Understanding the Performance Challenge

Schools and districts do not engage in the multiple, organizationally complex and personally challenging actions to "double student performance" unless there is a perceived need to make such dramatic change. Teachers, principals, and school leaders must fully understand and want to address the performance challenge. As Kotter (1996) put it in his motivational book on leading large-scale change in organizations, people must feel a "sense of urgency" to engage in such processes. Doubling performance requires a sense of urgency to do so. And accomplishing that goal takes several years of focus on that task, exceptionally hard work, and relentless effort to get the job done.

Creating that sense of urgency first requires understanding that there is a performance challenge. And understanding the full nature of the performance challenge emerges from analyzing a wide range of performance data, often catalyzed by pressure to improve that emanates from many sources.

The chapter has three major sections. The first reviews the sources of pressure to improve performance that impacted these schools and districts. The second describes how most started analyzing state test data to fully understand their performance situation and to comprehend their performance challenge. The third describes the curriculum-mapping processes in which many of these education systems engaged.

1. PRESSURE TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

Pressure to improve performance emanates from several sources.

Pressure From NCLB

As the previous Odden and Archibald (2009) book showed, pressures to change are dropping on the American education system from multiple directions. For some it is the accountability press of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. With admitted (though I would argue not fatal) flaws,[1] NCLB is one education program that requires accountability for student performance. NCLB seeks to have all students make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward proficient achievement, and most important presses the system to reduce the multiple achievement gaps in student performance that characterize the student performance landscape in the United States. As more and more schools and districts fall short of the AYP goals as these shortcomings in performance are documented, districts and schools are put on notice that they have a performance challenge and many, though not all, respond by seeking to do better.

Many of the schools and districts referenced in this and other books (e.g., Chenoweth, 2007; Odden & Archibald, 2009)—the Columbus School in Appleton, Wisconsin; the Aldine School District just outside of Houston, Texas; and schools profiled by the Education Trust (see www.edtrust.org)—drew their initial inspiration to change from disappointment with their NCLB and AYP results.

Pressure From State Standards-Based Reforms

Before NCLB came to dominate the American education scene, states created their own versions of standards-based education reform, a change agenda that sought very similar student performance goals—high achievement for all students. As more state student testing flowed from these reforms, many districts began to assess the performance situation these data measured and, when the gap between desired and actual performance became clear, they set out to reduce that gap.

Pressure From the Business Community

Concurrently with both of these sources of performance pressure, the business community, along with most of the political communities across the country, began to demand higher levels of student knowledge and skill. The rationale for this pressure was the increasing linkage between economic growth and the skills of the workforce. Increasing numbers of

jobs in the new economy, and those that provided high wages and were the growth engines of the new economy, required a broader and deeper range of student expertise. Again, as the nature of the skills gap between the worker skills needed by the new economy and the skills of students coming out of the education system became more well known, business and political leaders joined forces to pressure the education system to produce higher levels of student achievement, particularly for the rising number of students from low-income and minority backgrounds—who would become the majority of students in the near future.

Though some people questioned the motives of business involvement in schools, others showed that the skills needed by workers in the evolving, knowledge-based global economy were indeed much higher than were being produced by schools, and that low-skilled jobs were increasingly being exported to other countries (Friedman, 2005; Murnane & Levy, 1996). North Carolina's former governor and long-time education reform leader, James Hunt, began his focus on education back in the mid-1980s when he pledged to grow the North Carolina economy. He knew that a better education system was key to the economic growth of his state, and events since then have proven him correct.

Moral Drive to Improve Results

Others have been motivated by the "moral" drive to close the achievement gap and improve the performance of children from low-income and minority backgrounds. For example, when Jerry Weast became superintendent of the high-performing Montgomery County School District that borders our nation's capital, he showed the teachers, principals, and parents in that community that it was experiencing rapid demographic change and unless the district revamped the overall education system to address these altered circumstances, performance would likely drop and the moral challenge to educate all students to high performance levels would not be attained. As a result, he got the entire community to understand that it was a community in transition, and that regardless of demographics, it could not only maintain its high-performance reputation but also burnish it by educating its increasing numbers of low-income, minority, and immigrant students to the same high performance levels that had been attained mainly by its White, middle-class students in the past. And the district has done just that; its achievement gaps are very small, most subgroups have 90% or more of their students achieving at or above the Maryland proficiency levels, and the district has the most African American students taking and passing AP (advanced placement) exams than any other school district in the country, regardless of size.

Fullan (2008) and others have written about the "moral imperatives" of being a principal and "what is worth fighting for in the principalship," with the imperative being high levels of learning for all students, regardless of sociodemographic background. Many schools feel this internally generated pressure, and often their first step is to analyze their performance situation. Many of the examples of resource reallocation described in Odden and Archibald (2001b) began their restructuring efforts with this internally generated need to improve.

Pressure From Competition

Others argue for more competition in the school system as a strategy to create pressure for change. Policies that allow open student enrollment across district boundaries, charter schools, and even vouchers are often proposed as ways to pressure schools to improve performance, the notion being that competition for students would stimulate enhanced efforts to produce more student results.

In sum, the initial pressures to change emanate from many places. Though these pressures have not yet penetrated all districts and all schools, they nevertheless are present all over America and increasingly are pressing down on most school systems. In response, the first step many districts and schools take is to analyze existing performance data to understand the nature of their performance situation and thus their performance challenge.

2. ANALYZING STATE STUDENT TEST DATA

To gain an understanding of the current performance situation, all the schools and districts referenced in this book began by analyzing state student test data. The state testing data not only gave specific information on the overall status of student achievement but also gave information on achievement across different subgroups of students as well as across different subtopics of each content area tested. Urban districts, suburban, and rural districts engaged in this process, as did many districts with chronic achievement gaps between majority and minority populations.

Rural Districts

When Kennewick, Washington, a district of about 15,000 students in southeastern Washington, began its review of student performance data, the initial point was to have everyone in the school system as well as in the community simply understand that the district had a reading performance

problem. The analyses showed that only about 57% of third-grade students scored at or above proficiency and the district concluded that was not good enough. The district set a goal of hiking that score to at least 90% in the short term—and pretty much attained that goal. In the initial process, each school not only identified the nature of learning gaps between majority and minority students but also identified shortcomings in performance by sub-skill areas. The result was that each school became quite familiar with the "texture" of their student achievement profiles, which helped them tailor responses to the conditions of their specific school—with all schools striving to teach at least 90% of all students, including the students from poverty backgrounds, to proficiency levels.

Monroe, in rural south-central Wisconsin, discovered that state tests showed its students did okay on basic skills in mathematics but did poorly on the problem-solving tasks. As a result, the district launched a major effort to change the mathematics curriculum in the district and adopted a textbook series that embedded problem solving throughout the school year; the goal was to improve both overall performance and performance in applying mathematics to problem-solving tasks.

Abbotsford, in north-central rural Wisconsin initially conducted a sociodemographic analysis. The process informed the broader community that as the local meat-packing plant doubled its size, the vast bulk of new workers came from Mexico, bringing into the schools increasing numbers of children who were not proficient in English. Knowing they would be held accountable for state test scores, the district restructured the reading curriculum to an approach tailored to English language learning (ELL) students, and the result was that even though the district experienced significant rising ELL enrollments, it increased the numbers reading at or above proficiency into the mid-90% range and doubled the portion of low-income students achieving at that level.

Urban Districts and Schools

Boston, New York City, and Chicago used the results from their state's student testing system to anchor their broad-based education improvement strategies. Chicago, the country's third largest district of 410,000 students with more than 85% low income, was not long ago called the "worst" school system in America. Boston's highly diverse district serves approximately 56,000 students, and New York City, the largest district in the United States, serves approximately 1,040,000 students. All three large, urban districts launched two parallel activities to improve student performance: One was an ambitious curriculum and instructional change effort, and the other was a series of initiatives to solve the staffing

problems of their schools and to staff schools with talented principals and teachers with the goal of having no vacancies when school opened in the fall, including no vacancies for mathematics and science classes (see Archibald, 2008; Goertz & Levin, 2008; Kimball, 2008). The districts were successful on all fronts, and their scores on state tests doubled over a four- to six-year time period.

In Chattanooga, Tennessee, the low levels of student test scores in the schools in the poor section of that county school district were used to spawn the well-known Benwood Initiative, a partnership between a local foundation and the district to improve student test scores in those high-poverty, high-minority concentration schools (Chenoweth, 2007). These state test data showed that student performance in the Benwood schools was much lower than that of the schools in the more suburban part of the county and also was far below the state average. The state data further showed that students in the Benwood schools were over 80% African American and 95% were eligible for the federal free- and reduced-price program—in other words, students from families in poverty. The details of the overall reforms in this initiative have been chronicled elsewhere, but the result of those initiatives was that overall state test scores increased by over 50% for all the Benwood schools and doubled for many of them. Again, the public profiling of the poor results on the state tests were the catalyst for the launch of the reforms, and results from the same state testing system were used to show the fruits of the change efforts after only a five-year time period.

Dayton's Bluff School, a K–6 school with high concentrations of students from low-income and minority backgrounds in St. Paul, Minnesota, was dubbed one of the worst schools not only in St. Paul but in the entire state (Chenoweth, 2007). In 2000, state tests showed that nine out of ten students did not read on grade level. The school was in chaos. A new principal, a number of curriculum and instructional initiatives, very high expectations, and intensive professional development changed that performance profile so that by summer of 2007 nine of ten students did read on grade level, including over 90% of students from poverty backgrounds. The state tests were used to show that better performance was needed and then were used to show that better student performance had been attained.

Suburban Districts

Using state student testing data to identify more macrolevel weak areas in the curriculum and instructional programs represents one of the most useful aspects of this kind of data analysis. The Aldine School

District near Houston, a suburban district with urban demographics, in its 2008 presentation at the Doubling Student Performance Conference at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, argued that test score analysis does not provide solutions but does identify areas that need work (see the overview for Aldine, a 2009 finalist for the Broad Prize in Urban education www.broadprize.org). District leaders analyze the state testing results every year. In 2005, the district discovered a significant dip in science achievement. Upon further analysis, they discovered that their curriculum excluded several topics that were covered by the test. They not only added those topics into the next year's science curriculum but also provided professional development on the conceptual points for those units and monitored teachers to make sure the new units were taught; as a result, kids did better on the science test the next year. That year, the district also noted a drop in reading comprehension for Grade 5 English ELL students. They developed what they called a "layered" approach to reading and provided extensive training in how to implement that approach; Grade 5 ELL students did much better the next year. The district also used the overall district data to monitor student performance school by school, grade by grade, and classroom by classroom. Although the state testing data do not provide the detail for how to improve instructional practice, which is addressed by other elements of the district's overall instructional improvement strategies discussed throughout this book, they do identify the prime areas where achievement is not keeping pace with expectations, which allows the district to intervene in targeted ways by subject, topic within content area, grade level, and school.

Nagging Achievement Gap Districts

When Spokane, Washington, analyzed its state testing data, it faced a reality not expected. Though the district overall did relatively well, with about 65% or so of students achieving at or above the state proficiency level, it turned out that number was an average of much higher average achievement for the district's middle-class White students and much lower average achievement for the district's minority and lower-income students. This large achievement gap was a shock and an embarrassment, and the district decided to root out that performance inequity, and over the next five years made great strides in doing so (Fermanich et al., 2006).

Many other districts across the country have discovered that while the overall level of performance was fine, the district average was a combination of much higher performance for the White, middle-class students and much lower performance for their low-income and minority students, a

situation that was not defendable. This is especially true of many districts in the Minority Student Achievement Network, a collaboration of districts, many high spending, often in large university towns (e.g., Madison, Wisconsin; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Evanston, Illinois; etc.), but with large achievement gaps between these groups of students. Madison, a member of this network, discovered in its analysis of state testing data that if students were below the basic level on the third-grade reading test, they never achieved beyond the basic level by the eighth grade; the district also knew that the bulk of students in the below-basic category were African Americans. The fact is that many districts are unaware of how large the gap is between minority and majority student achievement until a team sits down and actually analyzes the numbers. All districts in the Minority Achievement Network have pledged to eliminate their achievement gaps by raising the scores of their African American and low-income students; Madison explicitly sought to eliminate all students from the below-basic performance level.

In conclusion, nearly all schools and districts began their trek toward doubling performance by analyzing student test scores from the state testing program. Those scores described their beginning performance condition, and the goal in all places was to produce dramatic increases, if not double performance. I should add that none of the places studied spent much time criticizing the state tests or arguing that the tests assessed too narrow a version of achievement. The individuals may have had criticisms, and those criticisms may have been valid, but they all used the state tests as a *starting point* for understanding where they stood vis-à-vis student performance and used the results of the analysis to identify the macro areas where they needed to improve.

Don't Focus Primarily on Demographics

I also should note that most places we studied did not focus this analytic phase on student, family, or community demographics, in large part because they were not actionable on the part of schools.[2] They analyzed student performance data on the assumption that what schools did largely impacted student academic performance and that to improve performance a sophisticated understanding of the extant performance condition of the school and district was an essential first step.

On the other hand, there were some places that did analyze the demographic data but used the results to target what to improve on the expectations, curriculum, and instructional fronts and not to take the focus *off* of what the district could do to change student performance. The case of Montgomery County, a suburban district in Maryland, is a good example.

The district's demographic analysis, lead by Superintendent Jerry Weast, documented the changing nature of the demographics of the county, noting that what was subsequently termed the "red zone," which cut down the middle of that large district, was being increasingly populated by students from lower-income, minority, and immigrant families. Weast used the documentation as a rallying cry for the district to mount new strategies, stressing that these demographic realities required the district to maintain high expectations for these new students, and to mount a set of curriculum and instructional interventions to ensure that these students performed just as highly as the traditional students in the district.

Thus, in some cases, some demographic student analysis can be helpful, but only if it leads to conclusions about what the districts and schools can do to improve performance. This point is very important. Making the opposite point in a large state conference I attended in fall 2007, a leading educator gave the first keynote speech, noting how difficult it was to teach in urban systems. He gave the example of one of his students who was shot and killed during the school year, another who left school a drug addict and ended up in prison, and a third whose health declined so that he could not attend school. This was the kickoff keynote for a conference focused on reducing the achievement gap. But the symbolic message of this speech was clearly that schools and teachers could do little to overcome these traumatic and overpowering outside forces. Certainly that is true for the examples he gave.

But as stated in the preface to this book, education systems now enact policies and practices that reduce student performance: such as provide less funding to high-poverty districts and schools; assign the least-qualified, least-expert, and least-experienced teachers to the toughest students; skip "tough" curriculum topics in many classrooms; require student work in many high-poverty classrooms that reflects very low learning expectations; and otherwise do things that will reduce student performance. The districts that double performance focus on these things and target the implications of both their analyses of state testing data and student demographic data, when the latter are part of the overall initial analysis.

3. CONDUCTING CURRICULUM STANDARDS AUDITS

At this initial stage of data analysis, many of the schools and districts also engage in a curriculum-mapping process, comparing what content is included in their district and school content standards, what content is included in the state curriculum standards or frameworks, and what content is included on the state tests. In many cases, districts and schools

discover that they are not teaching some of the content that is in the state curriculum standards and on the state tests. They also find that adding those units to the district and school curriculum is an "easy" first step change to make.

The Aldine example above is an excellent example of curriculum mapping that assessed the alignment of the state tests with the state and district curriculum content standards and with what teachers actually taught, and in turn modified the school and district curriculum to more closely align with the state curriculum standards and the scope of the state testing program. Though this process can very well lead to injecting complex new content into the local curriculum program, which needs to be followed by extensive and ongoing professional development, at the first level it is a relatively "easy" fix—teach all the curriculum content that is included in the state curriculum standards and that is covered by the state tests; otherwise student scores will be lower on the state test. To make sure students do well on the state tests, the new curriculum additions must be accompanied with effective professional development, but Step 1 nevertheless is to teach all topics that are covered in the state testing program.

In the Odden and Archibald (2009) book on resources for doubling performance, the district of Rosalia in rural Washington discovered that its curriculum gave writing short shrift and as a consequence, student writing scores on the state test were low. The first-step response was to teach more writing, and student scores on the state writing assessment rose immediately and dramatically.

4. SUMMARY

In sum, all schools and districts on the road to doubling student performance began by analyzing the student performance data provided by the state's testing system. They did not begin by saying they needed more money, they did not begin by criticizing the obvious flaws of the NCLB program, they did not begin by analyzing student demographics, and they did not begin by criticizing the state test or arguing that it measured a too-narrow aspect of student achievement. They began by analyzing data that measured the performance of their students. The goal was to understand the overall performance situation for their district and school, to see where students were performing well and where they were not, to understand differences in performance by student subgroups, and to understand how far or close their students' performance was to proficient and advanced levels of performance as indicated by state tests. It was a starting point.

And for many districts and schools, the findings were sobering. They discovered achievement gaps they didn't know existed, they learned that