
Lessons Learned in Systemic District Reform

**A Cross-District Analysis from the
Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System (CAIS)
Benchmarking Study**

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Lessons from the CAIS Benchmarking Study

Abstract

Urban district reform has been hampered by the challenge of understanding the tremendous complexity of district change. The CAIS Benchmarking Study was designed to improve this understanding through ethnographic research that maps the reform journey in three urban districts. These districts have had demonstrable success in raising the achievement of underperforming students and have also received recognition for the development of systems to support this effort. They are: Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland; School District U-46, Illinois; and Elk Grove Unified School District, California. In addition, Bellevue School District, Washington, served as the pilot site for development of the research protocols and tools. Although it did not fit the demographic profile of the project, Bellevue has received considerable national attention for supporting traditionally underserved students to be successful in Advanced Placement courses as well as for a number of systems innovations. This paper draws lessons learned from the pilot and the three district studies. The original construct of a CAIS can be found in [Defining a Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System](#) by Louise Bay Waters at www.stupski.org. Access to single district research and CAISWorks documentation can be made through Springboard Schools.

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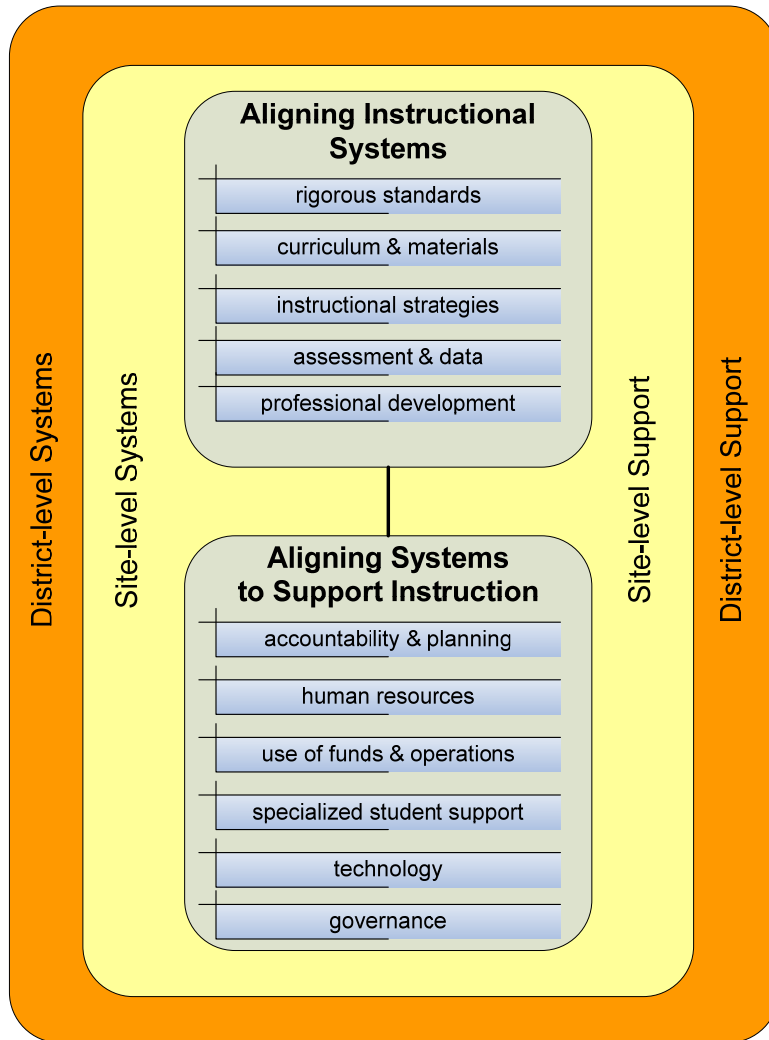
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I. Overview

Urban district reform has been hampered by the challenge of understanding and supporting the tremendous complexity of district change. Improving this understanding through actionable, practice-based research is the purpose of this study.

We began the study with the hypothesis that achieving districts both align their instructional systems (standards, curriculum, instructional strategies, professional development, and assessment and data) and their systems to support instruction (accountability and planning, human resources, specialized student supports, use of funds, technology and governance) around a powerful equity goal and a clear vision of teaching and learning. This basic framework is laid out in *Defining a Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System (CAIS)* by Louise Bay Waters (2007).

A Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System



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The purpose of the CAIS Benchmarking Study was to delve deeply into exactly how districts accomplish this alignment. Over the two years of the study, we have found that, indeed, the CAIS Study districts did focus on structural alignment, but that they also placed considerable emphasis on the development of organizational cultures that enabled them to address issues of equity and instructional quality in ways that many districts can't. These cultures were critical in sustaining the change process long enough for reforms to move from the cabinet to the classroom or to scale from a pilot to the district as a whole.

As we moved beyond a high-level understanding of the alignment of district structures and cultures to a more detailed look at the precise levers of district change, the role of district leaders in managing this change became clearer. What emerged was a picture of change as more of a dance than a march. Like good dancers, CAIS Study superintendents possessed a repertoire of moves, and they used these to respond to their changing and district-specific contexts. While these moves had many commonalities, their sequence and form varied. The most proficient of the superintendents not only had a range of moves, but were very intentional in their use and reflective in their application, thereby enlarging their repertoire over time.

Out of these lessons emerged a more complex theory of equity-based district reform. On the basis of this study, we posit that high-performing districts that sustain and improve academic achievement for low-performing students and students of poverty and color have the following features:

- They have leaders at the top of the system who keep the focus on a core strategy or set of strategies related to improving the achievement of under-performing students.
- These leaders intentionally leverage opportunities and evidence to help build stakeholder understanding, mobilize renewed efforts, adjust strategy and clarify their goal.
- They have people at multiple levels who implement both strategy and tactics in ways that, over time, serve to align both structures and culture with the district's goals for students.
- They have systems for learning at multiple levels. As a result, the work from the district to the classroom evolves over time. This continuous improvement approach both builds broad ownership and understanding and sustains momentum.
- While there are many levers for change, there are three that seem to be of particular significance: building human capital, building the discipline of continuous improvement and defining a high-quality instructional core.

The hallmark of these districts' journeys is that they develop and are sustained over a period of years as a result of leaders' ability to manage the politics of reform including various destabilizing internal and external forces.

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II. CAIS Benchmark District Selection and Research Methodology

While urban reform has been hampered by the challenge of the complexity of district change, studying district-level change has been equally hampered by the challenge of studying complex systems over time. A primary and critical constraint is the lack of comparable data across states. A second research challenge involves the methodological difficulty of making causal connections between multi-faceted, district-level change and student-level achievement, especially in the dynamic, politically-charged contexts in which classic “experimental design” approaches are impossible. In addition to these hurdles, research is hampered by the lack of clear exemplars: while a variety of researchers have found that districts do matter for student achievement, no large urban district with significant numbers of students of poverty and color and significant size has yet shown across-the-board exemplary levels of sustained student achievement.

The focus on the school district as an important source and locus of change is relatively new. The combination of methodological constraints, lack of comparable data sets and dearth of clear exemplars have thus far limited our understanding of exactly how districts that are intentionally building systems of achievement have made their progress. The default has often been to limit studies to the examination of variables that can be measured (i.e., class size, teacher credentials) even though these are well understood to be at best proxies for the primary levers for change. The research that has examined district reform from a broader systems perspective has often yielded high-level findings which are useful but which fail to provide the level of implementation detail, context or description of district development over time that is needed by district leaders faced with the practical challenge of leading change.

Selection

Given these constraints and these needs, the CAIS Benchmarking Study intentionally did not undertake to define “the one best path to district reform.” Instead we sought to deepen the discussion around the “how to” of reform by selecting districts for close observation that:

- Had over 25,000 students with at least 35% of these African American and Latino and over 20% students of poverty.
- Were among the highest performers in that demographic within their state and resided in states with strong correlations between state tests and NAEP results.
- Had been recognized for exemplary district systems in more than one area and an intentional focus on systems alignment.
- Had a strong equity focus.
- Had leaders willing to engage in a new kind of collaborative research project.

Within these parameters, the CAIS Study selected three districts to examine in detail: Montgomery County, Maryland; U-46, Illinois; and Elk Grove, California. Each of these districts has had success in raising the achievement of underperforming students and has been recognized for the development of systems to support this effort. Bellevue, Washington, which does not meet our demographic profile, has received wide recognition for closing the advanced placement gap and for developing strong district systems. Their accomplishments and openness to partnering in the development of the methodology for this study resulted in their inclusion as a pilot CAIS district.

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Methodology

The CAIS Benchmarking Study was built around the work of interview teams that met with individuals and focus groups at the board, district, site and classroom levels. At the district level, this included key members from all segments of the district from operations and technology to curriculum, special education and student services. During this time, other team members visited at least one elementary, one middle and one high school that represented high implementation, and another set that represented low implementation of the district's key reform strategies (a total of at least six schools). From this initial multi-day district visit and the review of collected documents, the interview team and project leadership developed a draft timeline and map of the key events, catalysts and strategies in the district's reform journey. They also postulated a list of potential cultural attributes, or guiding principles, that they felt represented both the tacit and explicit culture of that district.

With this initial framework in place, researchers returned and met with the district leadership team for a structured critique of the analysis. The result informed a more detailed sifting of the data. The final set of events, catalysts and strategies, as well as detailed descriptions of each, were arrived at collaboratively. Because of the complexity of the data collected and the analysis needed, the necessity of building a knowledge management tool to support this work became clear early in the project. The resulting tool, which we named CAISWorks, combines a relational database with a visual interface that together allowed the data to be tagged, sorted and displayed in a variety of ways. Each event in the database is tied to one or more of the 11 CAIS structural components (such as curriculum or governance) and one or more of the guiding principles (such as transparency or shared responsibility). Each event also has attached to it annotations explaining the identified systemic links as well as related artifacts (board memos, newspaper articles, assessment rubrics). To aid in analysis, both data points and annotations are searchable. More importantly, a graphical user interface allows researchers to view the data represented visually. These visual representations include depiction of the overall reform timeline as well as depictions of the evolution of various elements in relation to each other (e.g., use of data vs. professional development). Once the data was entered and the preliminary analysis complete, the team returned to the district again to use the tool with key district personnel to identify missing elements and unearth linkages not yet found by the team.

Facilitated by the power of CAISWorks, the CAIS Benchmarking Study was able to put in place a methodology that allowed researchers to collaboratively analyze the multi-dimensional process of district reform in partnership with the participating districts. The ability to view multiple layers of data and visually search for patterns has made possible the co-construction of knowledge between practitioners and researchers as well as across the four district research teams. The tool and the embedded artifacts and research summaries provide rich case studies on individual district reform. The Cross-District Analysis then takes these individual learnings and looks across the districts for patterns that can be gleaned.

The Cross-District Analysis

This cross-district analysis assembles a series of the lessons from the three CAIS benchmark districts and the Bellevue pilot that cast new light on how diverse, achieving districts with an equity focus have intentionally aligned their systems to focus on delivering high quality teaching and learning for traditionally underperforming students. Given the limitations of the study, these findings must be seen as descriptive of a hypothesis about promising practices rather than a prescriptive recipe for reform. Taken together, though, the identified practices point in directions that have important implications for leaders both within and outside school systems whose focus is on district reform. Though causal connections cannot be drawn between specific elements of the reform efforts in each district

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and specific results, the goal of the study was to explore how these specific elements can work together to support change for students. The identification of specific elements is also an important step toward identifying those variables that merit the development of a consistent set of measurement metrics that may one day allow the field to take on the analytic challenge of understanding exactly which piece of the puzzle made a difference to which outcome. In the meantime, a more holistic portrait of promising practices has the potential to help the district leaders whose job it is to assemble the pieces of a reform effort that can bring closer to reality the goal of providing life changing options for students of color and poverty.

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III. How Change Happens

Increasingly, the education reform community is becoming clear about the “what” of systems reform. A variety of studies describe what high performing, high poverty schools and school districts do. What is less clear — and what the CAIS study seeks to understand — is how they got to be that way.

What the CAIS study reveals is a complex and multi-faceted change process that is played out over a period of years. This process begins with leaders at the top of the system who define and maintain a focus on an equity vision and a core strategy to achieve it. Over time, work toward this vision yields a growing level of alignment of both the district’s structures and culture with these goals for students.

These are not stories of “breakthrough results,” but of continuous improvement, facilitated by systems and structures for learning at multiple levels. As a result, the work from the district to the classroom level evolves over time. This continuous improvement approach works to magnify and leverage a host of small improvements and, in this way, it builds broad ownership and understanding and sustains momentum.

Finally, though this work begins with leadership which is highly principled, it is sustained through an equally pragmatic approach to change. Of necessity, all of this happens in a local context which shapes what is possible. Leaders in these districts leverage this context, using or even creating catalytic events that build understanding, mobilize renewed efforts, guide a needed adjustment to the district’s strategy and/or clarify the goal.

Change Begins with Vision

If equity work is the effort to create a school system in which race, class, gender, language and culture are no longer good predictors of educational outcomes for children, every district in the CAIS Benchmarking Study is engaged in some form of equity work. Despite this shared goal, each district’s equity approach is a unique and local product, constructed by local leaders on the — sometimes narrow — spot in which vision, local politics, district strategy and capacity overlap.

In each district, the equity goal, while responding to a board concern, was articulated first by the superintendent. It is notable that in a realm in which rhetoric about “all children” is ubiquitous, the articulation of equity as an explicit goal and focus of a district-wide change effort is a personal statement. In each case, the superintendent seems to have arrived in the district with a personal set of commitments which he/she saw as a potential match with the district’s history and culture.

In the case of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), Jerry Weast was sought out by a board responding to a blue-ribbon commission that found honors and AP participation could be predicted with 100% accuracy by demographic and achievement characteristics in 3rd grade. Selected for his commitment to equity, he was able to immediately articulate a vision where “achievement will not be predictable by race.” Within two months of his hire in 1999, he had reframed the district conversation with a compelling problem definition: MCPS was two districts in one — a Red Zone and a Green Zone. Schools in the Red Zone had twice the diversity and four times the language variety of schools in the Green Zone. Elementary schools in the Red Zone had 80% of the poverty in the district, 78% of the Hispanic students, 75% of the English Learners and 70% of the African American students. Conversely, Red Zone schools had significantly lower achievement, lower participation in advanced courses and lower graduation rates. Galvanized by the analysis, Weast put in motion an intensive and inclusive strategic planning process that resulted in “Our Call to

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Action,” a plan that moved the vision to action and has served as the framework for reform for eight years.

The U-46 district board also hired a new superintendent with a known equity commitment to address issues of academic performance and changing demographics. However, the equity vision was framed more in terms of the achievement of all students, rather than prioritizing a select demographic group. Shortly after her arrival, when data revealed that English Language Learners (ELLs) were particularly poor performing, Connie Neale was confronted with a challenge that was specifically about equity. One of her first responses was to change the district’s motto from “Where America Goes to School Everyday,” to “Academic Success for All.” Educationally, she launched an overhaul of the instructional system to create a common curriculum for all students, including ELLs. During a concurrent budget crisis, Neale explicitly proclaimed that “equity does not mean equal” and, following a variety of programmatic and departmental audits, she redistributed resources to struggling schools and struggling students — many of whom were Latino. The language of high academic achievement for all — rather than a focus on equity — was one she felt would be better received in U-46, a community in which the rapid Latino growth has caused some friction and pushback, particularly from local media.

When the Bellevue School Board hired Mike Riley in 1996, equity was a piece of its agenda but not the centerpiece. Their overall concern was a lack of consistency and quality in the educational program, a concern which had particular significance for children of poverty and English Language Learners. As one board member described it:

“We had no curriculum. Whether your kids could read or write or deliver an understanding of the U.S. constitution was contingent on what teachers they had and what those teachers decided to teach individually ... While our middle class kids might survive this lack of coherence, sequencing and connectedness of subject learnings, they deserved more ... And, in terms of our children in poverty, without a coherent curriculum, children fell between the learning cracks most of the time. If the purpose of public schools is to provide an avenue for children of poverty to leave poverty, then our system needed to serve them better.”

The pursuit of equity was seen as an extension of the pursuit of good instruction on behalf of the goal of access for all students to a high quality education. Once Superintendent Riley was hired, he worked with the community to enlarge the understanding of two key factors in the equity equation — access and rigor. Their definitions became more aggressive and specific and led to actions such as open enrollment in AP courses, all courses using the honors curriculum, and a wide range of support classes and scaffolds. However, in this community, explicit discussion of “equity” or “race” is seldom heard. Mike Riley’s translation of an equity agenda for this context was about moving the community to believe that all students could succeed at high levels if they were provided a world class curriculum and the proper supports.

Doing the Work: Leveraging Context to Catalyze Change

Reformers, and even some superintendents, often speak as if courage were not only necessary but also sufficient to lead the creation of a high performing, high poverty school district. But in the CAIS Study districts, the picture is far more complex. Change in large public sector organizations is played out over years. There are multiple stakeholders involved and, at key junctures, the work must be carried out in a public forum. To be effective under these conditions, the leaders we studied balanced courage with a finely-tuned awareness of context. Often, the result was a carefully orchestrated use of catalysts, external events that leaders used to refocus, redirect or re-energize the change process.

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In these times of growing accountability pressure, it is useful for both school and district leaders to understand that, in successful education organizations, those in charge intentionally use or even create events external to the district that can serve as catalysts. These typically involve outside groups or agencies that bring expertise or an external standard to evaluate outcomes. Resulting discussions are typically played out in a public forum, often with negative, or at least argumentative, coverage in local media. Catalysts may take the form of a budget crisis, demographic change, change in leadership or political event, but many catalysts are related to student performance. State and federal accountability programs can generate such catalysts, though, interestingly, districts that are not subject to such external pressures may create their own performance catalyst.

U-46 provides a clear example of a catalyst that began as external and was then embraced and leveraged by the superintendent. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Latino population in the district grew 83%; Latinos now comprise roughly 40% of the student body, a percentage equal to the white students. One out of every five elementary students is now an English Language Learner. The ELL program, however, had not grown with the population and curriculum was fragmented, with little accountability or ownership by the larger district. In addition, during the 2002-2003 school year, School District U-46 faced a budget deficit and a storm of public criticism. Twelve schools had been put on Academic Warning for failing to meet AYP. The final straw came when the inadvertent omission of the district's nearly 7,000 bilingual students from an internal data review resulted in a very sudden realization that the district's ELL students were performing significantly below grade level. District leaders seized the combination of low performance and budget crisis as an opportunity. Superintendent Neale engaged a national expert to conduct an external review of the programs offered to English Language Learners in the district. She then used both the budget and academic crises to refocus resources on the creation and implementation of a consistent and centralized program for all students, including English Language Learners.

An external catalyst was also effectively used in Elk Grove. Valley High School was the second-oldest comprehensive high school in the district. As the district grew, new schools served the more affluent, and the general perception was, as one administrator put it, that Valley was "not the place to go to get the best education in Elk Grove." District leaders already were focused on both growth and growing diversity as potential catalysts for change. Then, the *Sacramento Bee* published an article naming the 10th grade class at Valley High School as one of the area's lowest-achieving. Shortly thereafter, a violent incident between students sparked a large-scale police response. Using the negative publicity to generate support for change, Superintendent Dave Gordon was able to create a sense of urgency for his envisioned equity agenda. By October, Gordon had restructured the district office to provide differentiated support to struggling school sites. The first district School Support Team (SST), composed of district office administrators from both the operational and instructional sides of the house, was formed to provide support to Valley High School.

The focus of the SST was on improving instruction. District administrators accompanied the principal on weekly classroom observations beginning with the lowest-performing 10th grade classes. Teachers received additional support from an on-site instructional coach, and the Research and Evaluation Department helped with formative and summative data. Board members attended early morning meetings with school leadership about school climate concerns. State compensatory education funds were reallocated to support math interventions. A then-vice principal at Valley High School recalls the district response:

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“The message from district leaders was ‘whatever it took.’ There was the sense that if we can do it here, we can do it anywhere. Staff had lost the belief that they could be effective — the growth data helped them believe they could be.”

While U-46 and Elk Grove leveraged external catalysts, Bellevue provides a classic case of an internally-generated catalyst. In 2003, Superintendent Mike Riley was pleased with the general progress of the school district but frustrated with both the pace of change and with a sense of complacency with the improvement in student performance already achieved. In response, he engaged an external group which came to be called “the Partnership.” The charge to this advisory committee, which ultimately represented eight organizations, was to help the district to benchmark its progress against external standards. In effect, the Partnership became a catalyst that challenged the complacency of the district. The partner organizations involved in this effort fell into three categories: 1) leading national organizations focusing on rigor — College Board, Achieve/American Diploma Project, Standards for Success, and Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) National Research Center; 2) local institutions of higher education serving Bellevue graduates — University of Washington and Bellevue Community College; and 3) organizations focusing on connecting first generation students to college — Partnership for Learning and Pathways to College Network.

Most student performance catalysts involve data and, in this case, the Bellevue Schools Foundation sought a grant from Boeing to fund the administration of the TIMSS assessment to all students in Bellevue, grades 3-12. This provided an international comparison of rigor and practice in math and science in the district. Bellevue also participated in a two-year assessment of the district’s curriculum and instructional practices by Standards for Success. Feedback from the Partnership was that Bellevue’s standards were too broad, asking teachers to cover far more material in less depth than was true in higher-performing countries. The conclusion was that, while significantly better than many other American programs, Bellevue fell short of providing graduates with skills that either matched those of the highest-performing international comparators or those needed for success in leading U.S. universities. These very public — and not always popular — reports by leading national and international thinkers were used by the superintendent to challenge the district and create new expectations for student achievement.

As we look across these districts, we find catalytic events treated in a way that contrasts sharply with the public education norm of downplaying bad news. First, these districts own the problem. Second, they reframe it, placing the problem in the context of the district’s ongoing reform effort — in effect saying “this is really what we’ve been working on all along” or “this is why we need change.” Finally, they use the catalyst as the opportunity to take bold and dramatic action, action beyond what would have been politically possible otherwise.

Changing Culture: “Guiding Principles” in CAIS Districts

The CAIS Study began with the hypothesis that we could understand the change journey of successful reforming districts by tracking their progress toward developing an increasingly aligned system — including core elements such as professional development, instruction, data and assessment, and supporting elements such as planning, operations, budgeting, human resources, etc. These elements, we posited, would be found in all of the districts we selected.

What we quickly discovered was that, while this much was true, there was another dimension that was essential to how change happens in school districts — culture. District culture, as we first experienced it, was a unique outgrowth of community values, local

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history and the choices made by leaders. Bellevue, for example, in its quest to provide high-quality college preparatory curriculum for all (a quest that reflected community values), drew on local high-tech culture to develop a district culture that we called “collaborative innovation.” The district functioned, in the words of its superintendent, in the mode of an R&D firm that was charged with developing the best possible curriculum for students.

Similarly Elk Grove, in its quest to manage the emotional downside of rapid growth, developed a culture that they variously referred to as “a family feeling” and “a small town in a big city.” Cultural elements like these seemed, and in one sense are, unique. In our research process we captured them in what we called “guiding principles,” and generated a unique list for each district.

Culture, of course, is not static; culture grows out of history and enables (or at times prevents) next steps in the change journey. Leaders in the districts we studied were highly aware of the culture of their districts and consciously leveraged and even took steps to shape the culture. We captured the culture of the moment in each district, and documented ways in which culture shaped both strategy and tactics.

For example, Montgomery County’s embracing of “shared responsibility” and “courageous conversations” — combined with what they term their moral imperative that “achievement not be predictable by race” — has enabled them to have highly explicit conversations about race. Superintendent Weast invited the Harvard PELP program to do a case study on institutional racism and sponsored a “Dialogue About Race” with the board. Actions such as these would be impossible in most American districts, but they fit with the culture Weast had developed over time in MCPS.

In Bellevue’s culture of “transparency” — which Superintendent Riley made very explicit — providing parents with access to the district’s Curriculum Web, including daily lesson plans, was a natural progression; no one who knew the district could have been surprised by this move. An action which would be radical or even unthinkable in other settings was almost routine, an organic outgrowth of what had come before.

Elk Grove’s culture of collaboration (and even conflict avoidance), which arose as a local response to a difficult strike by the teachers’ union, made it difficult for district leaders to confront the union about an interpretation of the language in the teacher contract concerning “intellectual property.” In this district’s culture, such a confrontation seemed unthinkable, and because leaders were less proactive about shaping this aspect of the culture, the constraints it created seemed very real.

As the CAIS Study progressed, however, and the research team identified “unique” cultural elements or guiding principles in each district, common themes emerged. Ultimately, district cultures appear to be ways that groups of people and organizations answer a common set of questions. The answers are unique; but, because the questions recur, answers echo each other. For example, every school district must answer a fundamental question about their beliefs about students. In the districts we studied, these answers are quite similar: all the CAIS Study districts share a culture based on some version of “the belief that all students can learn.” In fact, we selected districts for their commitment to an equity agenda, so to find it reflected at the level of culture was reassuring rather than surprising.

What was unanticipated was the extent to which other cultural elements were understandable as local ways of answering a common set of questions. For example, Bellevue’s “collaborative innovation” is a locally-appropriate answer to a question all districts must answer: “where does new knowledge or expertise come from?” Other districts

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may have a culture of drawing on outside expertise (U-46) or “growing their own” (Elk Grove).

Issues that appear to need cultural answers, at least in school districts, also include questions about how adults work together. (Words like “collaboration,” “teamwork” and “shared responsibility for results” appear across our districts.) If leaders can come to understand their culture as one way — but not the only way — of answering important questions that all districts have in common, they may be able to become more proactive about shaping the culture in which they work.

Other questions that may trigger a response at the level of culture include questions about what data or evidence matters, the role of parents and community members in public education, and the nature of accountability. Of course, some cultural elements answer multiple questions at once: “collaborative innovation” speaks to both where new knowledge comes from and also how adults work together. And some districts may not have developed a cultural answer to a particular question, however pressing. All of this is an emerging hypothesis which is worthy of further investigation.

How Change Happens: Putting the Pieces Together

Many people have spoken or written about the idea of systems and its applicability to school reform. Often, though, what we mean by a “system” is what’s visible: schools organized in feeder patterns and supported by a district office or district offices that carry out functions that range from new teacher recruitment to professional development for teachers and principals to data analysis and reporting. Often our focus on these “visible systems” leads us to forget about or underestimate the importance of others that are less visible, but equally important in understanding how change happens.

One of the central themes of the CAIS Study is that these invisible systems — including vision, culture and the ways that leaders interact with context — are at the center of how change happens in school districts. Another is that leaders in these districts consciously and purposefully utilize these elements of their “leadership toolkit” — making the vision explicit; leveraging the context; and labeling, and thus bringing to consciousness, the culture of the district, even as that culture is emerging.

The CAIS study began with a hypothesis about organizational change in school districts, but it has uncovered new dimensions of the “system” and a new understanding of the leadership it takes to change it.

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IV. Levers for Improving Access to Quality of Instruction: The “What” of District Reform

A Note on Strategy

In public education today, leaders are looking for a strategy for improving teaching and learning. Thus Harvard, in its Public Education Leadership Program (PELP), talks about strategy as a key ingredient in leading change in public education. According to Stacey Childress, PELP co-founder, “strategy is the set of actions an organization chooses to pursue in order to achieve its objectives.”

But a set of loosely connected actions don’t add up to a strategy. Strategy is a set of “deliberate” actions that are “puzzle pieces that fit together to create a clear picture of how the people, activities and resources of an organization can work effectively to accomplish a collective purpose.” Strategy is not only a road map, it is also a tool for coherence. Strategy is something that evolves over the course of many years. While it takes into account new information and innovations, it adopts only what advances the strategic thrust of the organization. In contrast, in districts where there is no coherent strategy, you see a “flavor of the month” approach to reform. As such, as Childress goes on to say, “strategy is about choosing — choosing what to do, and just as importantly, choosing what not to do.” (*PELP Coherence Framework, October 2006*)

Based on our research, achieving districts are very intentional about their choice of a key strategy or sequence of strategies. They are equally clear on their theory of action, i.e., how this strategy leads to improved teaching and learning and the access to that instruction for previously underserved students. They build cultures and communication to support the strategy and align their systems around it. In the CAIS Benchmarking Study, we have found three major strategic levers for this type of change — three foci for reform:

- Building human capital
- Building the discipline of continuous improvement
- Defining a high-quality instructional core

While attending to all, the three benchmarking and one pilot district each sequenced their overall strategy differently, beginning with the lever that was to remain the district’s central priority. In Montgomery County, where commissions had highlighted the lack of accountability for student achievement, the initial lever was building the discipline of continuous improvement. Elk Grove, with its rapid growth, gave greatest focus to building human capital, which was sustained over three superintendents. In both Bellevue and U-46, new superintendents entered districts with strong cultures of site-based decision making and no central curriculum or assessment. While implementing in very different ways, both initially undertook to define a high-quality instructional core. Although each of the four districts had one preeminent strategy, all developed intentionality in each of the three areas over time. The lessons learned about using these levers to align systemic change, detailed below, therefore draw from all the districts.

Building Human Capital

A recent report authored by Sir Michael Barber and Mona Mourshed finds that the world’s most successful school systems invest in systems to recruit, develop and support good teachers and good teaching (*How the World’s Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top, 2007*). The CAIS Study provides insights into the ways that four achieving districts have made the development of human capacity a central strategy for district-wide improvement and, in the process, how they have transformed traditional HR practices.

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An Early Focus of Reform

The CAIS Study set out to chart the reform stories of four participating districts, tracking the ways in which the focus of reform work shifts over the years it takes to make system-wide change. Mapping these journeys reveals that, in the early years of reform, superintendents are spending a great deal of time and energy working on human resource issues. For example, when Superintendent Mike Riley came to Bellevue, Washington in 1996, his charge from the school board was to work on curriculum. Yet, when the activities of those early years are catalogued, the pattern is clear — the early years were heavily focused on “getting the right people on the bus” as Jim Collins puts it (*Good to Great, 2001*). When Superintendent Bob Trigg was selected to lead Elk Grove Unified, he focused on hiring the most qualified teachers possible to teach the rigorous curriculum he envisioned for students. He also was intent on establishing an evaluation system that allowed the district to identify and address weaker teachers. This early emphasis on HR systems was consistent across the four districts and it was multifaceted. On entry, the CAIS district leaders simultaneously established new leadership structures, new expectations for site administrators, new definitions of teacher quality and new contractual relationships with employee associations.

Leadership Structures. We found that achieving districts put in place leadership structures that are aligned with their instructional focus and theory of change. In Bellevue, this meant creating leadership and support roles in curriculum and instruction in a district where curriculum had been totally site-based. It also involved moving from grade-supervision to a K-12 supervision structure aligned to the K-12 vision of curriculum coherence. Connie Neale in U-46 accomplished a similar transformation even more rapidly by hiring external consultants to lead a Project Team that built the curriculum and data infrastructure as well as the internal capacity for leadership and teacher support in those areas. In Montgomery County, the early work on leadership structures focused on creating the capacity to “build capacity” (Office of Organizational Development, Office of Staff Development) and accountability (Office of Shared Accountability).

New Expectations. Early on, CAIS Study districts also explicitly created new expectations for site administrators. Within two months of hire, Mike Riley personally trained all principals in new classroom observation protocols and set an expectation of 90 classroom observations a year. That first year he also transferred or removed the majority of principals. Similarly, Bob Trigg in Elk Grove Unified released or transferred all principals while imparting new performance guidelines. New expectations for administrators were closely followed by a focus on teacher quality. In Elk Grove Unified, this was a combination of a “hire the best and brightest” strategy along with a “grow your own” pipeline through the Teacher Education Institute. Bellevue’s Hire Aspirations initiative was a comprehensive approach to recruiting and hiring new teachers who had strong content-based knowledge and were philosophically aligned to teaching a common curriculum. U-46 re-aligned its accountability structure such that English Language Learner (ELL) teachers reported directly to their building principals, and then called upon the New Teachers Center to provide professional development so that all principals had the capacity to support ELL teachers to teach to rigorous standards.

New Union Contracts. Changes in teacher expectations also meant renegotiating teacher contracts. Whether adding Peer Assistance and Review (Bellevue, MCPS), delineating new expectations for rigor and/or adherence to the curriculum (Bellevue, MCPS, Elk Grove), or changing the work day (Bellevue), an attention to contract generally occurred early in the reform journey. In no case did a new superintendent enter the district with an explicitly-articulated agenda to renegotiate the contract. But in every case the superintendent either

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laid a foundation for such a move or seized an opportunity that emerged in the first few years. In each case, these actions were accompanied by new teacher incentives for participating in professional development.

The impact of their early emphasis on human resource strategy was intensified by the opportunity all four districts had to recruit significant numbers of new teachers. This opportunity to “hire to the mission” resulted from both growth (Elk Grove Unified and, later, U-46) and systemic initiatives such as full-day kindergarten, longer school days, class-size reduction or increased numbers of support teachers (MCPS and Bellevue) and even turnover generated by the high cost of housing (Bellevue).

Building Collaborative Relationships with Employee Groups

While attention to union contracts seems to be an important early step in successful district reform, Study districts laid the foundation for these changes by building collaborative relationships that would support fundamental change in the classroom.

Historically tumultuous district-union relations and painful strikes led MCPS and Elk Grove Unified to build entirely new, positive working relationships that have been sustained through multiple superintendents. After a bitter strike in the 1980s, Elk Grove district and union leaders met and decided to seek a different path. The union replaced its bargaining team and the district replaced its chief negotiator. The union also decided to operate independently of the California Teachers Association and put in place a policy that all association leaders teach classes for part of their work day. Finally, the union developed a particularly positive working relationship with the board that includes regular, independent meetings with board members and a 20-year policy of never endorsing board candidates.

Montgomery County adopted a different kind of structural change in its labor relations. Following a strike in the 1990s, then-Superintendent Paul Vance sought out the Harvard Negotiation Project and moved the district into interest-based bargaining. Under Jerry Weast, this approach became even more formalized with the creation of an administrator’s union and the incorporation of teacher and administrator union leadership into the district’s executive team as full partners in district decision making. Beyond this formal structure, the district also adopted the practice of “one-text” negotiation throughout the organization, not just in contractual bargaining.

The reform stories of Bellevue and U-46 also demonstrate the critical role of positive labor relations in jump-starting change. In both cases, new superintendents and new, reform-minded union leaders were able to overcome difficult histories. Through close collaboration, they were able to move the districts from a completely site-based curriculum to a common instructional approach across schools. As importantly, they were able to begin to shift the conversation from site and teacher autonomy to equity — defined, in this case, as providing all students access to a high-quality common core. Through this highly personal partnership, both districts put in place strong processes for teacher collaboration. However, neither Bellevue nor U-46 accompanied these major shifts with the significant structural changes that might have formalized and institutionalized the new relationship between the district and the union. And, in both cases, a few years into reform the initial teacher leaders were voted out, resulting in much more contentious relations. While not unraveling changes already in place, the shift in union leadership slowed the process of reform.

A Systemic Approach to Building Human Capital

The districts in this study explicitly developed a coherent, systemic approach to human capital that includes teacher and administrator pipelines, professional development

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strategies and professional growth systems — and these extended beyond the instructional side of the house.

Pipelines. All CAIS Study districts have formed partnerships with institutions of higher education to create a more stable pipeline for teacher and, in some cases, administrator recruitment. The most wide-ranging and long-standing is Elk Grove Unified's Teacher Education Institute which has prepared over 700 teachers in an in-district credential program affiliated with San Francisco State University. Like the partnerships in the other districts, TEI particularly focuses on preparing teachers in high need areas and recruiting bilingual teachers and teachers of color. Elk Grove has a parallel in-district program to train and certify new administrators.

Professional Development. These partnerships also generally provide support for professional development. However, the CAIS districts are reluctant to simply "outsource" professional development and the result is that, unlike the professional development programs in many districts, these programs are closely aligned with the districts' wider human capital strategy. In Bellevue, this is reflected in professional development highly consistent with that district's focus on content-based curriculum as the lever for improved teaching and learning. In U-46, professional development has largely focused on instructional strategies even more than content, an approach aligned with their change strategy. In all four districts, this connectedness is further reflected in a consistent emphasis on teacher participation and ownership. Examples of connected professional development strategies include "demand-pull" professional development, collaboration time within the school day and extra-pay incentives within the contract. Coherence is further strengthened by explicit clarity as to what constitutes good teaching. MCPS and Bellevue have both devoted considerable effort to careful, calibrated walk-through protocols and the definition of good teaching. Perhaps not coincidentally, both have also provided strong support for teachers seeking National Board Certification.

Institutionalizing a Systemic Approach. While all four districts have taken a systemic approach to building human capital, Montgomery County has been the most comprehensive with its Workforce Quality Initiative and the resulting Professional Growth System (PGS). Nesting in the MCPS data-driven culture, the Workforce Quality Initiative collects data and sets goals with regard to human capital management including: adequacy of teaching force, size and quality of teacher and principal applicant pools, teacher retention, teacher-leader positions and pipeline, number of professional development opportunities and their alignment to district goals and strategy. The affiliated Teacher Professional Growth System lays out standards, criteria and exemplars of teacher performance with aligned observation and evaluation processes. It formalizes a professional growth cycle built on an individual Professional Growth Plan and a "Career Lattice" of professional growth opportunities. The Career Lattice explicitly connects the teacher recruitment and development pipeline with the pipeline that ensures the district has a pool of candidates for principal and district office positions. A Peer Assistance and Review program for struggling teachers and comprehensive site-based and centralized support teachers for all teachers complete the PGS system. Following upon the teacher PGS was a PGS for administrators and supervisors and, more recently, a PGS for support personnel.

Conclusion

By focusing early and intensely on building human capacity, it appears that achieving districts put in place a "virtuous cycle" whereby their targeted, cohesive efforts result in a culture that in turn attracts candidates that reinforce the culture and its achievement goals. In each of the four CAIS Study districts, increased accountability accompanied by the increased quality of teacher support led to the development of a high quality, highly

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professional teaching force. In Bellevue, new teachers know that professionalism includes the expectation that teachers will be both deeply engaged in their subject matter and highly collaborative. In Elk Grove, they understand that they are entering a culture of continuous improvement, or “Elk Grove University,” as some have termed it. In each of the districts, teachers feel that they have chosen a district that not all teachers would want to join — and that in making the choice to stay, they are responsible to their colleagues for upholding the professional standards of their peers. This strong sense of internalized or peer accountability characterizes helps ensure that building human capacity is not just a goal or a program, but rather a fundamental fact of life in these districts.

Building the Discipline of Continuous Improvement

Data-based decision making is a platitude of educational reform. However, achieving districts recognize that building the discipline of continuous improvement is a complex process that moves beyond simply collecting and analyzing data.

On the technical side, it involves developing the means to gather, analyze and report a wide range of data not only about students but also about the performance of adults and of the system itself. On the instructional side, it means developing processes, capacity and culture to ensure data is actually used to adjust the work of adults in ways that have classroom impact. At the district level, data about system performance must be used to adjust how resources — including time, money and people — are deployed to meet the district’s goals. Finally, at all these levels, continuous improvement involves identifying and addressing gaps. This means that district leaders must have the commitment and political skills to navigate often contentious local political contexts.

Commitment from the Top

We have found that in the districts with an equity agenda, a focus on continuous improvement begins at the top. Most critical is the personal commitment of the superintendent and buy-in on the part of the board. In all the CAIS Study districts, the superintendent entered the district with a clear focus on the use of data and strong board support for monitoring key data indicators. This ranged from U-46’s concern with monitoring those schools on the state’s academic watch list and the district’s fiscal health to the mandate of Montgomery County’s board to track the achievement gap indicators outlined in the just-completed Larson Report. In each case, the superintendent took this general interest and support for data use further, signaling it as a personal priority and using it to raise a sense of urgency, communicate a vision for success and frame a systemic approach to continuous improvement.

Jerry Weast, MCPS superintendent, seized on the Larson Report and newspaper findings of disparate grading practices in math to articulate the imperative and to catalyze the process of closing the achievement gap. He convened a high-profile study group that produced the first “Our Call to Action” and the identification of the MCPS “Trend Benders.” These, in turn, became the foundation for a systemic approach to accountability. “Our Call to Action” provided the path to “bend” the predictable trend lines. The “Trend Benders” were research-based strategies for moving from a predicted to an envisioned future — one in which achievement would no longer be predictable by race. The first of the six “Trend Benders” was a System of Shared Accountability providing explicit, rigorous metrics for improvement.

Mike Riley in Bellevue took a different path to highlighting his commitment to collecting and analyzing data. One month into his tenure he analyzed a wide range of classroom- and school-level data on instructional access and quality. He then presented this analysis to principals in a leadership retreat, clarifying his expectations for collecting classroom

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observation data. This became the first of 11 annual Administrators' Institutes, each personally led by Riley and based on his analysis of site data. An even wider communication of the priority of gathering data took place over the first three months of that initial school year. Accompanied by his two supervisors of principals, Superintendent Riley collected observational data on instructional quality and consistency in 600 classrooms, followed by detailed written feedback to each teacher.

In addition to clearly signaling the importance of using data for continuous improvement, CAIS Study superintendents brought in external audits to deliberately challenge the status quo and catalyze change. In U-46, Connie Neale commissioned a series of external audits beginning with finance and eventually including transportation, plant operations, information systems, warehouse operations, bilingual education, gifted programs and special education. The audits served to restore public confidence in a district undergoing budget turmoil by benchmarking the system to best practices, directing change and providing a metric for reporting back progress.

Jerry Weast commissioned a series of external curriculum audits for a similar purpose. He also entered the district in the Baldrige competition early in his tenure, when he knew they were not competitive, in order to stimulate self analysis and disrupt complacency. The Baldrige competition allowed him to benchmark to external standards and begin the process of training staff to think systemically.

Mike Riley chose to institute disruptive benchmarking later in his tenure through "The Partnership." Six years after his hire, he convened a group of high-level external partners including College Board, Standards for Success and the authors of the TIMSS (Trends in International Math and Science Study) among others. Through the Partnership, he then commissioned a TIMSS study for Bellevue as well as an audit by Standards for Success. These studies compared Bellevue's curriculum against the highest international standards as well as the standards needed for college success at top American universities.

Commitment to the Use of a Wide Range of Data

The CAIS Study districts think of data broadly. Like U-46 and MCPS, they seek out external process benchmarking or develop internal systems metrics. These internal metrics include the sophisticated demographic and facilities metrics developed by Elk Grove to manage rapid growth. They also include processes such as those MCPS uses to monitor the implementation and outcomes of every major district initiative.

Similarly, these districts are not content to rely on state-supplied student achievement data. Each CAIS Study district has invested heavily in the collaborative development of interim and benchmark assessments. They have also adopted external assessments through partnerships with College Board (COMPASS math assessments in Bellevue), Northwest Evaluation Association (Measures of Academic Progress in U-46 and MCPS) and Reading Lions – Open Court reading assessments in Elk Grove. MCPS and Bellevue have made extensive use of Advanced Placement test data and then backwards mapped from AP.

Beyond assessment data, study districts use other indicators of student progress. Across the board in the districts studied, systematized attention was paid to attendance, discipline and course enrollment data. MCPS has developed the HAPIT (Honors and AP Identification Tool) to identify students from underserved groups that have the potential to succeed in AP courses and then track their participation and success. Data systems in Elk Grove and Bellevue track supports and progress indicators and/or warning signs for students in need of specialized student support. U-46 has designed a number of processes and assessments to monitor and support the achievement of bilingual students.

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Commitment to Developing a System of Data Collection and Reporting

CAIS Study districts experienced significant leaps in the use and impact of data when they moved to integrated data systems supported by data warehouses. With these systems, they were able to disaggregate student data in multiple ways at the classroom, site, subject, grade and district levels, and develop customized reports tied to instructional and accountability needs.

Over a number of years, Montgomery County has developed a complex and sophisticated integrated data system called IQMS (Instructional Quality Management System). The system is designed to report student data in four general ways: 1) performance against district standards and targets; 2) performance by subgroups; 3) performance against similar schools; and 4) status on leading indicators such as 9th grade math course enrollment, ever/never suspension, years in MCPS, etc. The system includes data from both state and local assessments, the student information system, and course curricula and standards. It has grown to also include data from authentic classroom assessments captured through hand-held technology, the HAPIT system, online grading and the professional development management system.

The districts in this project also collect a variety of “customer satisfaction” data such as the parent and graduate surveys in Elk Grove, teacher evaluations of principals and teacher feedback on the curriculum in Bellevue, site satisfaction with central services in U-46, and a range of system and client surveys in MCPS.

Ironically, the district that moved the earliest to focused use of data, Elk Grove, was ultimately handicapped by its pioneering efforts. Out ahead of commercial data warehouses, the district developed its own internal systems which were outdated by the late 1990s and seriously limited robust data analysis. Bellevue was handicapped in a different way by its early commitment to the use of data from classroom observations, assessments designed to be used solely by teachers for instructional improvement, and systems data like course enrollment. Despite this commitment to data, it did not invest in systems for data integration, analysis and reporting until nine years into the reform process. The negative impact of coming late to the development of data systems is cited by Mike Riley as one of his lessons learned.

Commitment to Developing a System of Data Use

Data systems — or even the use of data — do not constitute a system of continuous improvement unless there are powerful processes for data application accompanied by disciplined implementation of these processes. The districts studied here have this attention to process and execution. At the classroom level, this includes ways to connect data to instruction.

In Elk Grove, it can be seen in the continued review of individual student data as part of the preventative approach to special education entitled “Neverstreaming.” U-46 brings data use to the classroom level through teacher leaders at each site called data interpreters and through site Data Dialogs eight times a year. In MCPS, educators review and reflect on student achievement data at the classroom, school and district level following each interim assessment. They are expected and supported to make ongoing changes to the instructional program to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Bellevue’s annual Leadership Institutes provide hands-on opportunities for each principal to apply a range of data to site and personal planning — with ongoing one-on-one follow-up during the year with the

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superintendent. MCPS has a similar process, called the Professional Learning Community Institute, for targeted schools.

Montgomery County has also instituted the district-wide use of M-STAT, modeled after the New York City Police Department's Computerized Crime Comparison Statistics (ComStat). Through M-STAT, district and school leaders collaboratively review data at key decision points throughout the year. In order to institutionalize data-driven decision making, the school system made strategic choices as to where the leverage points were for accelerating achievement, distilling the myriad performance indicators the school system generates down to seven key focal points:

- Grades K-2, reading skills
- Grade 3, reading on-grade level
- Grade 5, advanced mathematics
- Grade 8, Algebra 1
- Secondary level, High School Assessments (HSA) — passing all subjects
- Grades 9-12, Advanced Placement course participation and performance
- Grades 12, SAT score of 1650 or higher

The data points are linked to important events on the instructional calendar. For example, SAT scores are presented for discussion and analysis in late spring and early fall to allow time for schools to plan and implement practices designed to positively impact SAT scores prior to the last test administration for seniors.

At the system level, CAIS Study districts have boards that are committed to institutionalizing data use through policies and practices. In U-46, this is reflected in the commitment to an annual Organizational Assessment initially provided through the Stupski Foundation. This monitoring is accompanied by a yearly calendar of reports to the board on dashboard indicators. In MCPS, the annual report on “Our Call to Action” indicators and “Trend Benders” serves a similar purpose.

Developing a Culture of Transparency and “Facing the Brutal Facts”

A powerful accelerant to continuous improvement is the development of a culture that values the unflinching examination of data and its equity implications. To the degree that a community has relatively positive student achievement results and an interest in issues of diversity and equity, this is much more likely to happen.

Given the presence of all of these attributes, along with a sophisticated data system and processes for data analysis and application, MCPS has developed a culture that invites both brutal analysis and frank equity discussions related to that analysis. This occurs at all levels of the organization, facilitated by an Office of Organizational Development, and includes public board discussions of race, access and institutional racism. Bellevue has also placed a high focus on transparency of data facilitated by the Curriculum Web and the on-line District Data Analyzer. With every teacher able to see every other teacher's student performance data, transparency has been used to identify problems in both assessment and instruction, raise expectations, and motivate the dissemination of best practices.

Although data is regularly disaggregated with issues of access and disparity highlighted, the community context in Bellevue has resulted in equity discussions that are more muted than those in Montgomery County. While transparency has been leveraged to catalyze change in these two districts, internal and external politics have made it more difficult for U-46 and Elk Grove to have the same types of data-based conversations about race and ethnicity even though superintendents in both districts operationalize high commitments to both

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continuous improvement and equity. In these cases, discussions are more limited in the larger community and more in-depth internally.

Conclusion

In the districts studied, the use of data is pervasive, supported by structures for its capture and use, and aligned to student achievement goals. Perhaps most importantly, leaders in achieving districts personally model the use of data and commitment to asking the hard questions this raises. They purposely build a culture of transparency and use uncomfortable data to accelerate reform. To do so, they develop systems that link data to a continuous improvement cycle and institute disciplined processes for the implementation of these systems. While all CAIS districts came to the use of data early and moved to more systemic continuous improvement over time, those that developed comprehensive approaches earlier rather than later appeared to accelerate reform. In other words, the full power of moving from data use to continuous improvement occurred when, and to the degree that, the following factors were in place and aligned: leadership commitment, a range of quality data indicators, systems for disaggregating and reporting data — coupled with sustained processes for data use and a culture of transparency.

Defining a High Quality Instructional Core

While differing in sequence, pace and degree of prescription, the four districts in the CAIS Study all moved from a less defined instructional core to one that was more defined and more consistent across sites. They also moved from systems where standards, curriculum, instructional strategies, professional development, assessment and data were loosely linked to ones where they were much more tightly aligned. Despite the differences in their journeys, the study underscored a number of practices achieving districts employ to build the structures and cultures to support a high quality instructional core.

Defining Common Standards and Expectations for Rigor

At some point in their journey, each of the benchmark districts set out to explicitly define a set of common standards and grappled with the issue of their level of rigor. In Elk Grove Unified and U-46, this was an internal process that drew upon external research and expertise but was heavily a product of teacher collaboration. In Montgomery County, Superintendent Weast initiated a series of external curriculum audits to accelerate the development of standards and curriculum. In Bellevue, Mike Riley called on some of the same external partners, such as Achieve and College Board, to create dissonance and re-energize the process of curriculum alignment five years into his tenure.

The CAIS Study districts also dealt differently with the sequence of the roll-out of new standards. U-46 began the development of standards with elementary literacy and moved across the curriculum and then up the grades. MCPS, although focusing on the elementary grades, began by addressing both math and literacy. In contrast, in Bellevue, the initial focus was on math and science and began by backwards mapping from AP courses.

Standards definition was ahead of the state in Elk Grove Unified and Montgomery County, while it built upon state standards in U-46 and Bellevue. However the process was sequenced, each of the districts saw the definition of standards as key to raising achievement. Similarly, they saw the application of common standards as key to providing equitable access to quality instruction. And, at some point, each district sought to move expectations beyond those of the state, defining rigor in terms of college success not high school graduation.

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Building Teacher Ownership and Buy-in

Based on our findings, it is our contention that while achieving districts are prescriptive in relationship to rigor and the use of standards, they also realize that without teacher ownership and buy in, standards become statements on the bulletin board. Curriculum binders become bookends on teacher desks.

For this reason, all the districts in this study intentionally developed processes for co-creation and teacher input into the identification of standards and the development of curriculum and assessments. A collaborative, go-slow approach was critical in the heavily unionized contexts of Elk Grove Unified and U-46 and resulted in more of a curricular spine (or Curriculum Roadmap as it was termed in U-46) than a detailed, mandated curriculum. In MCPS and Bellevue, clear board mandates for an explicit, consistent curriculum and the support or acquiescence of the union to this approach resulted in a more tightly defined instructional program with high expectations for implementation. Nonetheless, both districts developed sophisticated systems of co-creation and teacher involvement.

Providing Common Resources

In tandem with establishing a context-appropriate process for teacher collaboration, districts must grapple with a question of whether to “build or buy” instructional resources to support a common curriculum. While all four districts in the CAIS Study moved to common curricula, the role of materials adoptions and mandates differed.

Bellevue chose to accelerate its journey to common curriculum with the adoption of common texts. It later moved to define standards and build teacher collaboration around the instructional strategies related to the texts. U-46 and Elk Grove Unified (except for its adoption of Open Court elementary reading) deliberately did not adopt mandated texts but rather identified instructional resources that teachers could use with the mandated standards. MCPS heavily engaged teachers to internally develop a common instructional framework to guide all curriculum development and then instructional blueprints for all grade levels and subject areas. The latter contained pacing guides built around a limited number of common texts or other resource materials.

To facilitate consistency, focus collaboration and share resources, U-46, Bellevue and MCPS all moved to some form of online curriculum. In U-46, the online Curriculum Roadmap was seen primarily as a tool for dissemination of recommended curriculum resources and instructional strategies aligned to standards. Bellevue’s Curriculum Web was explicitly designed as an engine for focused collaboration and sharing of best practices — approaching an almost “wiki” format in some subject areas. Over time, it also provided access to the reporting capabilities of the District Data Analyzer — the online data tool allowing analysis of formative and summative student data. Montgomery County’s Instructional Management System (IMS) provides a comprehensive way for teachers to simultaneously access curricular information and student and teacher data. Along with curriculum and pacing guides, instructional resources and assessments, the IMS provides curriculum-linked student performance data, behavioral and attendance data, and data related to teacher professional development.

Identifying High-Leverage Instructional Strategies

Districts that have been successful in accelerating the performance of traditionally underserved students address issues of both access and rigor. Depending on local context, one often takes precedence over the other, which impacts whether the district focuses more on rigorous content or instructional strategies for access.

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In Elk Grove Unified and U-46, the driver of curricular coherence has been common standards and the identification of a bank of powerful instructional strategies, particularly strategies for differentiation. Their orientation has been to providing access to a common curriculum, in part because of their early focus on the needs of specific sub-groups. In order to address a burgeoning special education population, Elk Grove Unified obtained a waiver from state special education requirements in 1994 and started what they called “Neverstreaming.” This entailed developing instructional and intervention strategies that allowed the needs of potential special education students to be successfully addressed in mainstream classes prior to identification. It has continued to the present. Similarly, U-46 sought to address the severe achievement gap for English Language Learners by applying that focus in its first wave of reform. In both districts, professional development has been more heavily weighted to instructional strategies than to instructional content.

On the other hand, Bellevue focused more on providing rigor to both traditionally served and underserved students, benchmarking progress on the number of under-represented students in AP and honors courses. Therefore, their early emphasis centered on content and content-based pedagogy. However, with the advent of the Curriculum Web, a major focus of teacher collaboration has become strategies for differentiation. Montgomery County tackled both access and rigor simultaneously, working on rigor with external partners and on access through technology-supported individualized planning such as HAPIT to track AP enrollment and hand-held devices for collecting real-time data for ongoing differentiation.

Aligning Professional Development and Curriculum

The clear instructional focus of the districts studied generally resulted in a high degree of intentionality and alignment in professional development. As each CAIS district more clearly defined its common curriculum, its professional development moved from a menu of possible workshops to targeted training aligned to the major district initiatives.

In the last few years, Montgomery County and Elk Grove Unified have heavily focused on closing the achievement gap and building capacity to use differentiation strategies. MCPS has taken this a step further, providing professional development on strategies to be avoided, those deleterious to the achievement of students of poverty and color.

Interestingly, all four districts have adopted a “demand-pull” philosophy of professional development. By providing high-quality professional development along with financial incentives and clear expectations for initiative implementation, all four have experienced very high levels of teacher participation without mandates.

Each district has also developed ways to reinforce learning at the site and classroom level. In MCPS and Bellevue, this has included on-demand, videotaped training embedded in their curriculum management tools. In Elk Grove Unified, initiatives were accompanied by a training-of-trainers process whereby each site sent its principal, instructional coach and key teachers for intense training to then lead and support the initiative at the school. U-46 accompanied the roll-out of the Curriculum Roadmap with “Touchback” sessions that served a similar purpose. In these 90-minute sessions, coaches met with grade-level or department teams to address issues of implementation and provide support. Taken together, these approaches not only built capacity for execution, they also communicated the importance of the initiatives and the expectation for implementation.

Using Assessment and Data to Define and Reinforce Instructional Priorities

To the degree and at the point that each district aligned its data and assessment system to its instructional priorities, there was acceleration in the reform process.

Lessons from the CAIS Benchmarking Study

U-46 began its reform by developing data, assessments and data analysis processes specifically targeted at the achievement of English Language Learners. Prior to Superintendent Neale's tenure, ELL data was not disaggregated or reported. When she did so, the results were stark and sparked early attention to tracking ELL performance and tying the findings to classroom interventions. The processes developed to support this initial move to data use were then expanded to more generalized support for key aspects of the Curriculum Roadmap. They included teacher "data interpreters" at each elementary school and Data Dialogs eight times a year. This concerted focus on ELL and elementary Roadmap data is seen as a major contributor to large gains in ELL student achievement and the meeting of AYP by all elementary schools for all subgroups in 2007.

Montgomery County also came early to the development of a comprehensive data and assessment system that grew in sophistication. It was accompanied by systematized data review processes, such as M-STAT and Baldrige-informed school improvement planning that directly tied to curriculum implementation. As more data became available with greater capacity to query, hidden curricular gaps became clearer. In response, the district became more explicit in its expectations for curriculum implementation. While Bellevue came later to a powerful data system, that same process occurred. The availability of data drove curriculum improvement and led to clearer expectations for execution.

Elk Grove Unified was the earliest district to move to data and developed a home-grown data system. Ironically, it was hampered by the limitations of that early system for disaggregation and querying. It was also limited in its use of data by contractual restrictions on mandated assessments and data transparency, although district leaders have found some ways to work around the restrictions. Therefore, while data has been used for planning, it has not played a significant role in defining the instructional core.

Conclusion

Defining a high quality instructional core involves aligning the instructional system of standards, instructional strategies, curriculum, professional development, assessment and data around a common vision for teaching and learning. In each of the CAIS Study districts, this alignment process was facilitated by the move toward a common curriculum across the district — although the level of prescription varied.

The clarity and focus provided by alignment built a culture that focused on delivering high quality instruction which further defined the instructional core. In the three CAIS Study districts and the Bellevue pilot, teachers described this as a self-renewing process of high expectations and peer-accountability. As CAIS Study researchers observed the high quality of instruction in Elk Grove Unified classrooms, they asked teachers how they sustained such an intense focus on instruction and to whom they were accountable for this commitment. Repeatedly the response was "other teachers." Teachers in Bellevue also described high-expectations as a part of the culture. "Teachers come to Bellevue because they value intellectual stimulation and polishing their craft. If this is not what they want, they won't be happy here." In each of the districts studied, aligning structures to provide a high quality instructional core was accompanied by intentionally building a culture that sustained the will to utilize these structures.

Lessons from the CAIS Benchmarking Study

V. Innovative Approaches in Systems Alignment

All four CAIS Study districts have intentionally focused on systems building in three key areas: capacity building, continuous improvement and the instructional core. Going one step further, they have also focused on systems alignment between structures, culture and vision as a strategy for moving student achievement and equity. Beyond this overall systemic approach, they have also developed innovative tactics that embody and enhance coherence. These tactics represent specific “lessons learned” with potential applicability in other districts seeking to accelerate systemic reform. The innovations fall into three categories: redefining organizational boundaries, reframing traditional relationships and leveraging technology.

Redefining Organizational Boundaries

Loaned Leaders: U-46. When Superintendent Connie Neale was confronted by the combined fiscal and achievement crises at the beginning of her term, she also faced holes in her administrative team. Needing to jump-start reform and wanting time to both grow and assess potential leaders, she turned outside to fill her immediate needs. With support from the Stupski Foundation, she hired a retired deputy state superintendent to lead her instructional reform, supporting her with external literacy experts and an internal project team of teacher leaders. An external data expert, also Stupski-funded, was hired as a consultant to head up data and assessment with an initial focus on English Language Learners and low-performing schools. By bringing in people with known expertise who were unconnected to the internal turmoil and closely aligned to her vision, she was able to accelerate systems building. The subsequent year, Neale created the position of Chief Academic Officer and elevated a principal who had been involved with the project team. The team continued rolling out the Curriculum Roadmap and the loaned deputy remained as a part-time coach and thought partner for the CAO and team for the next four years. That second year, she also brought the data consultant inside as Director of Data and Assessment, having now established him with teachers and principals. The year of loaned leadership provided Superintendent Neale the space to stabilize the system and begin her reforms. Ironically, funding district positions is frequently seen as an inappropriate role for educational foundations, a premise this research calls into question.

Teacher Education Institute (TEI): Elk Grove. Faced with burgeoning enrollment and a slow pipeline from nearby teacher-credentialing institutions, Elk Grove sought a partnership with San Francisco State University in the early 1990s to create the district’s own 11-month teacher preparation program. To date, the program has produced over 700 teachers who have gone on to work for the district. TEI has allowed Elk Grove to put in place rigorous quality screens and tailor preparation to their curriculum and culture. It has also supported their efforts to recruit non-traditional candidates, particularly candidates of color, outside of the local area, bringing them in as interns. Building on the success of TEI, Elk Grove later instituted an administrative credential program with Sacramento State University to allow them to train their own administrators. A testament to the success of TEI has been its strong support through three superintendents, the initiator, Bob Trigg, and subsequently Dave Gordon and Steve Ladd.

Reframing Traditional Relationships

Bringing Unions into Management: Montgomery County. Jerry Weast’s initial description of MCPS as a school system divided into two separate and unequal districts — a Red Zone of poverty, color and low achievement and a Green Zone of affluence and high achievement — led directly into “Our Call to Action,” which was designed to mobilize both

Lessons from the CAIS Benchmarking Study

the district and the community to embrace all students and ensure that achievement would not be predictable by race. This same call to move across boundaries and develop shared responsibility for all students went out to the three employee unions. Beginning as collaboration and building on the district's earlier move to interest-based bargaining, it resulted in a restructured governance process. The three unions were invited to participate in the district's capital and budget planning process. To ensure all voices were heard, the superintendent also invited administrators to form a fourth union to participate on equal footing with the others. Once the initial planning processes were completed, the heads of the teachers' and administrators' unions became permanent members of the district's leadership team. The resulting decision-making structure has allowed MCPS to cross vertical and horizontal boundaries within the organization, speak with a consistent voice and model a culture of shared responsibility.

“Neverstreaming”: Elk Grove. By the late 1980s, as the population of Elk Grove both mushroomed and changed, record numbers of students were being referred for special education. In some cases, this included almost a third of the students at a single school. Superintendent Dave Gordon, who was closely connected to California's state educational leadership in nearby Sacramento, decided to use his insider's knowledge to broker a new approach to special education. The agreement he negotiated through state waivers allowed Elk Grove to receive funding for a special education population of 10% without testing for program eligibility. The funds could then be used in prevention, particularly at the pre-school and early elementary levels, and mainstream classroom support — something Elk Grove calls “Neverstreaming.” “Neverstreaming” has allowed Elk Grove to proactively serve special education students while significantly reducing identification. More importantly, it has established the value of early intervention and the norm of collective responsibility for a traditionally marginalized group of students. The district carefully tracks school-level identification data. When identifications seem disproportionately high, it intervenes to examine the core program not just the special education services.

Leveraging Technology

The Curriculum Web: Bellevue. Bellevue used the creation of a common curriculum as the vehicle to meet its goal of providing all students an education preparing them for college success. The Curriculum Web emerged as a pivotal structure for developing and supporting the common curriculum across subject areas. Essentially, the Web provides an electronic portal to the curriculum. It includes a vast array of resources such as lesson plans, pacing guides, curriculum materials and even video clips that scaffold the instruction of challenging concepts or supply on-demand professional development. At the same time, the Web provides an electronic forum for teachers to discuss, share, create and refine curriculum as a professional community. In some subject areas, this is highly mediated. In others, it has more of a “wiki” tone. The electronic nature of the curriculum also makes it highly transportable and enables review and contribution by external curriculum experts. Finally, the Web links to the District Data Analyzer that provides access to assessment results, transparent to all teachers and administrators. The Curriculum Web both built on and reinforced a district culture that valued collaborative innovation, deep understanding of subject matter, and transparency of practice and results. By incorporating teachers in content refinement the process, it served to diffuse union and teacher resistance to a highly mandated curriculum. In other words, it enabled Superintendent Mike Riley to implement a “both/and” approach to district reform — one that was both top-down and bottom-up.

Lessons from the CAIS Benchmarking Study

Instructional Quality Management System (IQMS): Montgomery County.

Montgomery County's IQMS was envisioned as a comprehensive system linking curriculum resources, student performance data, professional development management and systems accountability measures. In the reverse of Bellevue, MCPS began with the data and accountability functions of a component of the IQMS — the Instructional Management System (IMS). The IMS was designed to enable educators to monitor student progress, access state and MCPS standards, analyze assessment data by standard for instructional planning, and perform longitudinal analysis of district, school, grade, class, sub-group and individual data for program planning. As it grew in sophistication, it included graphic profiles showing student performance against targets, similar schools, leading indicators and other accountability measures. These measures were in turn linked to accountability processes such as the M-STAT, which uses the military model of after-action reviews to facilitate school-based data reflection. A later module incorporating curriculum resources was added to the larger Instructional Quality Management System along with one focusing on professional development. The staff development module integrated course registration, management and payroll functions into the system that now enables concurrent analysis of student outcomes along with professional development input. While providing significant structural supports for the Montgomery County reform process, the IQMS has been equally central to building a culture of data use and accountability for student achievement.

Lessons from the CAIS Benchmarking Study

VI. Conclusion

High performing classrooms and schools, while still not common, can be found across the nation. However, these beacons of hope are extremely fragile — difficult to sustain and scale beyond heroic teachers and principals. Scale and sustainability, and the equity imperative they entail, are dependent on districts. Unfortunately, there are no urban districts that have achieved consistently high levels of student performance across demographic groups, grade levels and schools over time. For this reason, a focus on systems reform remains imperative.

Given the criticality of this quest, we cannot wait for a comprehensive model to emerge but must draw lessons from districts positively moving in this direction. To this end, the Stupski Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation undertook the Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System Benchmarking Study, in partnership with Springboard Schools, to identify common practices in three achieving urban districts that could illuminate promising directions to be built upon by other districts seeking to accelerate reform.

In order to both identify and make these lessons as accessible as possible, it was necessary for the CAIS Study to examine district change in three dimensions: across the system — the alignment of both district structures and culture; through the system from vision to classroom impact; and over time with the dynamics of change. Each dimension involved an examination of both “what” they did and “how” they did it. The complexity of the task and the desire to make the findings accessible to the wider reform community led to the creation of a knowledge management tool, CAISWorks, and to the need for the identification of a pilot district, Bellevue, Washington, to partner with in the development of both the process and the tools for the larger research project.

The research sought, and found, ways that leaders managed both the “how” and the “what” of equity-based reform in contexts that were often less than ideal. What we have discovered is that there is no prescription for change but rather dimensions and processes of systems reform that can be intentionally managed. Understanding these dynamics positions leaders to accelerate and sustain the development of districts that provide powerful life options for students of poverty and color.

It is our hope that these findings will add to the growing knowledge needed in transforming urban education in the United States. It is the belief of our organizations that we in the field of educational research and reform must model the types of “collaborative innovation” and “transparency” we seek in the districts we support. Though the one best “answer” may continue to elude us, we are confident that through our collective work we will build the capacity for finding answers to the intransigent challenges of educational equity.

Appendix: CAIS Comparator Student Achievement Data

As noted at the outset of this paper, studying district-level change has been hampered by the challenge of studying complex systems over time. A primary and critical constraint is the lack of comparable data across states. A second research challenge involves the methodological difficulty of making causal connections between multi-faceted, district-level change and student-level achievement, especially in the dynamic, politically-charged contexts in which classic “experimental design” approaches are impossible.

Therefore, rather than seeking the “best” districts for study, the CAIS Benchmarking Study sought to deepen the discussion around the “how to” of reform by selecting what we termed “achieving” districts for close observation. These were districts that:

- Had over 25,000 students with at least 35% of these African American and Latino and over 20% students of poverty.
- Were among the highest performers in that demographic within their state and resided in states with strong correlations between state tests and NAEP results (see data below).
- Had been recognized for exemplary district systems in more than one area and an intentional focus on systems alignment (primarily through the rigorous selection process of the APQC benchmarking and nominations from researchers in district reform).
- Had a strong equity focus.
- Had leaders willing to engage in a new kind of collaborative research project.

CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

APPROACH

Comparison of each CAIS district to other same-state significant-poverty* districts and to the state overall on three metrics:

- Percent at or above proficient in math - state test**
- Percent at or above proficient in English Language Arts - state test**

* *“Significant” viewed in the context of statewide and CAIS district poverty levels.*

** *Aggregate statistic weighs each grade level equally regardless of number of students included.*

HIGH-LEVEL FINDINGS

1. The CAIS districts generally excel compared to other significant-poverty districts in their state and the state overall.
“A tall tree in a short forest” (MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast)
2. Growth trends 2003-2007 did not differ significantly among CAIS districts, comparator districts and states overall.

CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

Demographic Information

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and Comparators

Comparators include unified districts serving at least 9,000 students of whom 20 percent or more qualify for free or reduced lunch.

<i>2006 Data</i>	# Students	Percent Free/ Reduced Lunch	Percent Afr.Am.	Percent Lat./ His.	Percent White	Percent EL
MCPS	139,398	22%	23%	20%	42%	10%
MD STATE	860,020	32%	38%	8%	49%	4%
ANNE ARUNDEL	73,565	21%	22%	5%	70%	2%
BALTIMORE CITY	87,643	71%	89%	2%	8%	2%
BALTIMORE COUNTY	107,043	33%	39%	3%	52%	2%
CHARLES COUNTY	26,406	24%	46%	3%	47%	1%
HARFORD COUNTY	40,212	20%	18%	3%	76%	1%
PG COUNTY	133,325	43%	76%	14%	6%	6%
WICOMICO COUNTY	14,490	47%	36%	4%	56%	2%

CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

Demographic Information

School District U-46 and Comparators

Comparators include unified districts serving at least 9,000 students of whom 40 percent or more qualify for free or reduced lunch.

<i>2006 Data</i>	# Students	<i>Percent Free/ Reduced Lunch</i>	<i>Percent Afr.Am.</i>	<i>Percent Lat./ His.</i>	<i>Percent White</i>
School District U-46	39,656	41%	7%	39%	45%
IL STATE	2,111,706	37%	20%	19%	55%
Aurora East	12,316	74%	10%	81%	7%
City of Chicago	420,982	74%	49%	38%	8%
Decatur	9,822	64%	44%	2%	48%
E. St. Louis	9,873	69%	99%	1%	0%
Peoria	15,203	60%	60%	5%	32%
Rockford	29,145	67%	31%	20%	42%
Springfield	15,097	57%	37%	2%	56%
Waukegan	15,841	59%	19%	70%	8%

English learner data not available for Illinois

CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

Demographic Information

Elk Grove Unified School District and Comparators

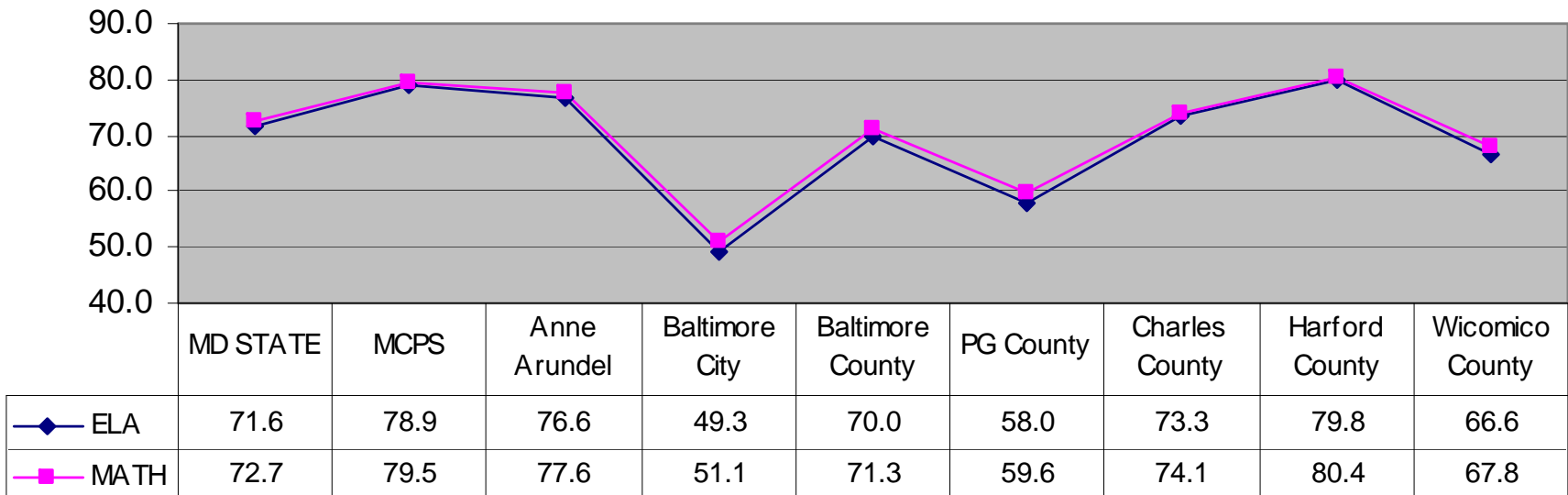
Comparators include unified districts serving at least 35,000 students of whom 30-74 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch.

<i>2006 Data</i>	# Students	Percent Free/ Reduced Lunch	Percent Afr.Am.	Percent Lat./ His.	Percent White	Percent EL
Elk Grove	60,735	40%	20%	21%	30%	17%
CALIFORNIA STATE	6,437,202	48%	8%	47%	30%	25%
Corona-Norco	47,510	39%	6%	48%	38%	16%
Fontana	41,930	67%	8%	81%	8%	41%
Garden Grove	49,574	60%	1%	53%	15%	47%
Long Beach	93,589	69%	18%	51%	17%	24%
Moreno Valley	37,019	63%	21%	57%	16%	30%
Oakland	48,135	65%	40%	35%	6%	28%
Riverside	43,052	48%	9%	51%	35%	18%
Sacramento City	50,408	64%	21%	31%	21%	29%
San Diego	132,482	59%	14%	44%	26%	28%
San Juan	48,325	30%	8%	15%	68%	9%
Santa Ana	59,310	71%	1%	92%	3%	56%
Stockton	38,936	70%	13%	4700%	10%	25%

CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

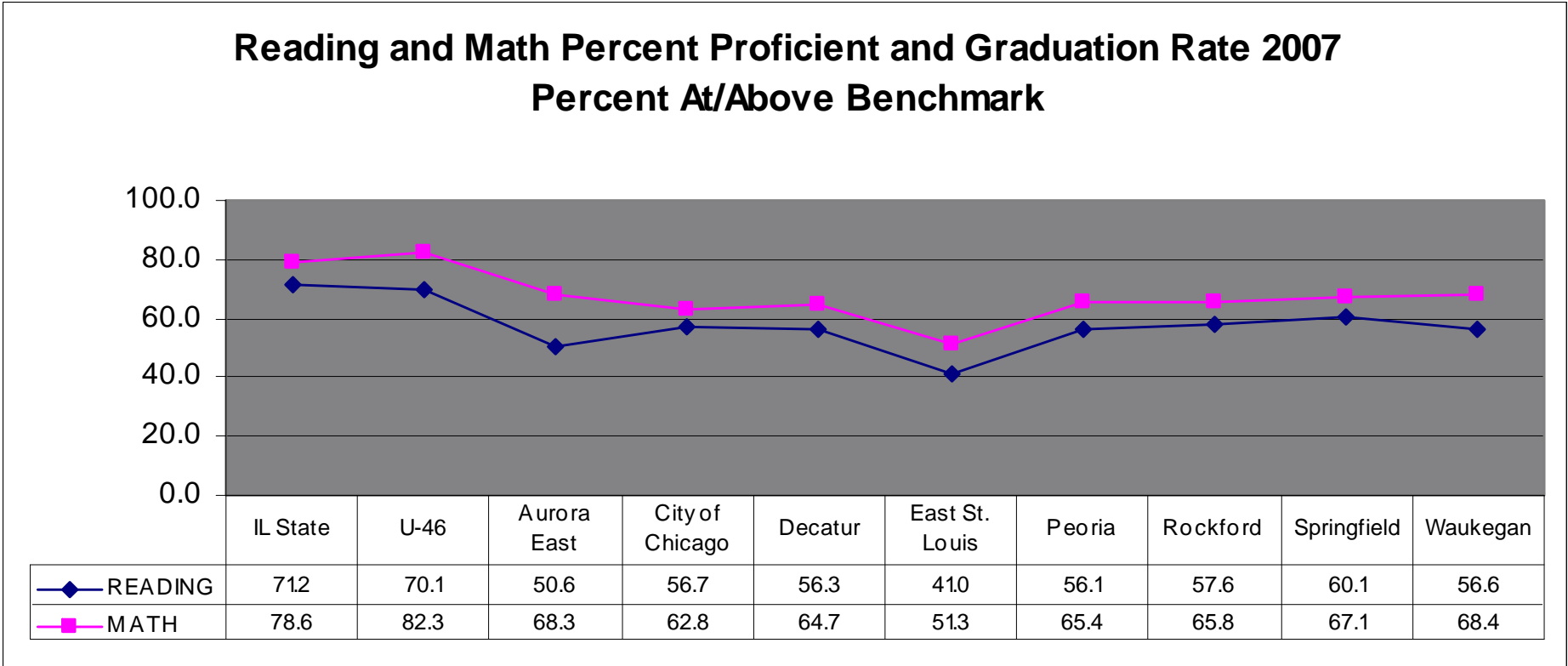
MCPS significantly surpassed the state average for both metrics. Its ELA and math proficiency was slightly bettered (by less than one percentage point) by one comparator district, Harford County (75% white, 40,000 students).

**ELA & Math Percent At/Above Proficient and Graduation Rate,
Average of Grade Level Scores 2007**



CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

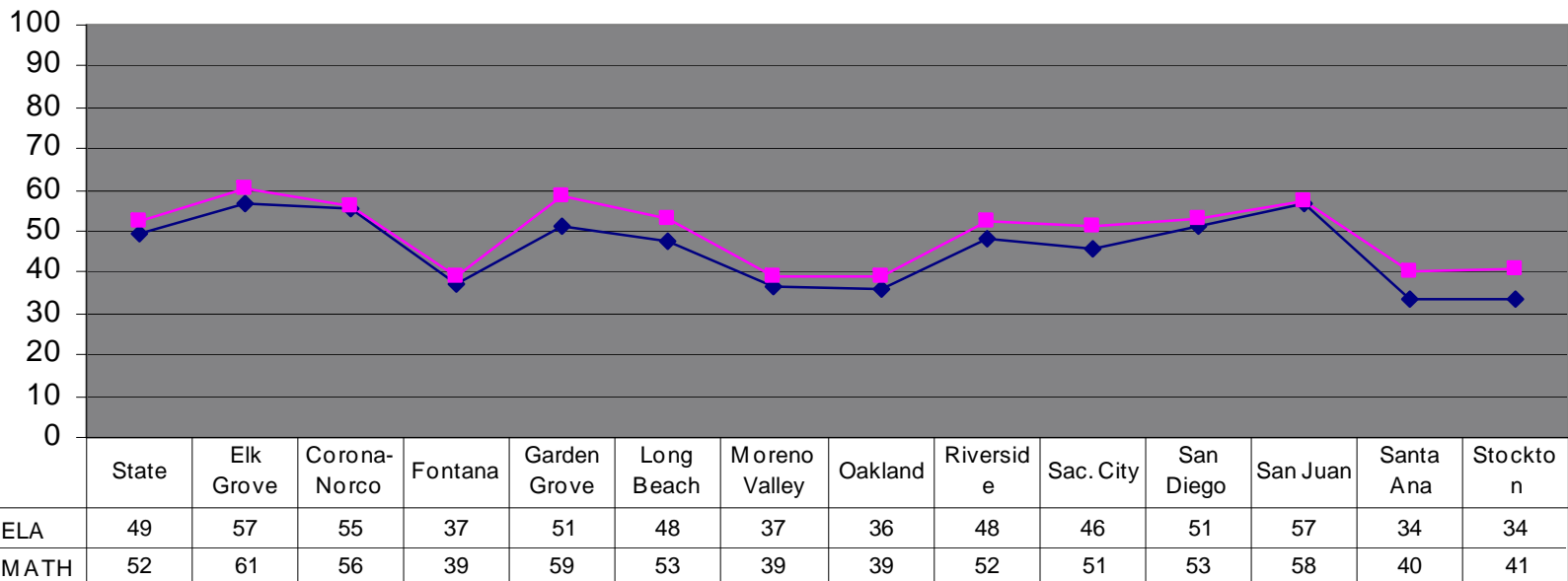
U-46 surpassed all other significant-poverty ($\geq 40\%$) districts in Illinois in the average grade level percent of students scoring at or above proficient in reading and math. It meaningfully surpassed the state average in math and slightly trailed the state average in reading.



CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

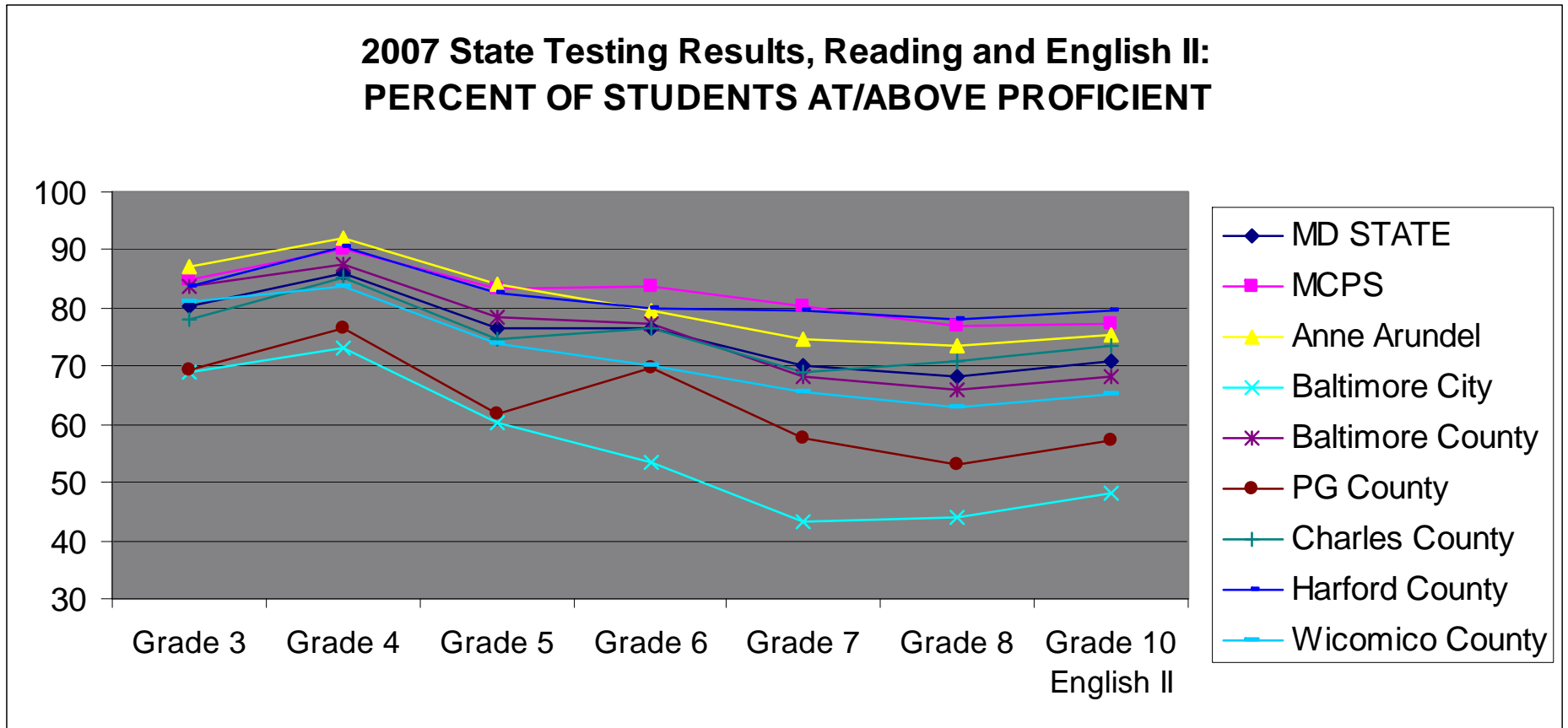
Elk Grove surpassed the state and all comparator (30-80% free/reduced lunch) districts in California in the average grade level percent scoring at or above proficient in reading and math on the state test.

**Elk Grove and Comparators:
2007 Math and ELA Proficiency and Completer Rate**



CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

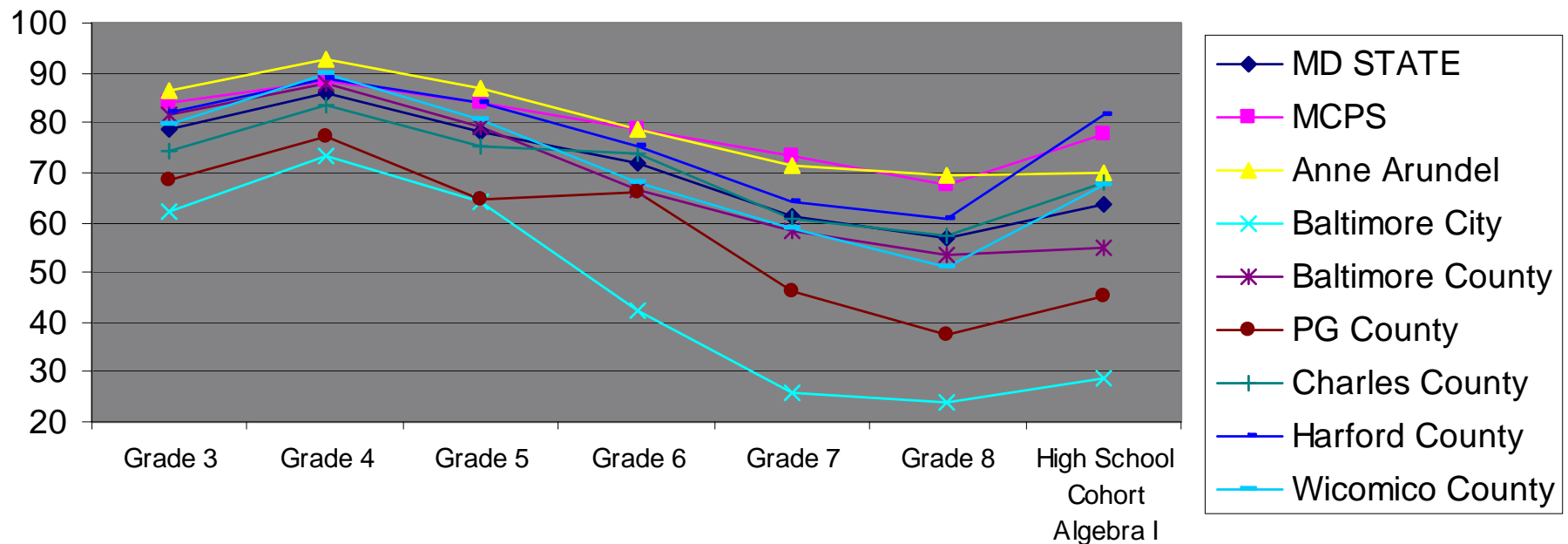
READING BY GRADE LEVEL: MCPS, Anne Arundel and Harford exceeded the other significant-poverty districts in Maryland as well as the state overall in the percent of students scoring at or above proficient at almost every grade level tested in reading.



CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

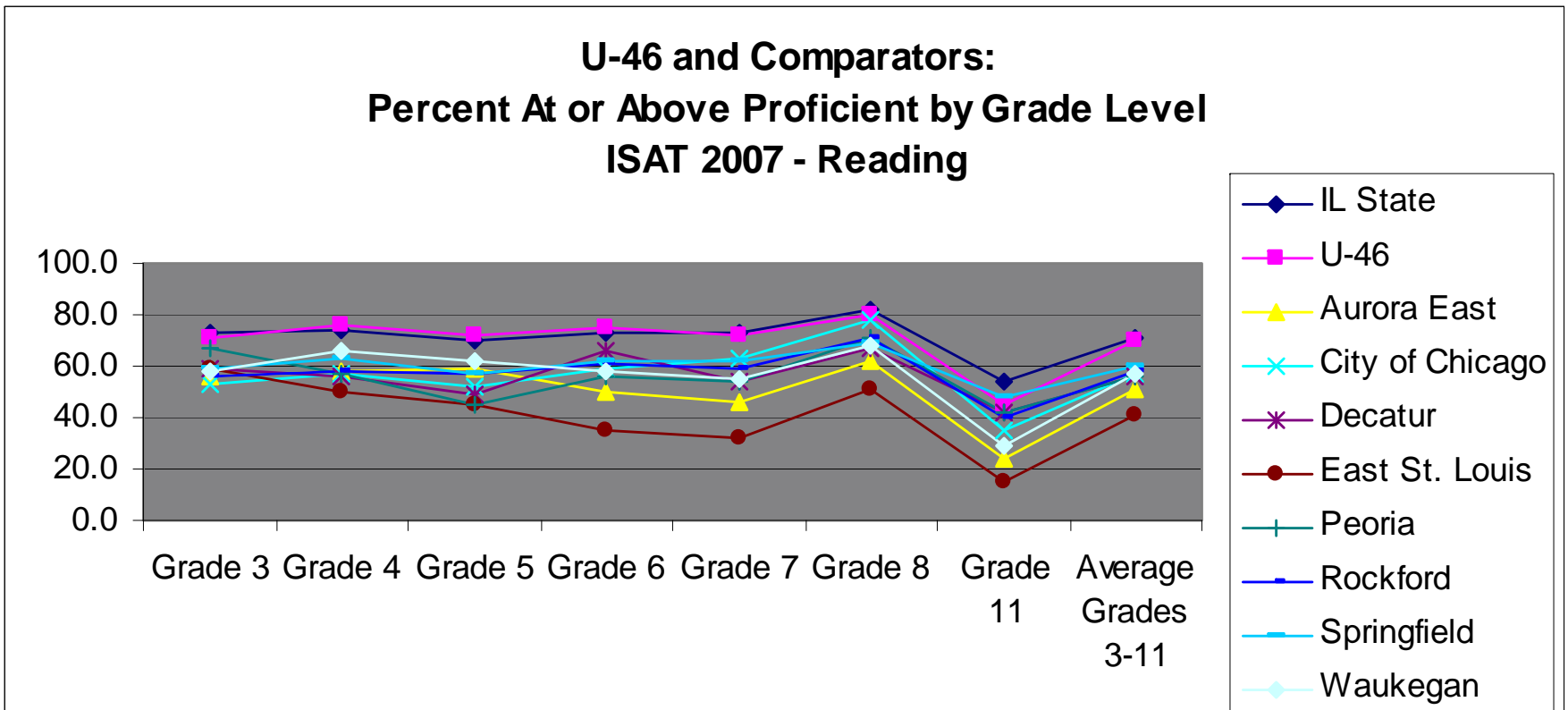
MATH BY GRADE LEVEL: MCPS, Anne Arundel and Harford exceeded comparator districts in Maryland as well as the state overall in the percent of students scoring at or above proficient at every grade level tested in math except high school.

**2007 State Testing Results, Mathematics:
PERCENT OF STUDENTS AT/ABOVE PROFICIENT**



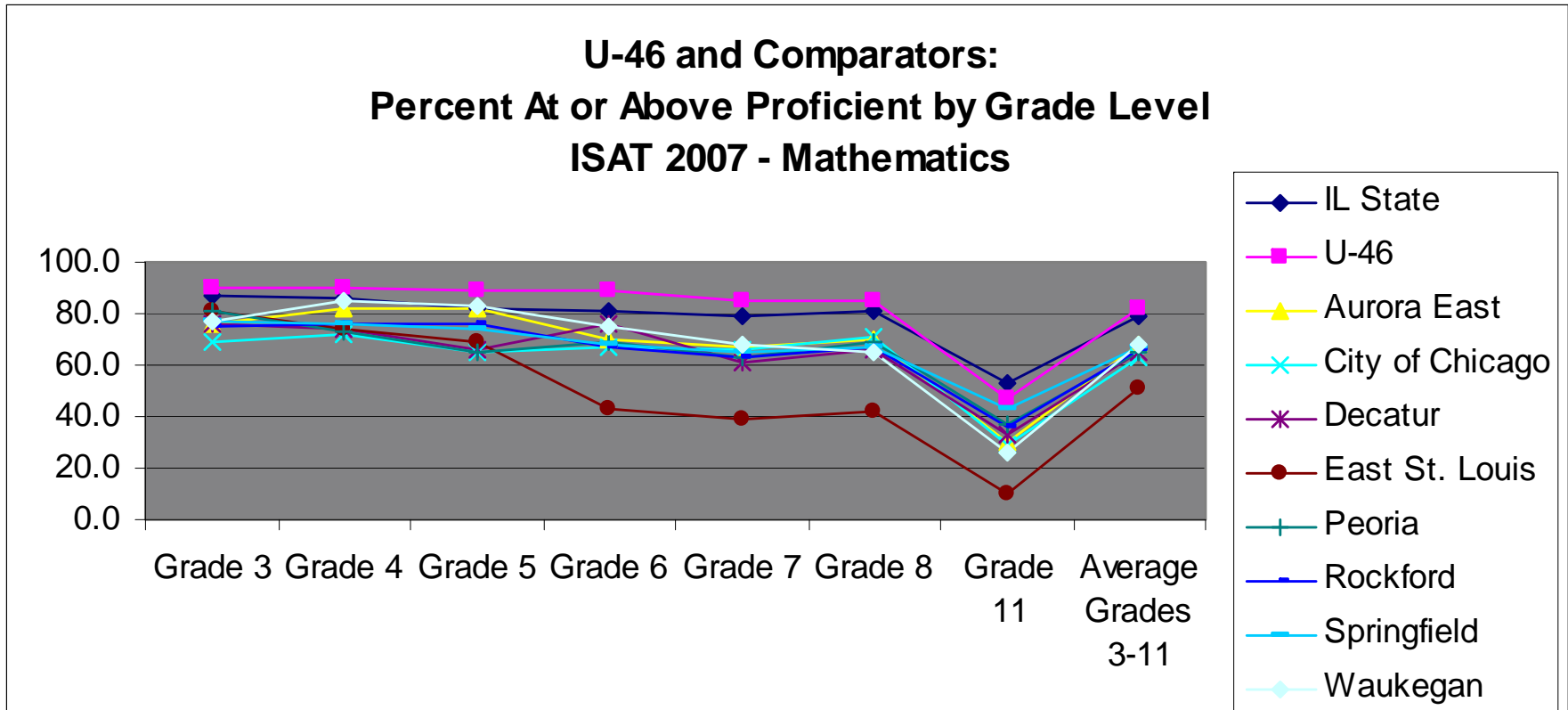
CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

READING BY GRADE LEVEL: U-46 surpassed all comparator districts at every grade level in 2007, with the exception of Springfield County - grade 11.



CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

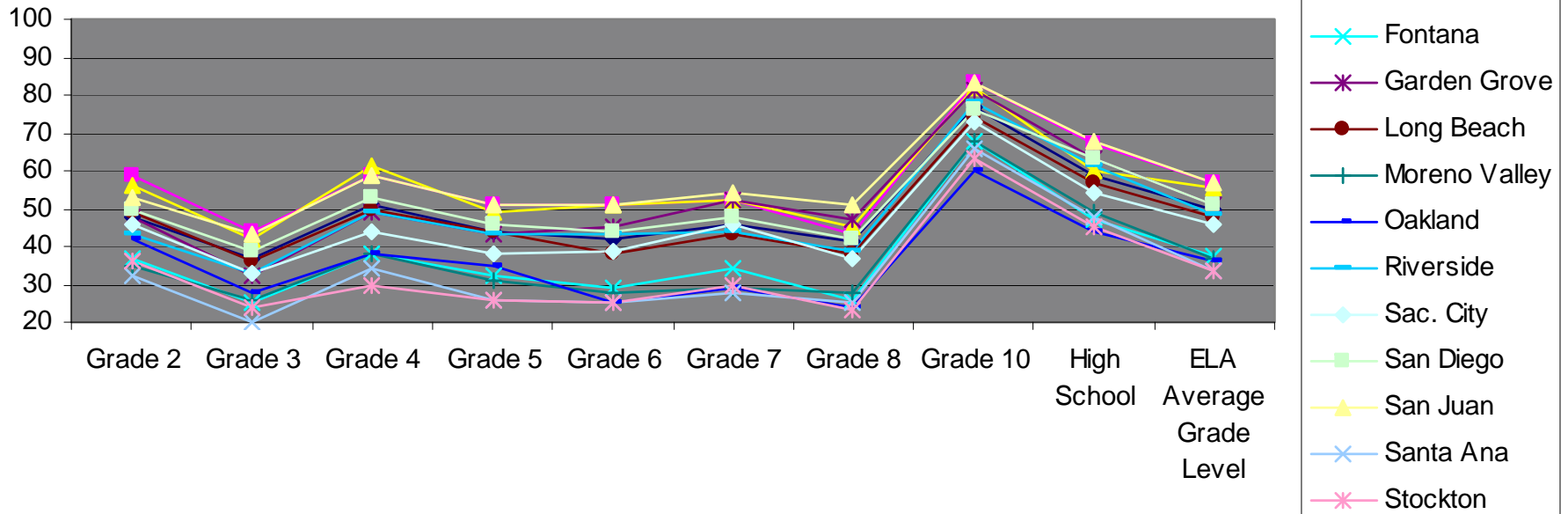
MATH BY GRADE LEVEL: In 2007, **U-46** surpassed the state at every grade level except 11th. It exceeded the performance of all other IL significant-poverty districts.



CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS BY GRADE LEVEL: In 2007, **Elk Grove** surpassed the state at every grade level. It was among the top 3 performers among comparator districts for all grade levels.

**Elk Grove & Comparators:
Percent At or Above Proficient by Grade Level
Reading (CST and CAHSEE) 2007**



CAIS: Comparator Student Achievement Data

MATH BY GRADE LEVEL: In 2007, **Elk Grove** surpassed the state at every grade level. It was among the top 3 performers among comparator districts for all grade levels.

