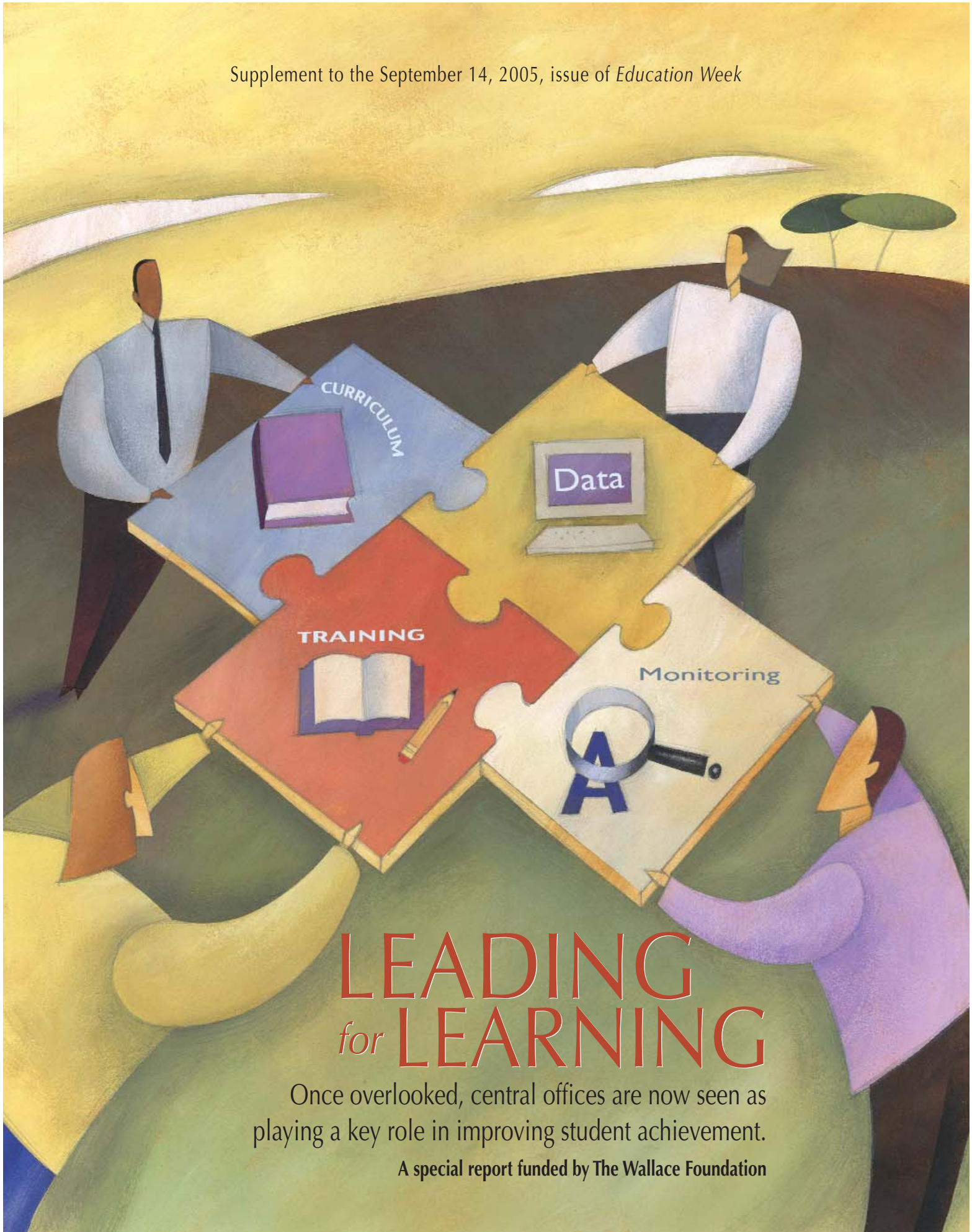


Supplement to the September 14, 2005, issue of *Education Week*



LEADING *for* LEARNING

Once overlooked, central offices are now seen as playing a key role in improving student achievement.

A special report funded by The Wallace Foundation

By **Jeff Archer**

Illustrations by **Brian Jensen**

Theory of Action

The idea that schools can improve on their own gives way to a focus on effective district leadership.

Not long ago, a popular theory about school improvement went something like this: Put in strong principals and dedicated staff members, and then get out of their way. When it came to improving teaching and learning, the thinking went, the central office had little to add.

The upshot was an era of policies that limited the role of district-level leadership in matters of instruction. Site-based management and “whole-school reform” models flourished in the 1990s on the premise that individual schools alone could raise achievement.

And the idea worked. Or rather, it worked for some schools, while others languished. As a result, a new consensus is emerging in the field that strong district leadership is needed to bring about large-scale improvement—now a mandate under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

“Either you believe in district reform, or you’re going to have to be extremely patient in waiting for a school-by-school turnaround,” says Jane Hammond of the Stupski Foundation, a Mill Valley, Calif.-based group that helps districts with strategic planning.

Education Week is focusing on leadership at the district level for its second annual “Leading for

Learning” special report. The key question is: What strategies should district leaders pursue to influence the quality of teaching and learning?

To answer that, we tell the stories of two school systems that re-established the role of the central office in guiding instructional improvement: the 10,000-student Gilroy Unified schools in California and the 26,000-student Clarksville-Montgomery County system in Tennessee.

The two districts—both of which work with the Stupski Foundation—have sought greater consistency across schools in content and teaching methods. They’ve created new ways for teachers to learn together and use student data. And, they’ve each seen more students succeed academically.

To get a sense of how widespread such approaches are, the Education Week Research Center also commissioned a poll of superintendents that asked what practices they use to improve instruction. The results show district leaders across the country embracing many of the strategies employed in Gilroy and Clarksville-Montgomery County.

True, districts still reflect a range of approaches. Some are more explicit in telling schools what instruction should look like—a method that some are now calling “managed instruction.” Others prefer to set broader

boundaries and then step in where they see problems.

Many experts see the growing assertiveness of district leaders as a natural consequence of the movement for higher academic standards that has dominated education policymaking for more than a decade. It's too much, they say, to presume that every school has within it the capacity to bring its students to the levels of achievement now demanded of them.

"When you have a policy environment now that expects change to occur at scale, that means that districts have to improve all schools, essentially simultaneously," says Warren Simmons, the executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, located in Providence, R.I.

Tellingly, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—one of the strongest promoters of designs for small schools—has drafted a new white paper arguing that schools are most likely to succeed if they're part of a supportive district, or, in the case of charter schools, part of a larger network of schools.

"We've spent over a billion dollars on almost 2,000 schools, and what we found is that most people don't know what to do, and how to do it," says Tom Vander Ark, the executive director for education at the Seattle-based foundation.

Mounting evidence suggests that effective schools are most often found in districts with strong systemwide guidance. In 2002, the Council of the Great City Schools identified some parallels among improving districts in an influential report, "Foundations for Success."

The council described strategies employed in Charlotte-

Mecklenburg, N.C.; Houston; Sacramento, Calif.; and the subset of schools in New York City then known as the Chancellor's District.

Each district had a common curriculum, and had set up training and monitoring systems to ensure consistent approaches toward instruction across schools. The districts also made frequent use of student-performance data to inform educators' decisions.

"You have to take responsibility for the overall instructional program," says Michael D. Casserly, the executive director of the Washington-based council, "rather than just abandon that to the individual schools without providing direction, technical assistance, or professional development, and just hoping for the best."

Chrys Dougherty, the director of research at the National Center for Educational Accountability, says much the same is true in most of the districts named as finalists and winners for the annual Broad Prize for Urban Education, which recognizes improved student performance.

"When you go to effective schools that are in a district that has certain things in place, they will say their job was made infinitely easier by the fact that the district did these things," says Dougherty, whose Austin, Texas-based center collects the data used to make the Broad Prize selections.

On the surface, this larger role for the central office might seem at odds with the concurrent push to give families more options. Some of the biggest urban districts, for example, are creating large numbers of new schools with different designs—what's come to be called a "portfolio" model.

Likewise, decentralized decisionmaking still has plenty of proponents, as seen in the number of districts giving school sites more power to hire whom they want and to spend their budgets as they see fit.

But strong district leadership is needed for empowerment of school sites to succeed, says Joseph Olchefske, a former superintendent of the Seattle public schools. As a district chief, he gave schools considerable leeway to design their own programs, but that didn't mean anything goes.

"You've got to set standards, you've got to create and implement assessments that are for all kids, regardless of the school, and have very clear accountability, which means consequences," says Olchefske, who is now the managing director of a new consulting group at the American Institutes for Research, located in Washington.

Michael Fullan, an expert on school system management at the University of Toronto, says one of a superintendent's biggest challenges is finding the right balance between central authority and site-based autonomy. Ideally, he argues, schools should feel ownership of a common vision of instruction.

"If you're too loose, you don't get the focus, but if you're too focused, you get prescription, and narrowness, and rebellion," he says. "The holy grail of school reform on a large scale is large-scale ownership."

Whether most districts in the United States can achieve that balance remains to be seen. But as the survey results and the stories of the two districts in this report suggest, few district leaders are leaving things to chance. ■

About This Report

This special pullout section is the second of three *Education Week* annual reports examining leadership in education, a topic of critical concern at a time of ever-increasing expectations for schools. Each report includes a mix of explanatory articles and research findings analyzed by the Education Week Research Center.

The project is underwritten by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, which seeks to support and share effective ideas and practices that expand learning and enrichment opportunities for all people. Its three current objectives are:

- Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement;
- Enhance out-of-school learning opportunities; and
- Expand participation in arts and culture.

For more information and research on these and other related topics, please visit the Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org. For copies of last year's special report, go to www.edweek.org.



Guiding Hand

In a poll, superintendents report more active roles in teaching and learning.

By **Jeff Archer**

WITH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT achievement at an all-time high, school district leaders say they are playing a more assertive role in shaping instruction, according to a national survey of superintendents commissioned by *Education Week*.

The nationally representative poll of 813 top district officials shows large numbers of them turning in recent years to common planning time for teachers, new forms of classroom observations, and, in particular, data-driven decisionmaking as systemwide strategies for improvement.

By showing the extent to which superintendents are employing specific practices, the results offer a rare snapshot of instructional leadership at the district level. Among the obstacles faced in providing that leadership, superintendents most often cited lack of money and competing priorities.

At the same time, the poll reveals clear differences depending on district size. Leaders of larger systems were more likely to favor standard approaches across their schools, such as “pacing guides” that show teachers what content to cover at what time throughout the year.

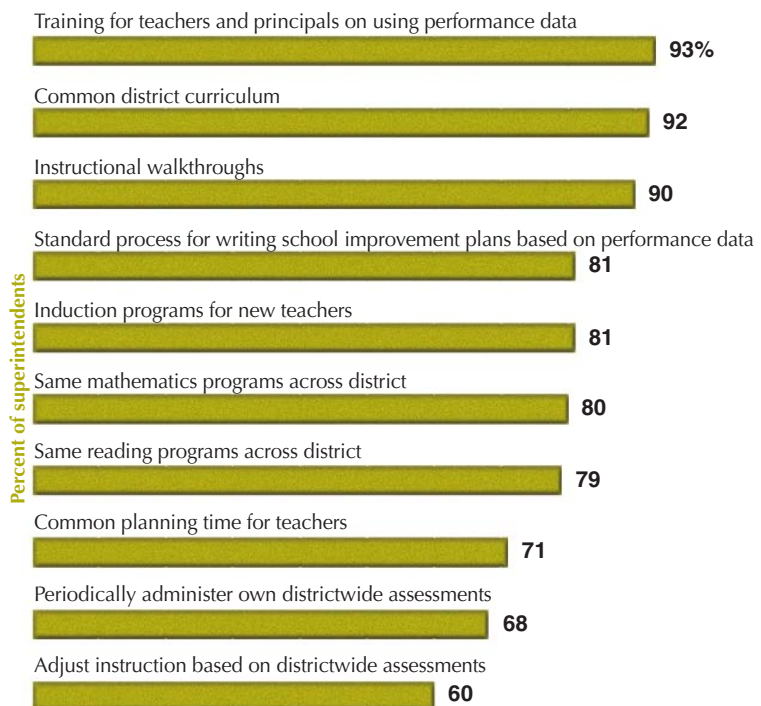
Other trends emerged for grade level and subject matter. Superintendents said they made greater use of common curricula and periodic districtwide tests in the early grades than in high school, and in reading and mathematics than in other subjects.

The survey did not probe how well districts are using the strategies that their leaders say they have put into place, and it did not connect them to student outcomes.

But the results do suggest the kinds of man-

Current Instructional-Leadership Practices

The top 10 instructional practices that a majority of superintendents use include a common district curriculum and induction programs for new teachers. Other methods, such as use of pacing guides or designating a teacher-leader position in each school, are less common.



SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

agement tools that leaders are reaching for as they try to create a common understanding about instruction in their districts, while also encouraging their schools and teachers to become more targeted in how they meet students' needs.

THE EDUCATION WEEK RESEARCH CENTER designed the telephone survey with Belden Russonello & Stewart, a Washington-based polling organization, which conducted the research in June. The margin of error for the overall results is 3.3 percentage points. Responses were broken down by district enrollment size:

Superintendents report districts are playing a larger role in shaping instruction.

fewer than 2,000 students, between 2,000 and 10,000, and more than 10,000—with margins of error of 5.3 percentage points for the group with the smallest enrollments and 5.8 points for the other two.

Sixty-four percent of all of the respondents were in their first superintendencies, but reported relatively lengthy tenures, despite the national concern about leadership turnover. About half the superintendents in each size category had been in their jobs five years or more.

Enrollment size had little bearing on some of the superintendents' views of the No Child Left Behind Act, which aims to make schools more accountable for raising student achievement. Roughly three-quarters of those in each group agreed or strongly agreed that the federal measure, signed into law by President Bush in January 2002, has forced them to be more active "in guiding the kind of instruction that happens in the classroom."

Size mattered in whether they saw such change as needed, however. Seventy-eight percent of the leaders of large districts strongly agreed that, regardless of the law, they should be more active in guiding instruction, compared with 68 percent in medium-size districts and 56 percent in small ones.

Asked whether, in the past three to five years, more instructional decisions were being made at the "district level, as opposed to at the school sites," 75 percent of those in large districts agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 58 percent in medium-size ones and 52 percent in small systems.

Such differences evened out when superintendents were asked more generally about how much of a role they and their district staff members should play in "providing direction" on instructional matters for their schools. Ninety percent of all respondents said "a large role," and 10 percent said "some."

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR WAYS OF providing that direction is through overseeing what gets taught. Ninety-two percent of all respondents said they use districtwide curricula. The practice is much more common in the early grades: Ninety-six percent said it was used for elementary schools, 88 percent said for middle schools, and 77 percent said for high schools.

Leaders of large districts see the most benefit in doing so. Eighty-eight percent of superintendents of districts with more than 10,000 students said a common curriculum could have a "great deal" of effect on improving student achievement, compared with 72 percent of those in systems with fewer than 2,000 students.

About 80 percent of all superintendents sur-

veyed said they require schools across their districts to use the same reading programs; a similar proportion said the same of math. Roughly eight in 10 also said they had all their elementary schools use the same textbooks in those key subjects.

Although somewhat less widespread, instructional-pacing guides are spreading quickly among large school districts. Forty-four percent of the superintendents in large districts said they had had such guides for at least three years, but 65 percent said they have them now.

Also growing rapidly is the use of "instructional walkthroughs," defined as classroom observations not for teachers' job reviews, but for improving their instruction. Ninety percent of all respondents said their districts use walkthroughs, with 27 percent reporting that they had adopted the technique in the past three years.

For the most part, however, the practice is limited to school site leaders. Among superintendents who said that their systems made use of such observations, 96 percent said their principals did the walkthroughs, 46 percent said central-office staff members, and just 20 percent said teachers.

More often, district leaders use common planning time to let teachers learn from one another. Seventy-one percent said their teachers' schedules let them meet by each grade level or department. Twenty-two percent said their districts had begun scheduling common time in the last three years.

In a similar vein, 54 percent of the large-district superintendents said each of their schools had a teacher freed from classroom duties to coach others on their instruction. That contrasted with 34 percent of those in medium-size systems, and 27 percent in small ones.

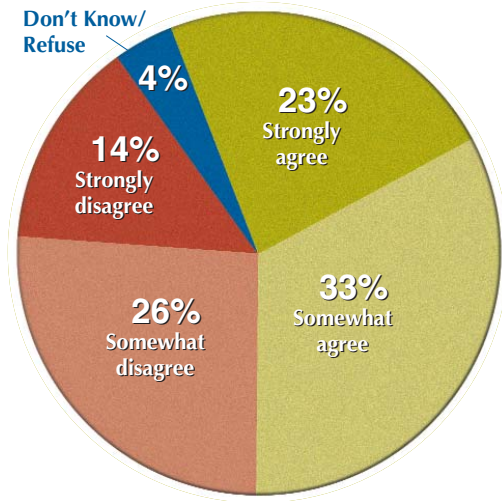
FEW STRATEGIES APPEAR TO BE GROWING as fast as those related to data. The survey results paint a picture of districts building up their technology systems and professional development so their educators can better use information on student performance to drive instruction.

For example, a little more than half of all respondents said their districts had been training principals and teachers on how to make instructional decisions based on data for three years or more. Another 40 percent said they had begun providing that training since then, meaning more than 90 percent now do so.

Twenty-three percent said that three years ago they had data-management systems that allowed educators at school sites to access achievement information on individual stu-

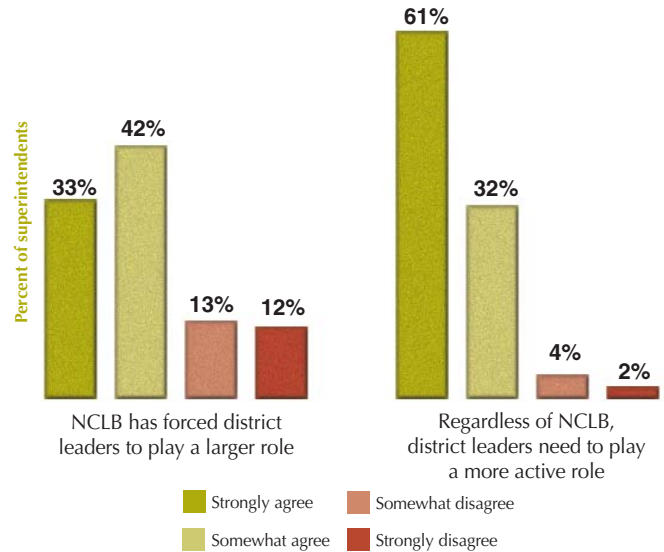
District-Level Decisionmaking

A majority of superintendents report that over the past three to five years, more instructional decisions are being made at the district level, instead of at school sites.



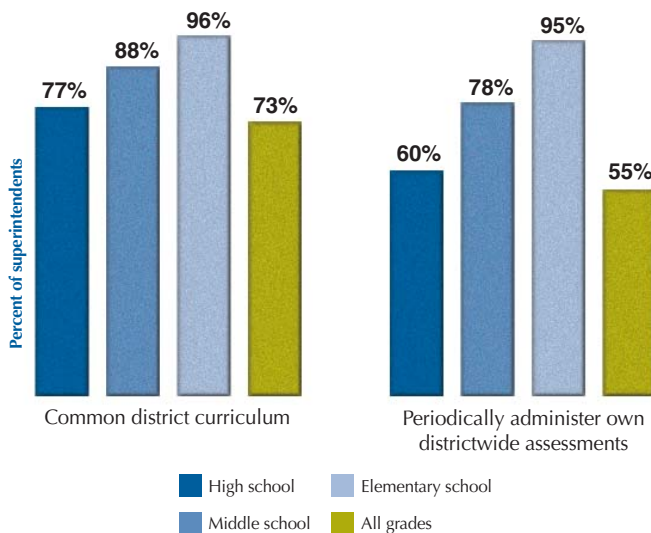
The Influence of No Child Left Behind

About three-quarters of superintendents say the No Child Left Behind Act has forced district leaders to play a larger instructional role. But even more, 93 percent, feel that district leaders need to play a more active role than in the past in guiding classroom instruction, regardless of the federal mandates.



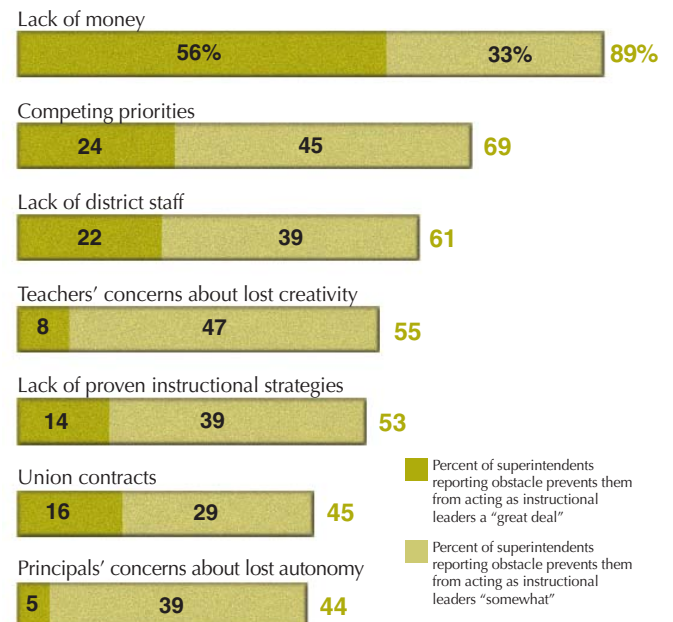
School-Level Differences

While 92 percent of superintendents say there is a common curriculum across their districts, and 68 percent say they administer their own periodic districtwide assessments, such practices are much less prevalent in high schools or across all grade levels.



Obstacles to Instructional Leadership

Almost 90 percent of superintendents report that a lack of money prevents them from acting as instructional leaders in their districts, and almost 70 percent cite competing priorities as a barrier.

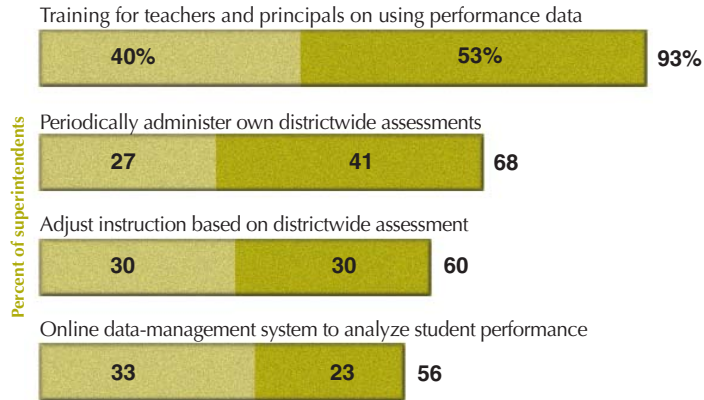


SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

An Emerging Trend

Regular collection of student-performance data and use of the data to inform instruction are growing trends at the district level, with significant percentages of superintendents reporting that their districts have engaged in such practices for less than three years.

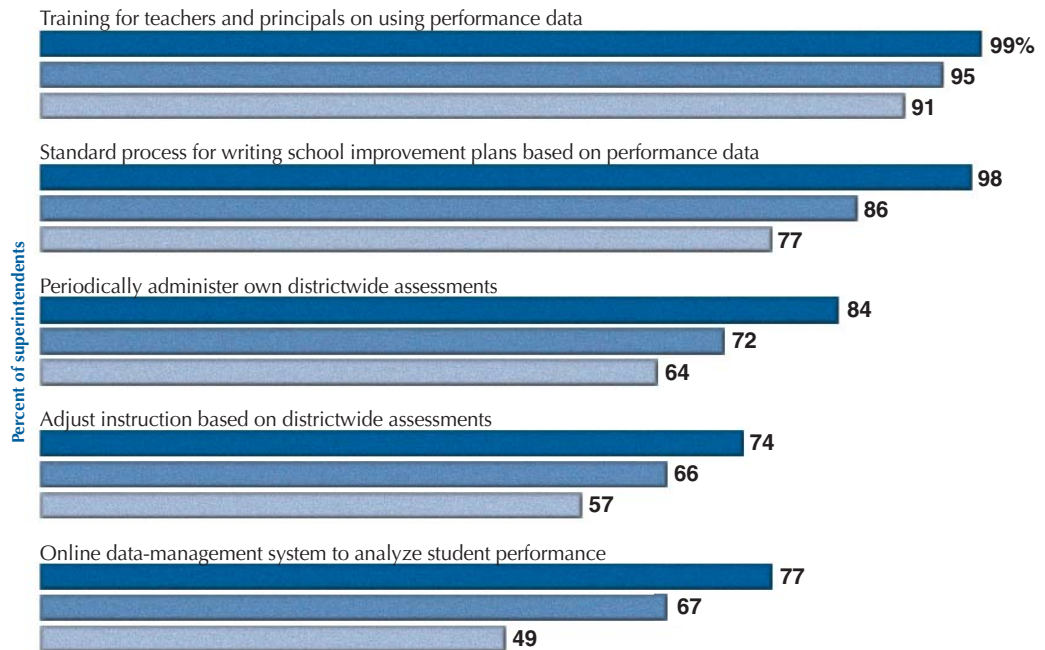
- Less than three years
- Three years or more



Data Differences

Compared with leaders of medium-size and small districts, superintendents of large districts more consistently report that their districts administer their own benchmark assessments and engage in other efforts related to analyzing student-performance data.

- Large districts (enrollment above 10,000)
- Medium districts (enrollment 2,000-10,000)
- Small districts (enrollment less than 2,000)



SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

dents online. But another 33 percent said they have put that kind of system in place since then.

Responses also pointed to big changes in the kind of performance data collected. A total of 68 percent of the superintendents said they now give districtwide student assessments periodically throughout the year. Twenty-seven percent of all respondents said they had been doing so for less than three years.

Of those who said they do such testing—often called “benchmark” testing—95 percent said it was in the elementary grades, compared with 60 percent at the high school level. Twelve percent said they gave the tests monthly, 47 percent said every six to nine weeks, and 37 percent said less often.

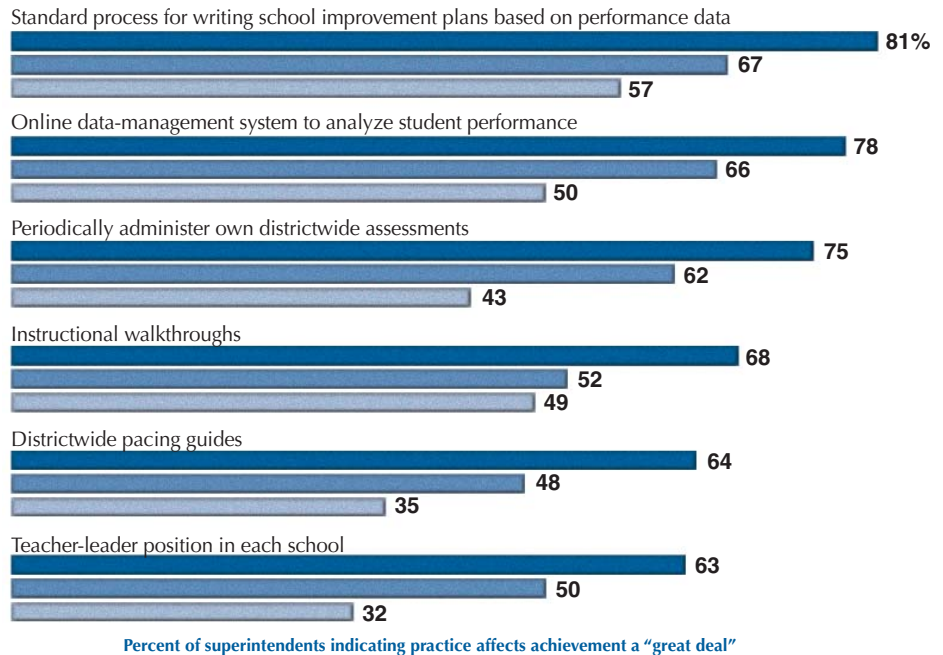
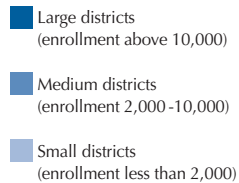
Data analysis has become a common part of schools’ annual planning as well. Eighty-one percent of all respondents, and 98 percent of those in large districts, said they had a standard process for schools to draft improvement plans that includes an assessment of student performance.

Leaders of large districts expressed the most faith in data-driven decisionmaking. Ninety-one percent, for instance, said training district staff members in using data promised to have a “great deal” of effect—the highest percentage among responses given to questions about 15 different strategies.

BUT SMALL DISTRICTS ARE MAKING BIG changes in their use of data. Nearly a third of

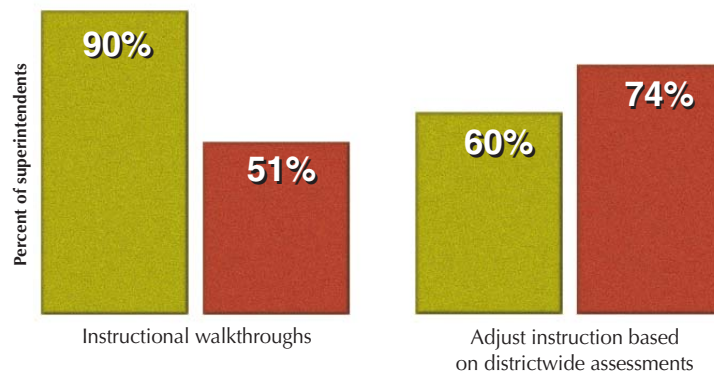
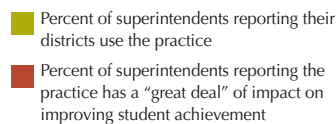
Impact on Achievement A Matter of Size

Across the board, superintendents of large districts are more likely than superintendents of smaller districts to believe that different instructional leadership practices will affect student achievement a “great deal.”



Practice vs. Perception

Superintendents largely believe that the instructional leadership practices most in use are the ones that exert a “great deal” of impact on student achievement. However, their ratings of effectiveness diverge from actual use for two methods—instructional walkthroughs and adjustments in instruction based on benchmark assessments.



SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

the superintendents of districts with fewer than 2,000 students said they had been using a student-data-management system for less than three years. That’s in addition to 17 percent who said they already were using one.

ASKED ABOUT POTENTIAL OBSTACLES, 65 PERCENT of respondents in small districts said “lack of the kind of staff” needed at the central office prevented them either a great deal or somewhat from providing leadership on instruction. Fifty-eight percent of those in large systems said the same thing.

Leaders of large districts were more likely to see union contracts as a problem. Fifty-three percent said labor pacts adversely affect their efforts

on instruction either a great deal or somewhat, compared with 43 percent of superintendents in small districts.

But other factors were seen as far greater impediments. Eighty-nine percent of all respondents, with few differences by district size, cited scarcity of money as a great deal or somewhat of a problem. Sixty-nine percent said the same about distractions posed by other priorities.

In contrast, 55 percent of all the superintendents polled said they were prevented a great deal or somewhat from exercising instructional leadership by “teachers’ concerns about lost creativity.” Fifty-three percent characterized “lack of research-proven strategies” as a problem. ■

Forward Motion

Gilroy, Calif.

In Gilroy, Calif., educators have learned a common process for improvement planning. The rest is up to schools.

When Dawn O'Connor returned to her job as a science teacher here last fall after five years away to raise her children, she found a very different school district. Unlike in the past, teachers were visiting one another's classrooms. They were meeting regularly to examine student performance.

"Before, when we got our scores at the beginning of the year from the year before, we said, 'Oh well, we didn't get the scores that we wanted,'" recalls O'Connor, who teaches at Ascencion Solorsano Middle School. She adds, "Other than my regular [job] evaluation, I can't remember anyone being in my room."

The change wasn't by accident. Leaders of the 10,000-student Gilroy Unified School District sought to create a collaborative environment in which teachers make corrections throughout the year. Meeting in "data teams," teachers compare notes and plan adjustments in their instruction.

Nor did the shift happen overnight. At first, the district pursued a top-down management strategy to establish a common language about teaching and learning across its 14 schools. Teachers sometimes felt stifled by the approach.

Now, they've got more breathing room. Instead of emphasizing the use of specific teaching methods, the district is stressing a common process of improvement planning at all schools. Teachers are held accountable more for their results than for how they teach.

By **Jeff Archer**



Superintendent Edwin Diaz, who has led the district since 2000, says he couldn't have given schools the flexibility they have now without first getting everyone on the same page. But he also doubts that sustained improvement would result if the central office continued to call most of the shots.

"We needed to shift from teachers just being compliant about implementing the strategies that they were trained in, to actually having to make decisions about which of those strategies to use and when," he says. "Because we think that's where you get the next big level of growth."

AT A GLANCE:
**Gilroy Unified
 School District**

Superintendent:
 Edwin Diaz

Enrollment:
 10,000 students
 47 percent Latino
 31 percent white
 8.1 percent Asian
 8 percent African-American
 30 percent
 English-language learners

Poverty:
 52 percent come
 from economically
 disadvantaged homes

Results:
 The proportion of students
 proficient or above on state
 language arts tests leveled off
 in 2003-04, but scores
 jumped again in 2004-05.

**Socioeconomically
 Disadvantaged Students**

Proficient and Advanced

2001-02	13.5%
2002-03	18.5
2003-04	18.1
2004-05	23.8

Hispanic Students

Proficient and Advanced

2001-02	17.5%
2002-03	22.6
2003-04	22.4
2004-05	28.6

All Students

Proficient and Advanced

2001-02	29.3%
2002-03	33.8
2003-04	33.1
2004-05	39.0

The California district is not alone in seeking the right balance between site-based management and centralized decisionmaking, a key issue as superintendents concern themselves more with matters of instruction. Gilroy's experience, in fact, shows how that balance can change over time.

Nestled in a fertile valley surrounded by green hills, Gilroy calls itself the garlic capital of the world. While agriculture continues to be a major employer, a growing number of new residents work in the high-tech industries of San Jose, about a 30-minute commute to the north.

For the school district, that demographic trend presents special challenges. Half of its students still come from low-income families, and about a third are learning English. But the influx of high-paid professionals has brought with it new expectations about educational attainment.

Six years ago, all of Gilroy's elementary and middle schools had magnet programs that drew students from across the district. Each chose its own areas of academic focus, instructional philosophy, and schedule. Adding to the extent of variation among sites was a conflict between the school board and its then-superintendent that, by many accounts, left a leadership vacuum at the central office.

Gilroy was among the lowest-performing of the 33 districts in Santa Clara County. In 2000, half of its schools failed to meet their improvement targets on the Academic Performance Index, California's test-based accountability system.

Diaz, a Gilroy native, saw a clear link between the district's decentralization and its lackluster performance. In his first year as superintendent, he visited classrooms in every school and saw great variation in the content and level of rigor of what was taught.

"I can remember one of our elementary schools that had some of the lowest test scores," he says. "It was a math and science magnet. They had little 2nd and 3rd graders in these white lab coats running around, but none of the kids were at grade level in reading."

Diaz began by phasing out the magnet programs in favor of neighborhood schools. The district rewrote its curriculum to cover what the state expected students to learn. New textbooks were bought, and the superintendent made clear that they were to be used.

For teachers' professional development, Gilroy picked a program by a Fresno, Calif.-based company called LitConn. The training shows how to differentiate literacy instruction based on each student's skill level. Although designed for teaching non-native speakers of English, district leaders believed all students would benefit.

Diaz wanted all teachers to go through the yearlong course, with the exception of high school math teachers, who received other training. Accomplishing that meant rewriting school budgets to include literacy facilitators—teachers without classroom duties who lead the LitConn seminars and provide on-site coaching. Every school has at least one facilitator.

"I think we have some well-documented science now on what are the most effective practices that we can say will result in greater student gains," says Jacqueline M. Horejs, the assistant superintendent for educational services. "If that's the case, then it's important that everybody in the district knows what they are and implements them consistently."

To make sure that happened, the district organized "walkthroughs," in which administrators made classroom observations. Armed with checklists, they looked for such techniques as "linkwords," a visual aid for teaching vocabulary, and "partner talk," in which students consult one another before giving an answer.

In 2003, three years into the district's campaign to bring about instructional consistency, not one of Gilroy's schools missed its state improvement target. Overall, the system posted greater gains that year on the performance index than all but one other district in the county.

Teachers' reactions to the district's efforts were mixed, however. Some saw benefits in using similar tools. The approach meant, for instance, that they all knew the same way of assessing a student's reading abilities. Others resented being told what to do. A few

called the walkthroughs “drive-bys.”

Few within the district dispute that the efforts prompted teachers to employ the same practices. Not only did they learn the same methods in their seminars, but their literacy coaches also arranged for them to visit their colleagues’ rooms to see them in action.

“We didn’t always agree with the modeling,” says Theresa Graham, a 5th grade teacher at Antonio Del Buono Elementary School. “But at least we all got together to see what the district wanted us to do.”

As soon became evident, the district’s strategy had limitations. In 2004, Gilroy’s performance leveled off. Half of its schools again missed their improvement targets. Some saw their scores drop.

Diaz agreed that teachers needed more discretion. At the same time, he feared going back to the days when teachers acted like independent contractors, using whatever methods they felt most comfortable with regardless of whether they worked.

For help in finding a solution, the superintendent turned to outside consultants from the Center for Performance Assessment. The Denver-based group advises districts on creating accountability systems aimed at continuous improvement.

The result was a new planning process for all schools that went into effect a year ago. Each site annually drafts a document that summarizes areas of greatest need and strategies for addressing them. The plans cite test scores and list performance objectives for the coming year.

At Rod Kelley Elementary School, for example, staff members promised, among other commitments, a 12 percent jump in the number of students who scored as proficient on a district writing assessment. Part of their plan to achieve that target was to give students clearer descriptions of good writing.

Within schools, similar planning takes place in the new data teams, made up of the teachers in each

grade or department. Every few weeks, they meet to compare how one another’s students are performing on a specific skill, and to brainstorm ways to improve.

Key to the district’s new approach was a change in the use of student assessments. After becoming superintendent, Diaz began giving districtwide tests three times a year to gauge students’ progress. Last year, he gave schools more freedom to decide which tests to use, while making it clear that they were to use tests more often.

“We had a lot of assessments that were in place mainly for monitoring,”

Teams of teachers look closely at data on student achievement to plan instruction.

he says. “I think we had a real gap in the assessments taking place in the classroom that were actually resulting in a different lesson the following day.”

At least one teacher from each team got trained on data-driven decisionmaking. The Stupski Foundation, a Mill Valley, Calif.-based group that has given planning and financial assistance to the Gilroy schools, paid for about 20 educators to visit the Norfolk, Va., school system, a district known for the technique.

Teachers’ planning rooms here now are adorned with devices for tracking progress. At one school, they’ve produced color-coded computer spreadsheets of students’ scores on multiple tests. At another, they use Post-It notes and poster boards to show which students have mastered which skills.

“There’s a constant conversation

about what’s working, and what’s not,” says Graham, the teacher at Del Buono Elementary. “It’s ‘What did you do? How did you get that to happen?’”

Graham says her data team played a big role in improving 5th grade reading instruction at her school last year. By sharing ideas on teaching pupils how to recognize an author’s purpose, they all saw jumps in reading performance over the course of several weeks.

Teachers still have concerns. Last spring, the Gilroy Teachers Association filed a grievance against the district, arguing that data-driven decisionmaking takes more planning time than the teacher contract allows. But many teachers favor the collaborative approach over the district’s earlier efforts.

“It’s just now feeling like it’s starting to smooth out, and feel normal,” says Heidi Jacobson, who also teaches 5th grade at Del Buono.

The district’s recent efforts appear to have paid off. State test results released last month showed that, after plateauing in 2004, the portion of Gilroy students achieving at proficient levels in English language arts jumped six percentage points in 2005—the highest such annual gain since Diaz arrived.

Feeling validated, district leaders make no apologies for their earlier direction on instructional methods. Teachers needed to learn a new set of tools to use when students were struggling, they argue.

“We think we’re in a much different position now,” says Horejs, the assistant superintendent for educational services.

Even with the emphasis on school-based decisionmaking, many here expect that teachers will continue to use many of the same instructional methods. The difference, they say, is that it will be because teachers choose to do so.

“I don’t think we’re ever going to swing back to everyone doing their own thing,” says Tricia Satterwhite, a literacy facilitator at Ascencion Solorsano Middle School. “I think they’ve equipped us, they’ve trained us, and they expect us to work as a team.” ■

In Sharp Focus

Clarksville, Tenn.

When the Clarksville, Tenn., schools raised expectations for learning, the central office played a leading role in standardizing practice and monitoring data.

Beth G. Unfried's role as the principal of Kenwood Elementary School has changed dramatically in the past four years. The expectations in the 26,000-student Clarksville-Montgomery County district began to shift in July 2001, when Sandra L. Husk became the superintendent. On Husk's first visit to the principal's 830-student school here, Unfried says, "She started asking me these questions. Like, 'What do you do when a child doesn't learn?' and 'How do you know when a child is mastering these skills?'"

"When she left, I felt so lousy," remembers Unfried, who found herself struggling to answer. "But today, I can say with confidence that I am the instructional leader of this building."

Before that time, the principal says, "I was the facilities manager, and I was busy. I felt good about what I was doing. I was keeping the peace. Sometimes we made good test scores, sometimes we didn't, but everyone was happy."

The same cultural transformation is taking shape across this Tennessee school district, located just over an hour north of Nashville, thanks to a concerted effort from the top that has focused on making student achievement the centerpiece of everything the district does. While the transition is far from finished, it illustrates the powerful role that district leadership can play in improving teaching and learning in classrooms.

By **Lynn Olson**



Founded in 1784, Clarksville, along the banks of the Cumberland and Red rivers in north-central Tennessee, was the state's first incorporated city. Its sleepy downtown, dominated by law offices and antiques stores, boasts restored brick sidewalks, period lighting, and historic architecture. But the county's small-town atmosphere is giving way to rapid development along Interstate 24 at the Tennessee-Kentucky border, fueled, in part, by the nearby Fort Campbell and the relatively easy commute into Nashville.

Superintendent Husk describes her first fall in the district as chaotic.

AT A GLANCE:
**The Clarksville-
 Montgomery
 County
 School District**

Superintendent:
 Sandra L. Husk

Enrollment:
 26,000 students
 65 percent white
 28 percent African-American
 5 percent Hispanic

Poverty:
 Nearly 40 percent come
 from economically
 disadvantaged homes

Results:
 The proportion of students
 proficient or above on state
 language arts tests increased
 in the following categories:

Elementary and Middle School

Proficient or above

2003	88%
2004	91
2005	95

African-American

Proficient or above

2003	83%
2004	87
2005	91

Economically Disadvantaged

Proficient or above

2003	82%
2004	85
2005	92

Hispanic

Proficient or above

2003	85%
2004	91
2005	91

One of her first tasks was to cut the budget by \$4 million. In September, two planes toppled the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and thousands of local U.S. Army families began saying goodbye to husbands and wives deployed overseas. It was the year the state began enforcing mandatory class-size limits in grades K-12. And 2001 was the same year Tennessee lawmakers required that test scores be reported separately for different racial and ethnic groups.

Suddenly, a district that had coasted just above average on state tests discovered that African-American and low-income students, in particular, were not doing very well. "I don't think that's a major surprise," says Husk, "but it was something that had not been seriously talked about."

One of her first moves was to reorganize the central office. Well-respected principals were promoted to become the chief academic officer and the directors of human resources, instruction, and assessment.

Sallie Armstrong, the director of the newly created office of curriculum and instruction, began working with teachers to arrange the state curriculum into what is called a scope and sequence, including units of study and a pacing guide to show what teachers should be teaching.

"We didn't have a guaranteed and viable curriculum because no one had led instruction that way," says Armstrong. "Teachers were going from the front of the textbook to the back of the textbook."

In 2002-03, Clarksville-Montgomery County embarked on a districtwide literacy initiative, including the use of the same reading textbook for all its elementary schools. It also adopted a common approach to teaching writing in kindergarten through 12th grade, the "Six Traits of Writing," developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Ore.

To help carry out its "balanced literacy" approach, the district hired 11 full-time literacy coaches, who model instructional strategies in schools and work with teachers to analyze student-performance data. The coaches visit classrooms and consult with teachers daily, provide professional development, and take part in school improvement

and literacy teams at schools. Three consultants provided initial training and continue to work with the district on the reading and writing programs.

Now, asked what Kenwood Elementary's motto is, a 3rd grader pipes up: "Reading is the cardinal rule."

Students' work, labeled by which state academic standard it addresses, papers the hallways. Every classroom has a "word wall" of vocabulary, writing folders for each pupil, and a posted schedule of the standards to be learned that day.

In one classroom, 3rd graders work in "literacy circles" to answer questions about *Tales of a 4th Grade Nothing* by Judy Blume. In the gymnasium, younger children race across the floor to slap a "high five" on large letters laid on the ground, as they spell out a word posted on the overhead projector. In the art room, students draw illustrations based on the book *Why Is Blue Dog Blue?* by George Rodriguez. When they're finished, they can go to the reading center, tucked away in a corner, to read independently.

Schoolwide events celebrate children's reading success, such as a "vote for books" campaign that culminated in a delegates' assembly where students voted for their favorite books.

The school has added two reading specialists and a reading lab, staffed by three teacher aides, to work with children individually and in groups.

Grade-level teams meet weekly to focus on specific problems or issues. They turn in their minutes to the principal. Teachers also have volunteered to do "quick visits" to each other's classrooms—initially focused on whether the classroom environment showed evidence of the district's reading and writing initiatives; more recently, to look for evidence of good instructional strategies.

Unfried, the principal, has gotten lots of support for such changes. Along with about 80 of her colleagues—drawn from both the instructional and noninstructional ranks of district employees—she attended a yearlong Leadership Academy to build leadership capacity across the school system. Last school year, she and other building principals—along with selected assistant

principals and teachers—also participated in “professional learning communities,” led by five of their colleagues, to encourage collaborative problem-solving focused around teaching and learning. This school year, all principals are fostering professional learning communities in their own schools, modeled on what they have learned.

“The work that the directors do with the principals looks very similar to the work that principals are doing with teachers and that teachers are doing with students,” explains Husk, who argues that the system had to create a cohesive culture focused on high expectations. “So it’s pervasive, not just in the classroom and throughout the school, but vertically in the organization as well.”

That unifying focus, across both the instructional and noninstructional sides of the house, is most evident in the district’s use of data to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its practices. Clarksville-Montgomery County, in fact, has earned certification under an internationally recognized standard for companies that effectively monitor and adjust their work processes based on data.

Every department and every major initiative is driven by such feedback, the superintendent says. “I think we have to expand how we think about data,” she adds. “It’s not just annual high-stakes student tests. It’s much broader and deeper and richer.”

Last year, for example, the district set a goal of delivering all newly adopted textbooks to schools by the first day of class. While it didn’t quite reach that target, 88 percent of textbooks were delivered by day one, and 100 percent by the third day of school. The maintenance department set a goal of completing all work orders within 20 days on average.

By the end of last school year, it was down to six days. Under a contract with Kelly Services, of Troy, Mich., which provides temporary staffing, the district improved the proportion of classrooms staffed by qualified substitutes when teachers

are absent from 93 percent in 2003-04 to more than 97 percent by the end of last school year. “The complaints just went away,” says Bruce Jobe, the director of human resources. “It’s changed overnight.”

That same focus on data permits the district to track the fidelity with which schools carry out instructional strategies. All of its major initiatives—such as the writing program—were designed around a three-year implementation schedule, with benchmarks set for each year about the types of activities that

Clarksville uses many types of data to monitor and improve its practices.

should be observed in classrooms, initial and intermediate outcomes, and the evidence schools should provide if the program is on track.

The district relies upon such tools as principals’ ratings, surveys of classroom teachers, daily activity logs kept by its literacy coaches, and classroom observations by its consultants and instructional-management team to monitor what’s happening.

Clarksville-Montgomery County is less experienced than some other districts in its use of periodic assessments to help inform instruction, often known as “benchmark” tests. But it is moving fast.

In the 2004-05 school year, it gave its first benchmark assessments in language arts and math in grades 3-10, aligned to state academic-content standards. Those tests were being revised over the summer. This school year, the district planned to add science tests. The tests are given three times each year and are built with the help of teachers and principals. Educators have access to

the results online, through a Web-based assessment platform developed by the San Francisco-based Edusoft.

Clara Patterson, the district’s director of educational services, says state test results are simply too little, too late, “so we started talking about the fact that we needed a consistent way of monitoring, on a regular basis, where children are at this point in time.”

Through the Web-based system, teachers also have access to state test results and information from DIBELS, the individualized, diagnostic reading assessment used by many districts across the nation. They also can build their own classroom assessments.

Margie Ford, the principal of Norman Smith Elementary School, says her school’s literacy coach provided an item analysis of the test results to each teacher last school year. “We’re going to take it a step further this year,” she adds. Teams of reading and math teachers, across grades K-5, will meet after each benchmark test to review the scores and come up with schoolwide suggestions for addressing any weaknesses. The school also plans to develop short, monthly reading and math tests, through Edusoft.

“We’re headed in the right direction because our system now has a vision,” says Smith, who’s headed the school for 15 years, “and we’re working as a whole.”

That vision is starting to produce results. All of the district’s 30 schools met their achievement targets under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2004-05. Based on Tennessee’s “value added” model, which examines how much growth individual students make from one year to the next, the school system showed above-average growth for its students in language arts and math, and exceptional gains in social studies and science.

Kenwood Elementary students made far more progress than expected in both math and reading.

“This was a totally different world a few years ago,” says Principal Unfried, recalling the previous lack of focus on instruction.

Now, her tone suggests, things are looking up. ■