

## **Superintendent Interview Responses**

In addition to surveying principals and teachers, the research team interviewed 20 school district administrators regarding their district's most effective strategies for school improvement. Conducted separately from the survey and analysis, these interviews were meant to provide additional understanding of the district context in which our sample schools operated. The information is qualitative in nature and does not represent a systematic examination of these districts or their practices.

The districts selected for interviews all had at least two schools participating in the larger study. Beyond that, they also either had at least one high- and one low-performing school, or they had a school with a state API rank of seven (the highest rank for this band of low-income schools).

Superintendent responses to two questions follow in this document:

1. Why do you think your high-performing schools participating in this study outperformed others?
2. What advice would you give to other superintendents?

## **Superintendents' Ideas on Why Some Schools Outperformed Others**

Superintendents were asked to share their thoughts on why their high-performing schools participating in this study did better than low performers serving similar populations in their districts. They responded with a range of possibilities. These included small school size, strong emphasis on writing, a structured reading program, effective professional development at the site, parent involvement, an actively involved community, and student intervention programs. But overwhelmingly, they credited three major variables: quality principals; strong, stable teaching staffs; and high expectations.

### **Quality principals**

Superintendents cited strong principals as central to the high-performing schools' successes. More specifically they described the principals leading the high-performing schools in the following ways:

They have "knowledge around instruction and the ability to lead." They can implement a structured program that looks at data and then adapt strategies to address student needs. They "lead discussions about their practice in an evaluative way for continuous learning and improvement, rather than blame." In addition, they keep the focus on standards and "the articulation between the standards and what happens in each classroom." They set benchmarks that help them reach their annual goals.

They know how to bring out the best in teachers and observe, monitor and give feedback so they can be responsive to teacher needs. Specifically, they "know how to help their teachers develop a plan, a strategy, for addressing the needs of the children, that's tailored to the performance levels of the child because we're getting data in their hands, and they're utilizing that data, and they know how to facilitate inquiry conversations around the data."

In addition, these principals communicate effectively with the district office. They "don't hesitate to tell us, 'wait a minute, you're doing this, this doesn't help us anymore. We're already beyond that. What we need for professional development is this. What we need as resources is this...'"

According to the superintendents interviewed, principals at successful schools also celebrate and recognize achievements; facilitate positive relationships with unions; and work with their communities.

Multiple superintendents mentioned that these outstanding principals were training others to become future principals. So not only were they benefiting their own schools, but future schools. One superintendent described an exemplary principal in depth:

You have a principal that has been there all along and is one of the strongest instructional principals that I have. He was my role model when I was a classroom teacher. He's probably one of the oldest principals in [this large district], but he is as enthusiastic about talking about instruction as anyone else in the city. You would think that this was his first year of teaching, he is so excited. Extremely high standards, no one knows instruction better than he does. In fact, his teachers got after him and said: "you can't always be the instructional leader. You have to give us the opportunity to show you that we know it as well." So here he is, 70-some years old, and he's become more open to allowing the teachers now to lead some of the professional development.

I would say that probably four or five of the new assistant principals and principals that I have hired have been from his school. So he has a farm team way of training his people. I think I have three that are working in my office right now, and he's always saying, "you're stealing my people." I said, "you know that you're preparing them to come to work for me anyway." But he and I get along so well, I bet I talk to him every other day.

He was on TV the other night. Parents wait in line to get their children into [his school]. In no other school in the entire [large district] do you have parents getting in line on Friday morning, spending Friday night, all day Saturday, Saturday night, all day Sunday, to get their kindergarten applications in on Monday morning. The TV crews are always out there because there are always 200 to 250 parents waiting in line. And why? Because they know that their kids are going to get a good education. It's also in [a particular neighborhood], and among the Asian families education is extremely important. Among Korean families, they want to make sure that their kids go to the best schools. So, his parents will wait in line. What's the alternative? You don't get into the school and you're put on the bus as a kindergarten student and you are bused to other parts of the city because there's not enough room there.

We are building two elementary schools that will relieve that overcrowding, but this principal says, "they'll still want to come to my school." And I said, "That's why it's important that we make sure that we open up those two elementary schools with high performing expectations and principals that are known in the area to support you." So he is helping me to hire those two principals. He will mentor them. He will be the person going between the three schools, and I will use him to help me make sure that those two schools are as successful as his.

So that's why he's on that list. He has been recognized in the state, and he has dual language programs. I love going to his school to the fifth grade culmination because the kids in his Korean dual language program can speak to you coherently and very well, in reading and writing, in English, Spanish, and Korean, and it's amazing. And because of his kids doing so well, I have been forced—but I want to do this—to open up a middle school program so that his kids feed right into it which then supports his program. Then when those kids finish there, we're going to have a high school program in our area, so there's a continuous seamless approach to building upon the successes that we have in his elementary school.

### **Strong, stable teaching staff**

Another element that set the high-performing schools apart from low-performers, according to the superintendents interviewed, was that those schools had a stable teaching force with minimal turnover each year. Many cited a strong senior staff as making the difference.

Some mentioned teachers' openness to new programs and ability to adapt to a changing environment. According to one superintendent, one school had "a very stable, very senior staff that has responded to the challenges and has not fought implementation of Open Court, and CLAD, and those kinds of things." Even further, "they were very open to the implementation, and anxious to obtain...an Open Court reading series, and anxious to implement it, whereas some of our other staff try to resist it in some form." Multiple superintendents mentioned that teachers at the high-performing schools actively participated in staff development programs.

### High expectations

Another common theme mentioned by numerous superintendents was that the high-performing schools had high expectations for staff and students and a supportive culture. As one superintendent put it, principals in those schools "talk about [high expectations], not only once a year, but in almost every conversation they have with their teachers—when they bring them together for meetings, when they bring them together for dialogue, it's always going back to that vision for all children." In addition, teachers "hold themselves accountable for the students' achievement. They don't make any excuses for why kids can't learn. They are demanding staffs, in terms of what they expect from kids."

Another put it this way: "It's just a really positive environment. Sharing across grade levels is just a dramatic norm there. And high expectations for each other as well. Everybody participates, everybody commits. In December we have a big celebration of student achievement and of grade levels whose students improved. It doesn't have to be proficient necessarily, but we analyze the data and see how many students improved and celebrate that. So there's a lot of support for each other by grade level because they're recognized that way."

### Circumstances that come into play

Apart from strong staff and leadership and high expectations, a few superintendents described practices or situations that may have influenced whether a school was high or low performing:

#### High performing

- One high-performing school had a magnet program for Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) students—a factor one could easily assume relevant to a high API. But the superintendent reported that the growth in that school had been from non-GATE student scores. In another district one study school had formerly been a GATE site, which the superintendent felt may have affected its scores over the last few years. (Now students attend GATE programs in their own schools.)
- Some schools were in wealthy communities where enrollment was down, so hundreds of students from low-income communities were bussed in. Superintendents speculated about whether the location in a high-income community, with children from those families attending the school, may have contributed to a higher API.
- One site was a K–3 school. The superintendent felt that with younger grades there's more of a nurturing environment that feels like a family. This may contribute to the school achieving a higher API.

#### Low-performing

- In one low-performing school almost 30% of students were in special education. When another school had dwindling enrollment and empty classrooms, the district would send other students there—including a high number of special education students. While this school had a lower API than others, the assistant superintendent interviewed reported that this school was noteworthy for its success in including special education students in the regular classroom.

- In one district, a low-performing school had a disproportionate number of ineffective teachers. “Low-performing schools have a high number of teachers who are called must-place teachers. It’s a phenomenon [in our district]. These are teachers who are not doing well elsewhere, so they must be placed in another school. The low-performing schools have a number of vacancies because they can’t get teachers to go there. So you put a number of must-place teachers who were not successful elsewhere in those schools, and it just perpetuates the problem. Some of the schools have very poor leadership, and some of the other schools have ingrained faculty who are not going to change to do anything differently because it’s not their problem. It’s the kids’ problem.”

## **Superintendents’ Advice for Other Superintendents**

Superintendents were asked if they had advice for other superintendents, or if they would do anything differently if they had to do it again. It is important to note that their advice is based on their own personal experiences in their particular district contexts. Their responses included:

### **General Advice**

- I have learned that you have to be very consistent in what you’re focusing on. You can’t just bite off a flavor of the month. That just does not work.
- You’ve got to be patient. It just doesn’t happen overnight. We tend to say, “Well, we did that, now what are we going to do?” [I say] you really haven’t done it because it probably hasn’t “taken.” That’s the hardest part for me—to be patient and to stick with it. I think in education, often times, [we say] “Well, we tried that, so now try this.” You have to decide where you’re going, have confidence that you’ve got the right strategies to get there, use the data to guide you, but then know it’s going to take time. You’ve also got to know when the horse has died and to get off. If you’ve picked a wrong thing, you’ve got to abandon it. But more often than not, I don’t think it’s that we picked the wrong thing, it’s that we didn’t stick with the thing we picked long enough to make it right.
- When it comes to reform...you are pushing as many reform initiatives as your site can sustain and handle without going over the edge. So you might have ten, you might have two, you might have 15 major initiatives going on across an entire school, all with the goal of improving as many conditions as quickly as possible, simultaneously, in that institution. If you think about the complexity of a school, you can’t have just one initiative, because there’s special ed, there’s PE, there’s all the different divisions and departments. It’s an incredibly complex place, and to think that we would do one thing and have impact is naïve. So...a really good school principal knows how to keep as many initiatives and reform efforts going as possible, without losing staff at the same time.
- We’re reducing staff and there’s this secretary at one of the schools who is not a very good secretary. And she’s ending up bumping somebody who is really, really good, and the person happens to be in my office, one of my divisions. So I thought...I know that this is a crummy secretary. [She is] really unorganized, etcetera. I go down to see what her last evaluation looked like, and the principal had marked her as satisfactory in all areas. [He] didn’t broach any of the negativity, even though he’s the very one who told me she was not organized and was not a good secretary. So I’m not letting him off the hook on that. I called and I said, “Look, I just went down and looked at that evaluation. You gave away the evaluation, and that’s exactly what we don’t want you to do. I’m telling you, I’m not going to accept this from you again.” That isn’t the appropriate language of doing it, and I wasn’t quite that angry when I talked to him, but that’s what we would call a courageous conversation. I’m holding people accountable to a standard, and when they don’t meet the standard, they’re going to hear about it.

### **Having a Vision or a Plan**

- If you don't have a vision of what you want to do, you just end up picking up the bits and pieces as you go. And it's difficult because you can get so overwhelmed with the day to day survival that it's hard to take that time and keep that big picture in mind.
- In this business, you've got to be doing a lot of things all at once, and you've got to be doing them in a fairly coordinated deliberative manner. I think you've got to have a framework for thinking about how you're going to put them in play, and how you're going to get your board and your community invested in supporting those sets of action plans and key objectives that you've set. Whether you call it a strategic planning process, goal setting process, action planning process—you [must] have one that genuinely engages your stakeholders, and gives the people a clear focus on what that is, and keeps them focused on that through the year. And generally that is for two or three years because, as we all know, change happens and really gets absorbed in the fabric of a school district over a two or three year period of time.
- So you've got to have a framework first. That's item one. You just have to do that. If you don't, you're running around doing things—the reform of the day—and you're also running a very high risk of having your school board or other constituencies filling that gap for you. They will come in with their own set of agenda items, or their own directions, and claim that that is where you should go because you haven't spent the time to develop the stakeholder investment in a plan, whatever it is.
- And it needs to be ongoing. You're reminding people what the action plans are, you're giving them updates, you're saying, “here's where we're focused,” you're keeping that in front of them. And unless you invest time in that, it runs off course, or it's susceptible to running off course, or it's susceptible to having other people crowding that with their agenda. Before you know it, you're doing six other things that you hadn't planned on six months ago.

### Focus on Instruction

- As a district, as we have become so focused on instruction, I have become much more expert on instructional strategies and instructional content. I still am nowhere near where I need to be, but I think we all have a common vision now. What else have I learned? I think I've learned the importance of having a vision, and communicating that vision.
- I think one of the things we've really developed is a focus on instruction, and how important teaching in the classroom is, how important instruction is. We lived, ate, breathed instruction, and improving what went on in classrooms. Before, many of our principals were chosen based on their operational knowledge and skills. Not to say that's not important...you still need to run schools, and you still need to know how to, but it used to seem like that was enough. That was what we expected of a leader. When we started this eight years ago, we changed that and said, no, your job has to be to turn out a student that is well educated. So you have to know instruction and you have to lead instruction, and you have to get in classrooms and you have to make sure that instruction is good in classrooms. So my advice to a superintendent is, if you want to improve student achievement, you've got to figure out how to do that through improving instruction.
- If you expect something from [principals as instructional leaders], you have to show them how to do it and then provide them with the professional development to do it, and then give them enough time to come back and reflect upon what they've done.
- We've had lots of meetings with the staff. We allow, invite, and encourage union participation. Most times we have the union president or somebody she's assigned sitting right with us as we're going through this process, so that they can see that we're not after individual teachers. This is not about saying that Mrs. So-and-so has done something wrong. This is about focusing in on instruction, totally in the whole school, and seeing what we can do to improve it. It's not about an evaluation process where you're using it as an evaluation against teachers. You're assessing what's going on at the school for improvement purposes. And I think having the union leadership there just sends a message that this is not a gotcha thing. This is about how we can better meet the needs of our students. We're not trying to get you. We're trying to focus, again, on instruction.

## Using Data Effectively

- The basic advice is to find a way to systemize the collection of data and the distribution of data so that it's accessible. Because if you have people doing assessments, and they can't use them, and you can't translate it into "How do I apply this?", then it's a wasted practice. We've refined it by really using teacher committees, and by depending on those people that are using the data to help us know what's going to be meaningful for them. We also brought the administrators into the meetings so that we knew the administrator needs at the site level. What do I want to see when my teachers turn this in? What's most helpful for me, what's most helpful for the teachers? Then the district works from there. We didn't come down and say, "This is what we need." We said we need a measure that will show us student progress three times a year, and then we used a process that allowed the people to say, "Okay, but here's the data that's helpful to me as a teacher." "Here's the data that's helpful for me as an administrator." This coming year we'll have it online. Up until this point it's all been collected manually at the site on a card that the principal receives.

- I think what I've learned is that you have to ask [principals] the questions and give them time to think about the answers. I don't think we give them enough time to reflect [on the data]. They're constantly doing and doing and doing and never reflecting upon what they're doing. I'm learning that besides going in there saying, "I want to see this," "I want to see that," I need to ask, "Why do you suppose you got those results?" I'm changing my questions.

- I think a lot of times teachers feel that all this is just imposed upon them, and what we're doing has been a huge transition for them. It's what we should have always been doing. Shame on us that we didn't just do it to ourselves years ago by establishing standards and benchmarks and expectations. We could have done it ourselves I suspect, although it helps when you can calibrate all to one standard across the state. I think that's even better. But, nevertheless, having said that, we didn't do it before, and all this can be somewhat overwhelming to teachers. So I think getting them to the table and giving them the bigger picture, letting them come up with solutions...saying "This is the target, now how are we going to get there?" I think it takes a little longer. But I think you accelerate your progress at the end by slowing down a bit in the beginning and make sure you build enough of a base to be able to take the next steps. I also think the benchmark assessments and those kinds of things are critical. It's too late to wait to the end of the year and then hope you do okay on the CST. You've really got to monitor your performance. At the district level, we look at these benchmark assessments and say, "Wow, across the district we're not doing well in this area or that area, what do we need to do to help get better results in this?"

- You've got to have the data piece. You've got to have the feedback loop. [Business management guru] Jim Collins calls it facing the brutal facts. You've got to have the facts in a format that teachers find valuable. Whether it's Measures Aligned or some other software program, whatever it might be, it needs to be generated in a very timely manner and displayed in a manner that helps teachers and principals drive instructional decisions on an ongoing basis. [It] compels them to face the brutal facts if, in fact, they're not closing achievement for a subgroup, or with their whole school. And you've got to have a culture that says face up to those facts, and do something about them. And if you're not, you're going to be held accountable for that. If you're not okay with that, you're on the wrong bus. Get off my bus.

## Curriculum

- I think the hardest thing is you've got to be relentless about making sure people are using [the curriculum], and that it's used appropriately.

- I was blown away at how the teachers were struggling to really understand the standards. I'm talking especially fifth grade up. A real eye-opener—a lesson I learned—was that the state-adopted textbooks weren't really standards based themselves. I mean, I would say that maybe a third of what they were putting in front of us saying "this is the standard" was really the standard. These are national books that kind of relate to the standard. So what we've taught our teachers is, don't count on the textbook until you determine, what is that standard? What do I have to teach? What do my kids need to know how to do? Then go backwards and find the resources, the

materials that will teach that. Because if you try to follow the state-adopted curriculum, you're not going to get there. That was a real eye-opener.

- [A curriculum audit] is a scary process because people are nervous that we are holding them personally accountable. As much as you try to say no—you don't use anybody's individual name when you're collecting this data and reporting it back, you're talking about what you're seeing in general happen at a school site—there's a real pressure on teachers to perform. They've never had that before. So there's a little bit of rebellion, particularly from some of our more veteran teachers who are close to retirement. Why do we have to do this? That is something you have to really talk about—that you're focusing in on students and not focusing in on us as adults. Sometimes you worry, because the staffs get real antsy. They would love for you just to ignore the law and not try to make any improvements. But if you're going to improve, you've got to do some things that are uncomfortable sometimes.

### Staff Development

- What we've learned is that the amount of staff development required to truly bring about a strong or complete implementation is far greater than we recognized initially. And we have great, great difficulties in providing the necessary staff development. The real hindrances are time and attitude—from some of our staff who still believe they know it all and they don't need to be trained. The AB466 training, the five days in the summer, has been very effective, and we think has done an excellent job. Prior to AB466 we had done our own training or brought in people, for the half hour in the morning or for a day here or a day there, and that really wasn't sufficient.
- You have to stay very focused. Really think...look at your data. What does it tell you? What is it that you really need? Look at the programs you currently have to make sure you're using them the way they were designed to be used. And if not, that's a good place to start to make sure you go back and re-train your teachers. Often [when] you adopt a new reading text, you do the publisher's training. You give them the book and assume everybody's using it the way it's supposed to be used. We found that is not the case. It takes time, and you can't just focus for three months and then move on to something else. You've got to stay the course until you really feel that at least the majority of your teachers have really internalized whatever it is that you've been focused on.
- You've got to have a well-defined professional development program and invest heavily in that. If you're not investing in that consistently over time, and doing it in ways that are linked to standards-based instruction, standards and core content, and powerful, engaging learning, then it's not going to have as much impact.

### Intervention Programs

- Well, I think you need to be very deliberate in picking the programs, and then give schools guidance on who goes to what program. At least for us, we hadn't really done that before. I think it [goes] back to looking at the data and saying, what is the problem? Four people who aren't feeling well wouldn't go to a doctor and all get the same treatment. With this I think the same thing. You need to look at the groups of kids you have and ask what's the appropriate intervention for those groups of kids? You pick something that's specifically designed to work with that population. And I guess that's one thing that we did learn. There are a lot of programs out there that say they're going to help with this, that, or the other. But we learned that when they're talking about the results they got, you need to look and see what kind of kids they started with. Did they get results with the same population of students that you're targeting? Because people tend to group all low-income minority students together. Well, if they also don't speak English, that adds another dimension to it. They have different issues than what maybe an inner-city African-American youngster would have.

### Hiring

- I do a lot of hiring of principals, and I will always look to see who are the people with a depth of knowledge of instruction and good people skills. That knowledge of instruction is so important. And what is their vision for their school? They have to have an idea of “where is it that I want to go by the end of the year? With all the complexities involved, how do I bring my schools along as a learning organization?”
- [In our hiring process,] do you learn about what that person knows about instruction? It’s not just an interview—you need a performance-based interview that illustrates their knowledge of instruction to some degree. Make sure that the interview questions are structured in a way that allows you to determine their leadership knowledge and their knowledge around instruction. The selection process has to have that extra step of looking at what they do and what they know in a classroom. You need to be very clear about what your expectations are for leaders when you set out to find them. We were clear, and it was very clear to anybody who applied that they needed to have that knowledge. Many people worked hard at [preparing for that] so they were ready for the opportunity.
- We started the school year without an elementary principal, and brought an assistant principal from an intermediate school over. [We] asked that person to handle the school for us because we just didn’t find anybody who met our standard. We waited, and it was October, and yes, we got complaints from parents, and yes, we had concerns from teachers, and we said, “We understand, but we’re not going to send you anybody but the best, and we haven’t found the best yet.” We finally did. She started middle of October. And, you know, that wasn’t all that long ago, and people have forgotten. If you asked them, when did your principal start, they’d probably tell you, “Well, we had to wait a little bit, she didn’t start right on time, but we love her.” Results work wonderfully. People will forget all the other stuff once they get the right results.

### Capacity

- We have found it very hard to find math resource teachers, or even math specialists who could work with all other teachers at the elementary level. They just didn’t have the skills, so we had to send many of them to the universities to try to start from the beginning so they had the basic understanding of mathematics. Algebra really begins in kindergarten, and we’re finding now our eighth graders and ninth graders having trouble with algebra, and I think it’s because they didn’t learn what they needed to learn in mathematics in elementary school. So, what I would say is the capacity to do the kinds of things that we know need to be done just isn’t always there. We have a hard time finding enough knowledgeable peer coaches in literacy. It’s the capacity of the people to actually populate the professional development infrastructure that we’ve found so difficult. We had to build that capacity while they were supposedly improving the practice, which was very difficult. And the same thing with principals—it was the building of the capacity at the same time we were improving practice. How very difficult and expensive that is, and you can’t ever let up. You never get there. It’s got to be a constant way of doing things. And you’ve got to figure out ways to keep going with your learning. You get new people, and then you have to know how to build the new into the ongoing work.

### English Learners

- You want everybody on the freeway, and for your English learners, you’ve got to make sure you don’t put them on a permanent country road that runs alongside the freeway with no access onto it. That’s kind of what we’ve done with special ed as well. There has to be an on-ramp. You’ve got to be supporting them learning English, but you also have to be very clearly pointing them toward what all the other kids are doing. It’s much easier said than done.
- There’s no one strategy that works. There are some very good programs out there that are good for helping kids learn English. There are programs that are good for helping kids who have fallen behind in reading. But probably the trick is knowing where the kids belong, having good criteria for placing them in the right program, and then having your teachers collaborate so that kids don’t get stuck on that country road. It might be fine that all of their instruction is focused on learning the language—from a teacher who’s gifted at that. But if they always stay with that teacher and never get back into the class with all the kids, doing the grade level work that needs

to be done...if they're not getting exposed to that, then they're always going to stay on that little country road, and they'll never get back on the freeway with everybody else.

- It's really not all that complicated. It's just extremely difficult, and it's very tiring for adults. I think the stamina of our adults gets worn down. It's really labor intensive work because you can't just set the kids to it and say, "Here, we've read this, now go work on this." For kids who don't speak English, there's none of that. There's not much they can work on. They're working on speaking English. That means you've got to be working with them.