>
11:30 – 12:00	principal and leadership team focus group	principal and leadership team focus group	principal and leadership team focus group
12:00 – 12:30			
12:30 – 1:00	<b>Elementary #4</b>	<b>Elementary #5</b>	<b>Elementary #6</b>
1:00 – 1:30	principal and leadership team focus group	principal and leadership team focus group	principal and leadership team focus group
1:30 – 2:00			
2:00 – 2:30			
2:30 – 3:00			
3:00 – 3:30			

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**Sample – Large District**

<b>Sample District May ???</b>	<b>Team A</b>	<b>Team B</b>	<b>Team c</b>
Time			
8:00 – 8:30	<b>Superintendent and Central Office Focus Group</b>		
8:30 – 9:00			
9:00 – 9:30			
9:30 – 10:00			
10:00 – 10:30	<b>School Board</b>	<b>Central Office</b>	<b>Central Office</b>
10:30 – 11:00	paired interviews	paired interviews	paired interviews
11:00 – 11:30	<b>Elementary Principals</b> Focus Group #1	<b>Elementary Principals</b> Focus Group #2	<b>Elementary Principals</b> Focus Group #3
11:30 – 12:00			
12:00 – 12:30			
12:30 – 1:00	<b>Elementary #1</b> Principal and leadership team focus group	<b>Elementary #2</b> Principal and leadership team focus group	<b>Elementary #3</b> Principal and leadership team focus group
1:00 – 1:30			
1:30 – 2:00			
2:00 – 2:30	<b>Elementary #4</b> Principal and leadership team focus group	<b>Elementary #5</b> Principal and leadership team focus group	<b>Elementary #6</b> Principal and leadership team focus group
2:30 – 3:00			
3:00 – 3:30			

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