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PATHWAYS TO CHANGE
LEARNING FROM EXEMPLARY QEIA SCHOOLS

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HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS

This report is the second in a series of five publications focused on the Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA) of 2006. The series draws on data from an ongoing, independent evaluation of QEIA funded by the California Teachers Association (CTA). Following up on the first report, which was focused on an in-depth examination of QEIA in participating schools, this second report focuses specifically on stakeholders in 10 exemplary schools and their experiences with school improvement. This report addresses the following three research questions:

1. What incidents and experiences led to success at exemplary schools?
2. What features of school sites help to mitigate challenges?
3. How might lessons learned be transferred to other schools while accounting for unique local contexts?

ABOUT THE SCHOOLS

The sample was comprised of seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school in 10 school districts. Exemplary schools were selected to represent the range of QEIA schools across the state in terms of school type, district size, geographic location, and population type (e.g., rural/small town, large city, mid-size city, etc.).

In California, schools receive a state decile ranking; by 2012, the exemplary schools had improved their state ranking by at least two deciles. Schools also receive a similar schools decile ranking; this ranking shows where schools rank on a scale of 1 to 10 compared to 100 schools of similar characteristics. Exemplary schools improved their similar schools ranking by at least three deciles.
As part of this study, principals – in interviews, and teachers – in open-ended questionnaires, were asked about key pathways that led to school improvement. A variation of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to generate reports of key events and/or experiences resulting in school improvement.

From principals and teachers, 174 incidents were initially identified. Thirty-nine accounts were removed during content analysis because they did not contain a specific incident (i.e., were too general), did not address the questions, were ambiguous, or were uncommon (i.e., mentioned by too few respondents). The remaining 135 incidents were categorized. Seven categories of incidents emerged from the analysis.

**Reducing Class Size**

As a key pathway, CSR opened the door to instructional opportunities that would not exist otherwise. Respondents commonly noted that CSR paved the way for the following changes in instruction:

1. More small group instruction;
2. Differentiated instruction;
3. Individual time with each student;
4. Instruction geared toward developing more complex skills;
5. Expanded time for re-teaching; and
6. Frequent and ongoing assessment.

**Leveraging Collaboration Time**

Collaboration served as a gateway to change in every exemplary school; collaboration led to three promising activities: 1) Planning Together; 2) Aligning Instruction; and 3) Sharing Practice.

**Responding to Student Needs**

Many school stakeholders emphasized the significance of changing school structures to find more instructional time for student intervention. They adjusted master schedules to provide for larger blocks of core instructional time, grouped students according to learning needs for re-teaching, added lunch time and pullout interventions, extended school days, adopted Response to Intervention models, implemented formal ELA and Math intervention frameworks, provided for intensive tutoring, and created small learning communities to support freshman transition.

**Building Local Accountability**

Several incidents were focused on strengthening local accountability by setting clear goals and high expectations, and emphasizing that all school stakeholders – teachers, administrators, parents, and students themselves – are responsible for the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

**Recognizing and Rewarding Students**

A few schools described pathways related to recognizing students publicly for academic achievement; these programs changed the culture of the school and promoted a more academic focus.

**Using Student Data to Intervene**

Effective data use resulted in greater understanding and awareness of student needs. The ongoing use of data for monitoring student progress was particularly valuable because it led to timely and focused interventions.
Strengthening Leadership

Several of the QEIA schools that were visited as part of this project experienced principal turnover due to staffing changes made by superintendents, retirement, or principals seeking other opportunities. When highly effective principals joined the staff at these QEIA schools, they infused schools with new ideas, clearer expectations, and focused plans for how to collaborate to change the tide.

FUELING THE JOURNEY

The pathway to change for these QEIA schools was not without several roadblocks. Like other QEIA schools, they struggled with financial challenges due to the ongoing fiscal crisis in California. Maintaining class size reduction was particularly difficult with shrinking general funds and diminishing resources. Furthermore, annual reductions in the teaching force due to budget cuts made it difficult for schools to retain consistent staff and sustain momentum. Additionally, like all organizations working toward systemic change, our exemplary schools noted that building the initial commitment necessary for improvement was sometimes challenging. Across the board, stakeholders in these exemplary schools emphasized five common features of their schools and cultures that helped them stay on the path and mitigate the roadblocks:

1. Exemplary Leadership;
2. A Common Vision;
3. Willingness to Change and Innovate;
4. Ongoing and Open Communication; and
5. Relentless Drive and Dedication.

STARTING THE JOURNEY

Given the significance of effective collaboration, this may be a good starting point for any school. Effective collaboration was described in the first report of this series and stresses the importance of key prerequisites – commitment, willingness to innovate, trust and respect, and supportive leadership. These prerequisites should be coupled with a variety of supportive structures, including frequent and regular time to collaborate; well-defined, formal teams with clear expectations; and a key leader who champions the effort and keeps the team on task.

Secondly, the emphasis on building local accountability and maintaining high expectations for teaching and learning, specifically, suggests the need for school leaders to set ambitious, but reachable goals for all their learners. These goals should be communicated to all members of the school community along with clear expectations about how everyone has a role in the change process. Progress must be monitored regularly and communicated openly to strengthen collective accountability for success.

Moreover, the prevalence of incidents focused specifically on understanding student needs and intervening appropriately – either through targeted interventions or instructional changes due to class size reduction – suggests a critical action: put systems and structures in place for getting to know students and their learning needs. School stakeholders should be equipped to both assess frequently and interpret data to identify opportunities for re-teaching. Small groups and one-on-one instruction provide additional mechanisms for getting to know student needs. Once those needs are known, master schedules can allow for more flexible intervention time that can be used for grouping students and working with them to get them back on track when they are behind. Creative approaches to finding more instructional time – after school, at lunch, before school – can be used to intervene in meaningful ways.

Lastly, the importance of an exemplary administrator to guide the effort must not be overlooked. In this report and the first report in the series, stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that an effective principal was a prerequisite for change.

The first two reports in this series provide valuable information about QEIA implementation and impacts. QEIA served as a catalyzing event for schools; stakeholders capitalized on the opportunity to change structures, establish systems, and provide better instruction to learners. These lessons can be used broadly by other schools seeking their own quality improvement.
This research was made possible through the support of a number of individuals and organizations. We would like to thank the 10 exemplary schools from across the state of California that were visited as part of this project. Without the cooperation and support of the participants—principals, teachers, support staff, parents, and community members—this report would not be possible.

This report has also benefited from the dedication of several staff and leaders at the California Teachers Association who provided feedback on study design and report drafts, including Rebecca Zoglman, Justo Robles, and Jane Robb.

Finally, we would like to thank several staff members at Vital Research for their support with data collection, including Bonnie Richards, Elaine Lindheim, Connie Maratea, and Patricia Yee. We would like to acknowledge the data management support received from Evan Shurak and Matthew Redman. Diana Dominguez and Norma Carrillo-Van Tongeren provided essential administrative support and coordination for our visits to schools. Lastly, we are particularly grateful to Steven Bray, Karilyn Mauerman, Sara McCleskey, Maria Jimenez, Janet Lee, and Elaine Lindheim for their assistance with qualitative data analysis.
This report is the second in a series of five publications focused on the Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA) of 2006. The series draws on data from an ongoing, independent evaluation of QEIA funded by the California Teachers Association (CTA). The evaluation is intended to address the following overall aims:

A. Understand the extent to which schools are implementing the program;

B. Explain why and how QEIA works in successful schools so that it can be replicated in others;

C. For schools that struggled, explain the factors that inhibited positive outcomes;

D. Examine the various impacts of QEIA on participating schools; and

E. Uncover promising practices from successful schools that can be shared with others.

Following up on the first report, which was focused on an in-depth examination of QEIA in participating schools, this second report focuses specifically on stakeholders in 10 exemplary schools and their experiences with school improvement. This report addresses the following three research questions:

1. What incidents and experiences led to success at exemplary schools?

2. What features of school sites help to mitigate challenges?

3. How might lessons learned be transferred to other schools while accounting for unique local contexts?

Subsequent reports will analyze the contextual factors at state, district, and local levels that influenced QEIA policy implementation; examine the role of teachers unions in education reform; and draw on lessons learned from QEIA to offer implications for subsequent reforms.
OVERVIEW OF DATA SOURCES

In 2011, 18 schools were selected to participate in a two-year study to learn more specifically about the implementation strategies of successful schools, the perceived impact of QEIA on participating schools, challenges to implementation, and key factors facilitating success. Of these 18 schools, 10 schools were particularly high performing.

The case studies of these exemplary schools were largely focused on learning more about the incidents that led to school change and the various factors that facilitated success. Thus, qualitative methods – interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires – were used to address the research questions.

Schools were visited in the spring and fall of 2011. Across all exemplary schools, 99 interviews were conducted with school stakeholders. The principal was interviewed at each site along with 3-6 teacher leaders, depending on school size (e.g., chapter presidents, grade-level leaders, department chairs, leadership committee members, etc.). In high schools and middle schools, one assistant principal was also interviewed. In the high school, the school counselor was interviewed. Two members of the school site council were interviewed at each site (typically one parent and one teacher). A parent focus group comprised of 4-8 parents was conducted at all but one school. A teacher questionnaire was administered at all sites and made available to teachers during faculty meetings or through teacher mailboxes to learn more about teachers perspectives on school success (N=183).

During the spring of 2012, follow-up interviews were conducted with principals and teachers most involved in QEIA implementation (10 principals and eight teachers participated).

ABOUT THE SCHOOLS

The sample was comprised of seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school in 10 school districts. Exemplary schools were selected to represent the range of QEIA schools across the state in terms of school type, district size, geographic location, and population type (e.g., rural/small town, large city, mid-size city, etc.).

In California, schools receive a state decile ranking; by 2012, the exemplary schools had improved their state ranking by at least two deciles. Schools also receive a similar schools decile ranking; this ranking shows where schools rank on a scale of 1 to 10 compared to 100 schools of similar characteristics. Exemplary schools improved their similar schools ranking by at least three deciles.

As seen in Figure 1, prior to QEIA funding, the API scores for the exemplary QEIA schools were, on average, 34 points below the median of their similar schools. Moreover, nine exemplary schools were underperforming compared to their similar schools. By 2012, the API score for each of the exemplary schools had surpassed the median of their similar schools (see Figure 1).

OVERVIEW OF QEIA

In 1988, California voters approved Proposition 98, which guaranteed a minimum amount of state and property tax revenue for K-14 education each year. In 2004/05, the state suspended the Proposition 98 minimum guarantee, resulting in a loss of $3.2 billion to schools. CTA and the Superintendent of Public Instruction sued the Governor in August 2005, and in May 2006, the Governor settled with CTA. QEIA is the result of the settlement and was signed into legislation in September 2006 (SB 1133). QEIA was designed to provide nearly $3 billion over eight years (beginning in 2007/08) to 488 low performing schools in the bottom two deciles.

Schools had the option for funding in the Regular Program or the Alternative Application. The accountability requirements for the Regular Program include:

1. Reducing class sizes in grades K-12;
2. Maintaining a student-to-counselor ratio of 300:1 in high schools;
3. Providing professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals in core content areas and English language development;
4. Maintaining an average teacher experience at each school equal to, or higher than, the district average for similar grade span schools.

*QEIA also provides funding to community colleges for career technical education and high school transition programs.
Ensuring that all teachers and interns are highly qualified in accordance with the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA);

Meeting minimum requirements of the Williams Act;

Ensuring that school administrators have exemplary qualifications and experience;

Providing professional development to administrators that is similar in quality and rigor to the Administrator Training Program; and

Meeting state Academic Performance Index (API) targets annually.

The Alternative Application (25 high schools only) enabled schools to craft their own local responses to school reform and determine their own goals, implementation activities, and benchmarks for success.

### PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

A total of 509 schools have received QEIA funding since the reform began. These schools represented 137 school districts throughout the state; 21% of schools that have received QEIA funding are in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Throughout the first four years of the reform, QEIA schools served approximately 400,000 students; the majority of students served were Latino/Hispanic (78%). About 90% of students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch. Half of the students in QEIA elementary schools were English learners; about one-third and one-quarter of students in middle and high schools were English learners, respectively.\(^5\)

During the first five years of the program, five schools withdrew and 13 schools were closed. Ninety-six schools were exited from the program because they did not meet program requirements, bringing the current number of QEIA schools to 396 (16 Alternative Application schools; 380 Regular Program schools)\(^6\).

For additional details on QEIA, its requirements, and participating schools, see the first report in this series, *Cultivating Change: A Deeper Look at QEIA Implementation* (Malloy & Nee, 2013).
As part of this study, principals – in interviews, and teachers – in open-ended questionnaires, were asked about key pathways that led to school improvement. A variation of the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to generate reports of key events and/or experiences resulting in school improvement. Interviewees and questionnaire respondents were provided with the following prompt:

"Overall, in the last three years, your school has experienced very positive gains in student achievement. Reflecting back on your experience as a key stakeholder in a QEIA school, please think about one incident or experience that you feel had a particular influence on your school’s success. This could have been either positive or negative."

Three questions followed the prompt:

1. Please describe the incident or experience, including what it was, when it occurred and who was involved.
2. What do you think was so important about this incident or experience?
3. How did this incident or experience make a difference in your school’s success?

From principals and teachers, 174 incidents were initially identified. Thirty-nine accounts were removed during content analysis because they did not contain a specific incident (i.e., were too general), did not address the questions, were ambiguous, or were uncommon (i.e., mentioned by too few respondents). The remaining 135 incidents were categorized.

Seven categories of incidents emerged from the analysis:

1. Reducing Class Size;
2. Leveraging Collaboration Time;
3. Responding to Student Needs;
4. Building Local Accountability;
5. Recognizing and Rewarding Students;
6. Using Student Data to Intervene; and
7. Strengthening Leadership.

As illustrated in Table 1, Reducing Class Size and Leveraging Collaboration Time were the pathways noted most often by respondents, 27% and 24%, respectively. Using Student Data to Intervene and Strengthening Leadership, while noteworthy, were less common across respondents.

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<tr>
<td>Strengthening Leadership</td>
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REDDUCING CLASS SIZE

QEIA legislation requires funded schools to achieve and maintain small class sizes in all core subjects as follows:

A. For K-3, no more than 20:1 per class;

B. For self-contained classrooms in grades 4 to 8, maintain the lesser of either a grade-level class size reduction (CSR) ratio of 25:1 (no one class to exceed 27 pupils), or have classroom averages of at least five pupils fewer per classroom than the average in 2006/07;

C. For subject specific classrooms (English language arts, reading, math, science, and history/social studies) in grades 4 to 12, maintain the lesser of either a grade-level CSR ratio of 25:1 (no one class to exceed 27 pupils), or have grade-level averages of at least five pupils fewer per classroom than the average in 2006/07.

The reduction of class size was considered by many teachers and principals to be a catalyzing event for instructional changes in schools. One teacher at an exemplary middle school put it this way:

I would say that the most significant occurrence at our school, due to QEIA, would be class-size reduction, which was a great catalyst for the positive changes that took place at [our school]. Teachers were able to focus more on instruction, rather than having to deal with constant behavioral problems, which come with larger class sizes. Students were able to get a better quality education, which helped them to be more successful in their studies, as well as classroom performance, which resulted in higher scores. Manageable class sizes enabled teachers to have better classroom control...resulting in more one-on-one or small group instruction opportunities. The entire school climate changed; teachers were less stressed, and student behavior improved.

As a key pathway, CSR opened the door to instructional opportunities that would not exist otherwise¹. Respondents commonly noted that CSR paved the way for the following changes in instruction:

A. More small group instruction;

B. Differentiated instruction;

C. Individual time with each student;

D. Instruction geared toward developing more complex skills;

E. Expanded time for re-teaching; and

F. Frequent and ongoing assessment.

These changes to instruction occurred largely because teachers found it easier to efficiently manage classroom behavior with fewer students in the room. There were fewer student disruptions and less behavioral challenges, which resulted in more time for instruction as well as a more engaged, focused class of students.

Moreover, because teachers were able to spend more time with individual students, they developed stronger relationships and a greater awareness of student needs. Furthermore, more frequent assessment provided valuable information that could be used to tailor instruction. Such differentiated instruction was particularly valuable for struggling learners and students with special needs who were mainstreamed. A few teachers explained:

I have one student, in particular, who has gained and demonstrated progress. He is in Special Education but has the one-on-one attention from me, thanks to the number of students in my class. He has grown so much, academically and socially. He loves coming to school every day.

QEIA has made a huge difference in the education of our students, especially in the life of my autistic student. Due to small classes, he’s communicating with classmates and teachers with phrases and making eye

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contact for a couple of seconds. He’s reading aloud in class and at home.

Class size reduction allowed teachers to instruct small groups and focus on student needs. Because of class size reduction and small group instruction, teachers were allowed to analyze assessments that indicated which content standards students were struggling with and help them catch up.

PAVING THE WAY: STAFFING FOR CSR

One exemplary middle school in Southern California made the strategic decision to hire elementary school teachers with multiple subject credentials in order to support instruction in grade-level communities. Rather than the traditional middle school model of 50 minute periods, the school organized into communities in which students were taught multiple subjects, with the same teacher, for longer blocks of time. Reductions in force (due to the ongoing financial crisis in California) had resulted in a large number of unemployed elementary school teachers in the district; the school used this opportunity to hire teachers that could instruct across subjects during the longer blocks:

What had happened is since we wanted to core and family our teachers, we went all multiple subject. We don’t have any single subject teachers on our campus, and that allows us to do this. Now to teach algebra in eighth grade, you do have to have a supplement or pass the CSET. But they are still multiple subject teachers. So we don’t have any single subject teachers on our campus.

Coincidentally, the new elementary teachers had previous experience with class size reduction and some of the more effective teaching strategies that could be used with fewer students in a classroom. The middle school capitalized on this new knowledge; they looked to these new teachers to learn how to differentiate instruction, use small groups appropriately, and team-teach.

We had a lot of elementary teachers come up, and so they brought a lot of their elementary strategies. And so with class size reduction, it gives a lot more room for that small group, individual instruction. And I think that’s the biggest thing. And to be honest with you, I think bringing some of these strategies from the elementary level, rather than standing up in front of a class and lecturing, is huge. And we’ve seen it, and we’ve even seen some of the veteran teachers that have been here kind of starting to transition into that through collaboration in grade-levels, and partner teachers, and things like that… If we feel a teacher needs some help with implementing a strategy, we’ll try to partner them with somebody strong that came up from the elementary level that can kind of work with them and help them out with that.

Moreover, the longer block of instructional time coupled with more individualized instruction resulted in more personal relationships with middle school students. The Assistant Principal expressed: “I think it gives those students a chance. Rather than with 51 minutes with one teacher per day, it gives them almost two hours with that teacher. And they only have two teachers for four subjects, and so it gives more…it’s more of a personal relationship between teacher and student… I think for us, it’s worked.”
Teachers echoed the benefits of spending more time with individual students and the ability to more effectively schedule and structure interventions due to the smaller class sizes:

From what I see, behavior is a lot more manageable, being able to spend more time with each student, do small group instruction. We’re able to schedule in more interventions with smaller groups. So, that way the kids who are struggling are able to get intervention classes for their electives where they actually get to work more closely with the teacher.

We can have collaborative groups in the classroom. I can spend time with my low students, not necessarily focusing all the time on others. They each get some time with me. It makes it a lot easier to structure interventions after school, lunchtime, during my prep period, if I need to call a student to come in. And I think because we are more accessible in my classroom, the kids do feel more comfortable leaving notes saying can I come see you during this period or I didn’t understand this today.

When asked how teachers accepted the change, one administrator commented: “There were a couple that tried to hold back, but I think once we totally implemented QEIA and we brought in all these new teachers, there was a revitalized sense of energy.”

**LEVERAGING COLLABORATION TIME**

As noted on page 2, as part of the requirements for the program, QEIA schools are required to provide high quality professional development to teachers and paraprofessionals. Schools must provide training to at least one-third of teachers and instructional paraprofessionals, and teachers at QEIA schools are required to participate in 40 hours, on average, of professional development annually. Professional development activities may include:

- **A.** Collaboration time to develop lessons or analyze student data;
- **B.** Mentoring projects for new teachers;
- **C.** Support for teachers to improve practice.

With the emphasis on collaboration time in the legislation, it is not surprising that one-quarter of incidents gathered were focused on leveraging collaboration time to lead to better teaching practice. In fact, at least one stakeholder in each of the 10 exemplary schools cited collaboration as a key pathway to change.

As discussed in the first report of this series, collaboration requires several prerequisites to be effective, including: adequate commitment, willingness to innovate, sufficient trust and respect among participants, and supportive leadership. When these prerequisites were combined with a clear vision and sufficient time and resources, collaborative activities encouraged several transformative changes in school culture – enhanced data use, stronger professional communities, greater collective accountability, and increased instructional cohesion and coherence.

The findings from this research focused specifically on the most significant incident leading to change which were consistent with those in the first report. Collaboration served as a gateway to change, leading to three promising activities:

- **A.** Planning Together;
- **B.** Aligning Instruction; and
- **C.** Sharing Practice.

One principal at a highly successful elementary school explained how teachers used their collaboration time...
to plan for and align instruction and make better use of assessments to improve teaching:

I think giving teachers time to plan and time to look at the curriculum and look at the state expectations of us, there’s no other time in the day where they have that luxury. I think that’s truly been beneficial for us, having the time and the product that has come out of that. They’ve created shared docs so they can access them in their classroom with the material, the curriculum, every single component of our language arts program, or math program, and they have shared files that they can open. They’re all teaching the same thing at the same time. So it becomes a true measure, when they’re all giving the same assessments. And they’re all coming together and looking at their results. Then you can really have a conversation of best practices.

Teachers at this same school concurred, describing how the school instituted Wild Card Days to facilitate planning and alignment at grade-level: “We have two Wild Card Days a year. The whole grade level has subs, and we spend the day uninterrupted working as a team to prepare and find out what our students need.” A teacher from the same school credited such planning time for being the primary reason for the school’s large gains in student achievement: “I feel that collaboration is the # 1 reason we’ve made huge gains…I look forward to having this time with my colleagues so that we can be focused solely on working with our students to get them where they need to be.”

Teachers and principals in many schools stressed the significance of reflecting on practice and sharing instructional strategies during collaboration time. One principal in an exemplary elementary school explained how their collaboration time was used to reflect on what went well and generate best practices collectively:

And just going back to that idea that many hands make light work, if you have lots of good teaching professionals that have good ideas and strategies, that’s number one. And then number two, after they’ve planned that lesson and taught that lesson and assessed that lesson, then to be able to come back and say, “Hey, did it work or did it not work?” And, “What is it that you did or didn’t do to make sure that kids got that? I mean, that’s really the gift of time and the gift of being able to collaborate. For teachers to be able to learn from one another is really what it’s all about.

A high school teacher echoed the importance of sharing with colleagues and said “When teachers get together to help one another to be better teachers, the kids win.” A middle school teacher elaborated and shared: “There is no one teacher who knows everything. Together we are more powerful and brainstorm to help all students in that grade-level meet mastery.”

Moreover, stakeholders used their collaboration time to drive ongoing improvement. One high school teacher summed it up well and said, “We are teaching to the standards, sharing our best practices and examining your performance critically, constantly looking to improve.”

One exemplary elementary school serving about 500 students in Southern California attributed a great deal of their success to aligning instruction across and within grade levels, the benefits of which were reflected in their API score of 831 in 2012, 31 points above the state target of 800. When asked what has accounted for their school’s success, the principal emphatically stated:

I mean obviously it’s the refined process of teacher collaboration. I think that everything falls within that, because teachers, unless they’re working interdependently, unless they’re consistent with their implementation of our curriculum, it’s not going to move us forward. So I mean obviously it all begins with let’s analyze our data, where have we come, where do we still need to grow. Through that we say okay, we always focus in on our school plan what are our main goals.
With the highest EL population in the district, the school placed its instructional focus in three areas: 1) ELD instruction, 2) writing, and 3) guided reading. The principal commented: “Teachers are accountable for obviously teaching to the standards, which is our curriculum alignment,” and further detailed the process of fostering alignment among staff which included identifying and unpacking focus standards at the beginning of the year, as well as analyzing data throughout the year to identify strategies and interventions to help struggling students. When asked the effect of collaboration on her school’s success, the principal emphatically shared:

There’s no way we would have gotten this far with our test scores; with everything we’ve done. I mean, we were program improvement five and a half years ago. We’re nominated for a National Blue Ribbon school right now. That doesn’t happen overnight. That’s everybody working together and as a team, because they haven’t always been on the same teams.

In interviews, the majority of teachers also shared that having structured collaboration time really allowed the opportunity to be “on the same page” with their colleagues: “It is awesome, because we have the opportunity to talk and discuss, whereas before, there was hardly any opportunity. It would have to be after school and by the end of the day; it’s really tough to find the time to sit down.”

Another teacher shared: “And I think it’s because of the collaboration time that we have, the planning time that we have, the teacher training that we’ve had that makes us all on the same page.”

When one teacher was asked what other schools would have to do to replicate their success with leveraging collaboration, she simply concluded: “They would have to have meaningful teacher collaboration, not just sit in a classroom for two hours and just talk about whatever. They would have to be data-driven. They would have to align their curriculum to the standards. I think that pretty much covers it.”

DISTRICT
Chula Vista Elementary School District

API SCORE IN 2013
845

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS
817 students; 89 percent Hispanic; about 80 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; 70 percent are English learners.

“It’s the QEIA funding that makes it possible for our teachers to have time to plan, collaborate, and analyze students’ work. Collaboration time is significant. It helped us improve student achievement,” says literacy coach Evette Ramirez, whose position is funded by QEIA.

THE JOURNEY
Teachers spend hours every week in brainstorming sessions assessing student data, planning lessons together, or watching one another teach and giving feedback. The literacy coach helps model lessons for colleagues and promotes quality professional development. While QEIA also ensures smaller class sizes and other resources, she says, the collaboration QEIA allows by funding substitute teachers to free up colleagues is vital. “It’s been very powerful for us.”

SUCCESS
Lauderbach Elementary is one of 56 California public schools to earn a Title I Academic Achievement Award this year from the California Department of Education. To be awarded, schools must have doubled the achievement targets set for them for two consecutive years.

RESPONDING TO STUDENT NEEDS

Many school stakeholders emphasized the significance of changing school structures to find more instructional time for student intervention. They adjusted master schedules to provide for larger blocks of core instructional time, grouped students according to learning needs for re-teaching, added lunch time and pullout interventions, extended school days, adopted Response to Intervention models, implemented formal ELA and Math intervention frameworks, and provided for intensive tutoring. One teacher at an exemplary elementary school highlighted the importance of such structural changes to meeting the individual needs of students, explaining:

I believe interventions are key to our students’ success whether they’re before, during, or afterschool. Several teachers taught intervention. We have small groupings of students based on achievement level within the grade level. The small groups allow students to participate more. Instruction is more focused. Students feel more confident and teachers can actually see student progress.

Teachers and principals who identified this pathway realized that their struggling learners needed targeted support and extra time to practice reading or writing or cement a math concept. Rather than allow those students to simply move on to another subject or grade, they intervened purposefully to get them back on track:

[Our principal] implemented the Achievement schedule to give extended periods one day a week for each class. The longer periods allow teachers to use interventions to address specific concerns and help the students. We focused on the lowest students and gave them extra instructional time beyond the classroom time. They came to school earlier. It reached these students that didn’t have any previous letter knowledge and were falling behind academically and also losing confidence in learning.

In addition to maximizing intervention time, one school opted to create a freshman academy on campus to offer remediation or more intensive support to students during high school transition. The academy was launched to specifically support students that might have difficulty in high school. One teacher explained, “It helped to focus on an at-risk group that needed the intervention to help make sure they had all the resources to pass their freshman year.”

Academy students were identified based on eighth grade performance; approximately 130-140 students are in the academy each year, representing about 20% of the first year students at the school. In the academy, teachers are grouped together and work with a common set of students. For example, each student cluster has an English teacher, math teacher, and science teacher. The teachers meet to discuss the needs of individual students and work collaboratively to address them. A designated counselor works specifically with academy students along with community specialists who make sure that both the school environment and home environment are conducive to student learning. One academy teacher shared their success:

We provided them with the skills necessary to move on to the next grade. It wasn’t until the first semester ended that we witnessed the fruits of our labor. Over 80% passed their classes. I believe the Freshman Academy allowed us to put the at-risk students’ needs first, as opposed to blaming the student for their failures or lack of knowledge.

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PAVING THE WAY: COACHING FOR SUCCESS

A key resource at one exemplary school has been the presence of an instructional coach to guide student interventions at the school and maximize instructional time. The coach is responsible for training aides
for Universal Access, creating assessments on the school data system to track student progress, and desegregating data to help teachers figure out what to re-teach. The instructional coach described her school’s approach to intervention in the following way:

Well, we’ve changed the way that we teach. We’re all involved in direct instruction. We have a master schedule so that any time if you say — if you ask me about a student and you mention a time, I actually know where they’re at and I can problem-solve or set up an intervention for them without pulling them out of their math… We have interventions, timely interventions immediately for our K-3’s as well as our fourth through eighth. And we instituted — my first year, we started using what’s called AIMSweb. It’s an assessment program and now our entire school district has adopted it this year. But this is our fifth year using it, so we can identify — we were able to identify almost immediately that we had capable students that were underperforming.

To meet the needs of struggling learners, the instructional coach oversees Universal Access time. During Universal Access, a physical education (P.E.) tech takes half the students from two classes for a period; a trained aide and/or the instructional coach along with the teacher work with the remaining students. The students are grouped according to ability; the additional instructional time is used to pre-teach, re-teach, assess, and reinforce core instruction. The coach explained the process used at their school-site:

We have a P.E. Tech that’s hired under Title I, and the P.E. Tech will take half of one class and half of another class so that the class size drops down to ten and then we put our resources, whether it’s an aide or myself. And when I say intervention, it can be an enrichment or a remediation. But that’s really our universal access time. So the kids are all leveled. And it might be a first-grader from one class and two second-graders from another class and they’re in a reading group for a half an hour, guided reading at their level. And then there’s six kids left in the classroom with the classroom teacher but they’re all at the same reading level. It’s everybody’s needs being met so it’s really exciting.

The coach also saw her role as that of problem-solver: “Whenever teachers have concerns about kids, we kind of problem-solve in their own classroom management. Because I don’t have my own students, there are times that I’ll go in the classrooms that are having challenges with students and help with that. I’ll do model lessons for classroom management.”

When asked what has accounted for the school’s success, teachers and administrators alike emphasized the importance of the instructional coach, the focus on maximizing core instruction, fidelity to the curriculum and tracking student progress for timely interventions:

Yeah, it’s instructional time spent in language arts and math. We’re just dedicated to giving huge pieces of the day for that. It’s the fidelity of curriculum. It’s the data and assessment...It’s the staff development and high expectations. And willingness of the staff to keep getting better.

The whole [thing], the data collecting, the tracking of the AIMS, the scores, tracking to get the teachers to re-teach, tracking to pull the kids out when they need extra help.

The instructional coach stressed her belief that “teachers are the number one intervention,” reiterating that it was her job to train and support them because they are on the front lines.
Building Local Accountability

About 14% of incidents were focused on strengthening local accountability by setting high expectations and emphasizing that all school stakeholders – teachers, administrators, parents, and student themselves – are responsible for the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

In these schools, stakeholders discussed how critical it was to begin with a set of ambitious, but reachable goals focused on teaching and learning. Teachers shared that high expectations helped focus the school community on what mattered – student learning – and give them a sense of purpose. One teacher explained:

Creating goals for students, high expectations for students, high expectations for teachers… result in a lot of hard work and extra hours. Committed and focused teachers will always bring success to students. These things make you focus on what you are doing daily in order to improve student learning.

In one elementary school, teachers set quarterly goals for student learning in cognitive planning meetings. At grade-level meetings, teachers review data and discuss strategies for meeting student learning goals. One teacher characterized this incident in the following way: “The increased teacher accountability in team cognitive planning meetings…Although it was more stressful to me as a teacher, it kept me more focused on the objectives we targeted each quarter.” Another teacher at this school said:

This experience boosted teacher, student, and parent morale; it set a high standard for the teaching and learning at our school; it gave all a renewed sense of pride and purpose in pursuing learning. Students were motivated to continue success. Teachers were inspired to continue to invest in student achievement. Our school gained 80 points in our API score.

Moreover, a couple schools also raised expectations for parent involvement in student learning. For example, one middle school required teachers to reach out more frequently to parents in order to strengthen parent accountability. In another elementary school, a parent outreach program was established to educate parents about the curriculum and standards so they could support their students in meeting higher expectations. One elementary school teacher shared:

Our expectations are much higher for all grade levels…and parent involvement is vital…I don’t think that many public school families are aware of how rigorous school is today. By bringing them into the classrooms, it makes them more aware. For example, one student

in my classroom was a very reluctant learner. A team of teachers and coaches met with his mother and later his father. We discovered that he needed his parents to reinforce how important education will be for his future. His mom now volunteers in class.

Finally, the process of raising expectations, setting goals, and reviewing progress enabled stakeholders to see their successes. Many teachers and principals discussed the significance of accomplishing the objectives that they had established:

The morning our principal told the staff that our school scored a 790. I felt so proud of the work the staff had done, and happy the students attended a good school.

We provided a common goal for all teachers and students to strive for. Our principal communicates the goal to students and teachers on a weekly basis. And the students continue to meet and exceed the yearly goal, EVERY year.

Additionally, students were aware of their responsibilities and commitment to their own learning. The principal explained: “When kids go to P.E., they may miss P.E. that day so they can get that re-teaching lesson. And the kids understand it. It’s not a punishment or anything. They just need to know it’s time that they’re going to get with the teacher to learn that concept.” A teacher at the school echoed the principal’s sentiments about raising expectations:

We believe that our circumstances are not a reason not to perform. That’s the biggest thing and I want to tell you right now. Of all the other stuff, that’s the biggest thing that’s made the biggest change. Because, we can bring in anything. You can bring in any kind of strategy and if you don’t really believe, it’s not going to happen.

Prior to QEIA, teachers noted that the school had a reputation as an underperforming school in an impoverished neighborhood. One teacher described: “Yeah, [we were] looked upon as a dumping ground as far as parents go, the community goes, and I believe- and I’m going to say this, the district goes, too. I’m sure that’s how it was looked upon. The change is unbelievable.”
The school’s API has increased over 200 points since QEIA began; one teacher enthusiastically shared: “I would say it’s is almost a complete turnaround here at our school. The academics are better. The kids are more in control. They want to learn. Our reading scores are just skyrocketing.”

With the belief in success and evidence of success, came more success. One teacher shared: “Like I said, success breeds success, and that’s been a huge help having every employee at the school onboard. So, we are all willing to do what it takes to get students to learn. Expectations of students because since we’ve started QEIA, our students know what to expect no matter what classroom you go into, because we’re all doing what needs to be done.”

RECOGNIZING AND REWARDING STUDENTS

Stakeholders in three exemplary schools highlighted the significance of student reward and recognition programs. These types of programs typically focused on recognizing students publicly for academic achievement. In one elementary school, for example, student achievement rallies are used to recognize student progress; rallies take place five times each year. Parents are invited, students are photographed, and their names are added to the “Hall of Fame.” According to stakeholders, these rallies were instrumental to motivating and inspiring students. One teacher explained:

Student achievement rallies are a big hit with students and parents. Most students enjoy being kept in the loop as to where they stand academically, by being recognized and awarded for their growth/progress. Student achievement rallies occur 5 times per year. In my opinion, students apply themselves better when they recognize their efforts or progress is being recognized. They each try to sustain that progress.

Teachers and principals who described pathways related to student rewards noted that such programs changed the culture of the school and promoted a more academic focus: “This has changed the culture of our school...”}

Since QEIA, teachers described having more of a focus on teaching and learning and “making every minute count.” One teacher emphasized: “I think we are much more conscious of how we teach, making sure the kids are engaged all the time and focusing in on what they actually need - re-teaching, immediate feedback.” In addition to teachers being more focused, they worked to instill this same type of direction in their students: “And showing the kids where they are and where they need to be. So they are aware, and they’re not just coming to school to learn, they have a focus too... Why are we teaching this to you? And letting them understand so they have buy-in on why they’re learning.”
school from social to academic. Awesome change.”  
Another teacher noted:

“It has fostered a motivation in my students to do better...as well as a new sense of pride and belief in themselves as learners...It has also increased a sense of student pride in their school. They took more ownership for their learning and their school.

PAVING THE WAY: THINKING GOLD

At the exemplary high school, staff and administrators highlighted student reward programs as really making a difference in helping to boost achievement on state tests as well as foster a visible, ongoing academic culture on campus.

The exemplary high school implemented a three-level student incentive program, called Think Gold. Level 1 includes students who scored advanced on three or more scoring areas of the CST, and Level 2 consists of students who improved on their test scores overall. The third level - The 380 Group – is comprised of students who pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) the first time they take the test.

To get students interested and excited about Think Gold, the school hosts a carnival at the beginning of every year to kick off Level 1. A special dance called the “White Out Dance” is used to recognize Level 2 students. In an interview with the principal, he proudly pointed out a Hall of Fame poster hanging in the main office recognizing the achievements of the top-three scoring students in each content area of the CST. The principal went on to eagerly share: “We’re waiting any day now for our CAHSEE results because our goal was to increase the number of students passing by five percent to reach our top score ever.”

As part of the program, students receive rewards when they advance to one of the levels. The most successful incentive of the program has been the free lunch pass: “The number one incentive they want is early outs for lunch. That’s the number one. It’s free. It doesn’t cost any money...the kids who get up and walk out of class every day early for lunch with their gold card that’s a different color. It’s got gold sparklies and the whole bit; that’s really what the kids want.”

The success of the program has also trickled into other schools in the district. One teacher commented: “Other schools have been watching us as a model and finding their own incentive programs...my daughter [who attends another school] came home, and said ‘I got passes to the prom.’ So, that’s kind of my vision. I just see it as very positive. Yes, our kids come from lower socioeconomics. It does not deter them from academic excellence.”

According to teachers and administrators, the primary purpose of the program is to provide extrinsic motivation for students with the hope that it becomes intrinsic. One administrator shared:

“My personal opinion [is] we don’t have a lot of data. That’s the problem with this program, is it’s all about what you perceive. And when we first started, our kids hated the testing environment. They hated it so bad, they would not come to school...The last two years, we haven’t had to go get a student. They’re all showing up. They’re taking the tests pretty seriously in the beginning- last year. This year, we walked into classrooms and we could not believe the intensity. The kids are really focused on it. So, I believe it’s become intrinsic much quicker than we thought it would.

On changing the academic culture of the school, the assistant principal shared: “They really see it every day. It’s a reminder every day...And that has helped with our testing environment.” Additionally, the principal communicated on the value of the program: “I think there’s a different feel on campus than there was. And so changing the culture, changing the mindset was critical.”
The meaningful use of student data to intervene with struggling students was considered by many to be paramount to school success. Effective data use resulted in greater understanding and awareness of student needs. At one exemplary elementary school, teachers created student profiles, based on data that were used to tailor instruction. One teacher described data use in the following way: “This year, at the onset of the school year, we completed student profiles as an effort to get to know our students before the first day of school. The purpose was to direct us to understanding our students’ backgrounds to gain information on how they learn best. This experience allowed for all members to implement differentiated instruction at its optimal level.”

The ongoing use of data for monitoring student progress was particularly valuable because it led to timely and focused interventions. As explained by one teacher in an exemplary elementary school: “Having a literacy coach who progress monitors all students has made a positive increase in our school success…It’s important to have the support of another teacher whose sole job is to create specific interventions or groups according to our data.”

It was common for teachers to remark on the significance of learning how to work with data, “dig data,” and understand data. At one exemplary elementary school, their new principal was particularly focused on the use of student data for improvement. Nearly every teacher interviewed commented on the expertise of the principal regarding data use and interpretation, and they appreciated an instructional leader who helped them digest data more effectively. The principal explained: “What teachers tell me is that I am able to explain it and help them translate looking at the data into next steps. I am able to help them see things differently than they had seen them before.” A teacher elaborated: “I mean it definitely changed with the new administration. Now with previous [principals], we used data, but like I said, I don’t think we really had a clear understanding..."
as to what we were looking at. And she understands it backwards and forwards.”

PAVING THE WAY: FOCUSING ON DATA SCHOOL-WIDE

At one exemplary middle school in Southern California, stakeholders described the culture of the school as being highly data-intensive. Specifically, data is used to determine what to teach, what interventions are needed, as well as to determine the type of training and collaborations that are needed. The Assistant Principal remarked: “Data...that’s the first thing we look at. You walk into a school. You just look at the data. You want to see what the kids are doing. And you look at everything from suspension rates to attendance, to the grades that the teachers are giving, to matching that with the CST scores.”

When the principal was asked in an interview what has accounted for her school’s success, she concurred with the Assistant Principal and highlighted three main areas:

1. It would be a very, very deliberate, conscious, persistent focus on student academic needs;

2. It would be consistent use of data to drive whatever decisions; and

3. It would also be teaching kids to self-monitor. So, not only are we monitoring, they’re also self-monitoring.

On teacher explained that they use the data to focus, drill down, and be specific with how to adjust instruction to better assist students:

It’s become more specific. Because we know not only is it standard number sense 1.5, we know specific within that standard what might be causing problems for kids, whether it’s the language, or the way we’re presenting something…QEIA has really helped us become more focused, as opposed to just talking about something generally. Because it’s not just that the kids have trouble with integers. It’s specifically subtracting integers, and it’s specifically bigger ones.

On helping students to self-monitor, one teacher shared the significance of students being able to see where they fall on district benchmarks through data displays:

I don’t think any other school I’ve ever been to has mentioned using the data in this way... the kids can come in and see how they did on the benchmark by the color. They’re color-coded so they see their color and they know where they fell in the benchmark.

The teacher followed up by saying that her students feel pride and excitement over their improvement on tests. Classes at the school even have friendly competitions over test scores, but more importantly, students feel in control of their own learning:

I think the kids are more aware of their own performance. Now, it’s not about people telling me how I’m performing. Now, it’s about I also know how I’m performing and I can verify it and confirm by doing X, Y, and Z. If I want to change it, I also know my pathway to change it. So, I think they’re just more attentive to the academics.”

STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP

The first report in this series highlighted the importance of leaders for school improvement and identified 20 characteristics of exemplary administrators. The report noted that high performing schools tended to have principals that embodied those characteristics. Not surprisingly, a few teachers in these exemplary schools identified a change in leadership as a critical incident on the path toward improvement.

Several of the QEIA schools visited as part of this project experienced principal turnover due to staffing
changes made by superintendents, retirement, or principals seeking other opportunities. When highly effective principals joined the staff at these QEIA schools, they infused schools with new ideas, clearer expectations, and focused plans for how to collaborate to change the tide. One elementary school teacher talked about the significance of her principal’s leadership and said:

She helped us to pull together as a staff, learn what true collaboration is all about and use the smaller class sizes to our advantage. In focusing all of our efforts, we are now able to pinpoint specific areas that we can address. It has also created a climate of family with our staff and our students. We are one big team.

Other parents appreciated the compassionate nature of the principal and noted feeling welcome and an essential part of the school community. One parent who was aware of the principal’s prior success at a neighboring elementary school commented:

The only reason why my kids came here is because of [the principal], because I saw what he did at [the elementary school] which had a lot of issues and problems too…And as a person…you feel comfortable around him. He’s like a family member. Let’s put it that way. And, we all want the best for our kids, and you put yourself around a person like that that really cares, not just says that he cares, but he can show it in his actions. That’s why my kids are here…That’s why my kids are here.

Another mother echoed: “That’s what I’m saying is that it’s not just a principal and student. There’s a relationship there, and he cares. So, it makes a big difference in a child’s development when they know people care about them, and they’re not just a number or a student.”
The pathway to change for these QEIA schools was not without several roadblocks. Like other QEIA schools,\(^{11}\) they struggled with financial challenges due to the ongoing fiscal crisis in California. Maintaining class size reduction was particularly difficult with shrinking general funds and diminishing resources. Annual reductions in the teaching force due to budget cuts made it difficult for schools to retain consistent staff and sustain momentum. Additionally, like all organizations working toward systemic change, our exemplary schools noted that building the initial commitment necessary for improvement was sometimes challenging. Across the board, stakeholders in these exemplary schools emphasized five common features of their schools and cultures that helped them stay on the path and mitigate roadblocks:

1. Exemplary Leadership;
2. A Common Vision;
3. Willingness to Change and Innovate;
4. Ongoing and Open Communication; and
5. Relentless Drive and Dedication.

Staying the course began with an exemplar leader who set the tone for success and championed the endeavor. These leaders were accessible, visible, and compassionate. They clearly communicated their expectations and engendered a sense that everyone was in it together. In nearly every exemplary school visited, staff and parents often lauded the principal and attributed much of the school’s success to leadership. For example, one teacher at the exemplary high school remarked: “He makes you want to achieve more. I mean he really does. He’s always pushing the envelope that we lead the schools as far as doing new things that help students achieve. And we’ve shown it to be successful.”

One parent interviewed in an exemplary middle school honed in on the administration’s high level of accessibility and visibility: “I know that if they’re accessible to us, they’re also accessible to the kids. And just being visible, seeing them in the morning out there in the crosswalk, seeing them on campus. They’re just not out somewhere in education land. They’re actually visible.” In addition to accessibility and visibility, the parent reiterated the significance of the principal’s dedication and commitment: “They care about our kids. They want our kids to succeed…I think they’re very genuine in how they feel about all the students here, and just working hard.”

Additionally, critical to success is a laser-like focus on core shared norms and values. In successful schools, nearly everyone we interviewed shared a common vision of where the school was headed and how they were going to get there. They underscored

the importance of having common goals and views about how to improve student learning. One principal commented:

I think our success is because we had a vision of where we wanted to go and QEIA made that possible. It didn’t come in reverse order. Sometimes when people hit a jackpot of funds, they start trying to figure out what they need to do to spend the money. That is not what we did. We had a direction of where we were going. We had some guiding principles, and we had already started figuring out what we needed to do and how we could achieve it.

Moreover, the work of administrators and teachers was aligned with this vision. Goals for professional development and collaboration were consistent with the school vision. One teacher described her fellow colleagues as “a disciplined group fixed on a common goal.”

Stakeholders in highly effective schools also resoundingly emphasized the importance of gaining the commitment of teachers and staff; all stakeholders must understand, realize, accept the need for, and be willing to change. One teacher explained, “First, we have to get everybody to decide that there’s a need for it. Then, we’re more open to changing our ways. And that’s always the hardest part of changing human nature. We’re all resistant to change.” Another teacher echoed the importance of commitment to the change effort: “You just need to make sure that the staff is totally onboard with the mission. You have to have a common goal, and the goal should be to move the school forward, making sure of setting up kids for success.”

Along with being committed to change, a key driver to success was a willingness to innovate and adapt to changing times and circumstances. For administrators, it involved thinking outside of the box and being creative with the use of additional funds. For teachers, it included shifting paradigms to start collaborating with peers and sharing data and strategies rather than remaining isolated in individual classrooms.

Teachers also noted the salience of ongoing and open communication: “Make sure staff is open…use each other as resources…my most valuable resources are my other colleagues, hands down.” Others expressed the significance of communication to enhance relationships and understanding of others: “Our communication, our collaboration helped us all understand not just what people thought but why they thought that. You did get a fuller understanding of what it was like to be a teacher at that grade level, doing what they were doing.”

Other teachers shared the importance of ongoing communication that clearly laid out what was needed from staff: “[The administrators] always present their expectations. They do it daily through email, during staff meetings. Just constantly, anytime we meet and anytime we talk, it’s always these are my expectations; this is what I’m expecting from my staff.”

Finally, teachers and administrators stressed the importance of relentless drive and dedication to working together to achieve goals. Stakeholders in highly effective schools overwhelmingly possessed a positive, “can-do” outlook. Schools celebrated success, stayed positive, and relied on each other even in the face of challenges. One teacher vocalized: “I would say definitely it takes a village. It takes all of us to help all of our students.” Another teacher commented: “It’s everybody working together, and that’s when you see that growth.” Successful schools also largely had the support of parents in the classroom, on committees (SSC, ELAC, PTA), and participation at various school events which helped to improve the school’s culture and build a strong sense of community. According to one teacher at an exemplary elementary school:

We’ve had a lot better parent involvement, especially since they see a lot of the program and things that we’ve tried to do, to bring the families into the school and make them more involved and then they become more involved in certain fundraisers and even social things like talent shows and stuff like that, that has brought the community together.

Relentless drive and dedication was encouraged when exemplary leaders modeled such commitment. In one example, a teacher in a particularly effective school said: “She’s always willing to listen, stay late, do whatever it takes for our students. Contact the parents, contact the community…She’s just willing to go above and beyond and always try her hardest to do whatever it is.” Because of the principal’s modeling and leading by example, staff were inspired to follow suit: “She does whatever it takes every day and I think that’s what leads our team to have everybody do whatever it takes.”
CONCLUSIONS

Seven pathways to change were identified by the 10 exemplary schools studied for this report:

1. Reducing Class Size;
2. Leveraging Collaboration Time;
3. Responding to Student Needs;
4. Building Local Accountability;
5. Recognizing and Rewarding Students;
6. Using Student Data to Intervene; and
7. Strengthening Leadership.

It is important to note that stakeholders from the same schools often highlighted multiple pathways as critical to their school’s success. As seen in Table 2, each school’s stakeholders described at least three pathways; two sets of school stakeholders described as many as six pathways. This suggests that pathways are not mutually exclusive; that is, each of the pathways has the potential to work in concert with other approaches to change.

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At the same time, as seen in Table 3, stakeholders in at least three schools mentioned each pathway, suggesting that there was agreement regarding the significance of each pathway for school improvement. Leveraging Collaboration Time was mentioned in all schools; Responding to Student Needs was also considered particularly influential. Stakeholders in fewer schools emphasized Strengthening Leadership and Recognizing and Rewarding Students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PATHWAY</th>
<th># OF SCHOOLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leveraging Collaboration Time</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to Student Needs</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing Class Size</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Local Accountability</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Student Data to Intervene</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening Leadership</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing &amp; Rewarding Students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

STARTING THE JOURNEY

Given the significance of effective collaboration, this may be a good starting point for any school. Effective collaboration was described in the first report of this series\(^\text{12}\) and stresses the importance of key prerequisites – commitment, willingness to innovate, trust and respect, and supportive leadership. When these prerequisites are coupled with a variety of supportive structures, collaboration can foster meaningful work among teachers and other school stakeholders. According to stakeholders in exemplary schools, supportive structures include well-defined, formal teams with a clear expectation for their collaboration along with a specific purpose and goal for the work. Furthermore, a dedicated architect – a key leader who champions the effort and keeps the team on task – facilitates progress. In addition, collaboration should occur regularly and frequently; that is, formal time should be scheduled for collaboration.

Secondly, the emphasis on building local accountability and maintaining high expectations for teaching and learning, specifically, suggests the need for school leaders to set ambitious, but reachable goals for all their learners. These goals should be communicated to all members of the school community along with clear expectations about how everyone has a role in the change process. Progress must be monitored regularly and communicated openly to strengthen collective accountability for success. In exemplary schools we visited, they accepted no excuses and they were committed to teaching each and every student; this type of culture begins with clear goals, high expectations, transparency, ongoing monitoring, and celebrations of success.

Moreover, the prevalence of incidents focused specifically on understanding student needs and intervening appropriately – either through targeted interventions or instructional changes due to class size reduction – suggests a critical action: put systems and structures in place for getting to know students and their learning needs. School stakeholders should be equipped to both assess frequently and interpret data to identify opportunities for re-teaching. Small groups and one-on-one instruction provide additional mechanisms for getting to know student needs. Once those needs are known, master schedules can allow for more flexible intervention time that can be used for grouping students and working with them to get them back on track when they are behind. Creative approaches to finding more instructional time – after school, at lunch, before school – can be used to intervene in meaningful ways.

Lastly, the importance of an exemplary administrator to guide the effort must not be overlooked. In this report and the first report in the series, stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that an effective principal was a prerequisite for change. As seen in Table 4, the research on QEIA reported in this series has uncovered 20 characteristics of exemplary principals that can be used by both schools and districts to hire, train, and coach new and existing administrators.

### Table 4: Top 20 Characteristics of Exemplary Administrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communicator</td>
<td>Able to effectively communicate goals, responsibilities, and tasks required of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Listener</td>
<td>Able to hear and understand what people are saying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible</td>
<td>Present in classrooms, conducts walkthroughs, visible on campus throughout the day - i.e., mornings, break, lunch, and after school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Leader</td>
<td>Able to offer direction and expertise to ensure student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous</td>
<td>Willing to make difficult decisions/be unpopular even in the face of uncertainty for the greater good of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In it Together</td>
<td>Collaborative/team player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on a Vision</td>
<td>Steadfast implementation of shared school goals and standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current</td>
<td>Up-to-date with educational research/trends/literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>Understanding and empathetic to the needs of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>Holding students and teachers accountable to achieving their best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated</td>
<td>Willing to go above and beyond /do whatever it takes to help students, teachers, parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Impartial and honest in decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized</td>
<td>Efficient and methodical with tasks/responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>Flexible, adaptive, and willingness to innovate/open to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approachable</td>
<td>Warm, welcome, open-door policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Awareness</td>
<td>In tune with the needs of students, teachers, parents, and the larger school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisive</td>
<td>Able to commit, execute, and follow-through with decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-driven</td>
<td>Utilizes various forms of data for informed decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leads by Example</td>
<td>Models good behavior for the entire school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourceful</td>
<td>Able to bring in and leverage existing resources/build the capacity of staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Final Thoughts

The first two reports in this series provide valuable information about QEIA implementation and impacts. QEIA served as a catalyzing event for schools; stakeholders capitalized on the opportunity to change structures, establish systems, and provide better instruction to learners. With the intent to improve student learning, exemplary schools leveraged QEIA to chart their own unique pathways to change. These lessons, however, can be used broadly by other schools seeking their own quality improvement. The key, however, is to begin with a clear vision that unifies the staff, high expectations for teaching and learning, relentless drive and dedication, and pathways to change that align with local needs. When asked about the advice she had for other schools seeking change, one teacher in an exemplary school put it this way:

I’d tell them that it doesn’t matter what size shoe I wear, it’s not going to fit you. And believe me. We’ve had visiting teams from inside and outside the district. And because they had similar demographics to us, they’re looking for a program. We said, “Look, we have not been successful because of a program. We’ve been successful because we all agree to be successful. You have to find what’s going to work for you and your school and then everybody has to buy into it. If you don’t have buy-in – if this comes from the top-down, then you’re just doing the same thing that you’ve done at your school for 50 years and you’re going to have the same results.” It has to be something the teachers come up with, something the staff works together on, and something that everybody can support…Whatever gets handed down to them as the flavor of the month probably isn’t going to get much buy-in. I think the key to our [success] is we’ve held the course. We set out early on what we wanted to do, how we wanted to get there, and then we’ve stuck with it.