The Spokane School District: Intentionally Building Capacity that Leads to Increased Student Achievement

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Teachers from Hutton Elementary in Spokane remembering what it feels like to learn something new. "I wanted them to experience what new learning feels like for kids," said Principal Chuck Demarest, back row, second from left.

Introduction

This case study documents strategies leading to successful change efforts in the Spokane, Washington, school district. It serves as a rich source of ideas and creative solutions that address many of the problems facing districts as they work to raise levels of student achievement.

For several years, school reform efforts have focused on stimulating change in individual schools. However, it has become apparent that school districts themselves play a crucial

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role in stimulating and supporting positive reform. For example, Bodilly (1998) found that in districts providing support for comprehensive reform, implementation proceeded faster and penetrated deeper than in districts where that support was lacking. The reform requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act lend a sense of urgency to the need to make significant changes leading to academic achievement for all children districtwide. As documented in this case study, Spokane is well on its way to eliminating the achievement gap between high poverty schools and those schools enrolling more affluent students.

Fouts (2003), in summarizing research on classroom, school, and district effectiveness in Washington State, identified several district practices that contribute to such success:

- District personnel provide vision and direction to the reform efforts
- They set expectations and provide the resources, mentoring, and expertise necessary for schools to achieve their learning goals
- They provide and support focused, meaningful professional development
- They decentralize decision-making (pp. 39-40)
- District policies provide appropriate levels of flexibility, support for improvement and incentives to stay the course with a promising plan, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all approaches (McCarthy, Taggart, and Celio, 2000 in Fouts, 2003)
- The district removes barriers to change that afflict some schools; they remove resistant teachers from schools.
- They provide and support effective and stable leadership in schools along with strong oversight of school performance and plans for improvement.

Cawelti and Protheroe (2001) further conclude that the following characteristics are necessary in successful districts:

- The superintendent and other leaders develop and nurture widely shared beliefs about learning, including high expectations with a strong focus on results.
- They restructure systems to decentralize management and budgeting to the building level; this increases accountability by linking people to results as schools use feedback data about performance to plan for improvement.
- They work extensively on curriculum alignment, ensuring that the local curriculum matches the state frameworks; they do item-by-item and student by student analysis of student responses to test items. (p. 98)

McLaughlin & Talbert (2003) studied reforming districts in California and found five “key conditions that characterize reforming districts”:

- “a system-approach to reform
- learning community at the central office level
- coherent focus on teaching and learning
- a stance of supporting professional learning and instructional improvement
- data-based inquiry and accountability” (p. 10).
Togneri and Anderson (2003), in studying five high poverty districts that were improving student achievement, found the following characteristics present in these districts:

- Acknowledgement of poor performance and willingness to see solutions
- A systemwide approach to improving instruction
- A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement
- Decision making based on data
- Adoption of new approaches to professional development
- Redefined leadership roles
- A commitment to sustaining reform efforts over the long haul

Overall, districts committed to improving instruction and achievement in all schools exemplify a strikingly similar set of strategies:

- They use a systems or systemwide approach to improving instruction.
- They develop a vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement. This includes developing districtwide curricula and aligning curriculum to state frameworks & doing item-by-item and student-by-student analysis of student responses. Share beliefs about learning, including high expectations, and providing a strong focus on results.
- They make decisions based on data, not instinct.
- They adopt new approaches to professional development.
- They redefine and increase instructional leadership by building expertise among teacher and principals. This includes fostering networks of instructionally proficient principals and teacher leader. This also requires strategic allocation of financial resources and putting in place support systems for new teachers.
- Redefined leadership roles include the following characteristics:
  - Central offices drive systemwide change
  - Principal and teacher leaders are crucial to the systems for instructional leadership
  - Work to build trust and collaboration is intentional; these efforts include key stakeholders (committee of teachers, principals, union leaders, university colleagues, board member, parent leaders, and other interested parties)
- They understand that achieving desired outcomes for reform efforts requires making a long term commitment to provide resources and ongoing support.
Spokane: The City Context

Spokane is located along the eastern border of Washington State, 18 miles west of the Idaho border and 110 miles south of the Canadian border, in the heart of the Inland Northwest. Spokane derives its name from the Native American tribe that makes its home in the area and translates as "Children of the Sun." With a population of 195,629 in 2000, Spokane is the largest city between Seattle and Minneapolis. Both ethnic diversity (see table below) and poverty have increased in recent years: 9.2 percent of families and 15.9 percent of individuals were living in poverty in 2000.

As the county seat, Spokane serves as a hub for business, retail, and financial services. It is the major health care provider to a 36-county region encompassing parts of Montana, Oregon, Idaho, British Columbia, and Alberta, as well as Washington. Spokane experiences four seasons, with each contributing to the region's unique lifestyle. Situated between the Rocky and Cascade mountain ranges, Spokane is protected from damp coastal weather like that of Seattle, as well as harsh winters. The growing season extends from mid-April to mid-October with summer weather that is ideal for enjoying the many mountain and lake recreational areas in the vicinity. Winter weather includes occasional snowfalls of several inches while nearby winter sports areas receive a great deal more snow.

The School District: Demographics, Poverty, and Achievement

In comparison to many urban districts, Spokane has a relatively low minority population, totaling 10.5 percent. However, the increasing numbers of children living in poverty and attending school provide an ongoing challenge. Twenty-six of the 35 elementary schools are Title I schools. More than half of these elementary schools have a 63 percent or higher rate of poverty. In addition, the increasing numbers of English Language Learners now stands at 1200 students who speak 33 languages. Many of the more recent students are refugees who may never have attended school before. It is an ongoing challenge to provide translators as well as create a context where these children feel safe and welcome as they adjust to conditions in their new home. The district also houses six middle schools, five high schools, and four special schools with a student/teacher ratio of 1 to 21 in elementary and 1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment/Population</td>
<td>31,362</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
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<td>2.3%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>89.5%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent minority</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible for free or</td>
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<td>Special Education (2002)</td>
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<td>Transitional Bilingual (2002)</td>
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<td>ELL (2003)</td>
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The Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) is the state test aligned with Washington standards given yearly to students in fourth, seventh, and 10th grades. In spite of the challenges presented by students living in poverty, most of the WASL scores in the district have been on an upward path for several years. For example, the percentage of fourth grade students meeting grade-level standards in mathematics consistently went up each year from 1996-2004. With a few scattered exceptions, similar gains can be seen for the other content areas and grades. In fact, these gains always approach and often exceed the average gains made in Washington state overall.
### Spokane District Test Data: Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)

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<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Math % Met Standard</th>
<th>Reading % Met Standard</th>
<th>Writing % Met Standard</th>
<th>Listening % Met Standard</th>
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<td>47.1</td>
<td>42.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>32.8</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>71</td>
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<td>2003-2004</td>
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<td>44.9</td>
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**Introduction to Change in Spokane**

The change process in Spokane began after the wake-up call issued by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Several individuals, including teachers' union leaders and district administrators, began reading, researching and discussing models to enhance achievement for low-income students. In 1991, the district began to review the educational design of programs and services in Title I schools serving large numbers of students living in poverty. This spurred the creation of the Facilitator Program, a site-based professional development effort that started with two facilitators and has grown to
75 in 2003-2004. This program is now shifting into a more clearly delineated instructional coaching model.

In 1993, Gary Livingston joined the district as superintendent and was highly visible. During Livingston's tenure, the district began to receive awards and recognition within the state of Washington for some of their Title I schools. Some coordinators and teachers served on state teams developing the state content standards. When Brian Benzel succeeded Livingston in 2001, he carried on with a fairly new central leadership team helping to set the vision. Boundaries between the central office and school sites became more permeable as central administrators became site supervisors, partnering with schools in an active and visible way.

**Theory of Action**

Spokane has been on a nearly 20-year path of improvement that reflects a theory of action about how districts can encourage and support the development of high performing schools. "The mission of the Spokane Public Schools is to develop the skills and talents of all students through rigorous learning experiences, supportive relationships, and relevant real life application." Central to this mission and the current strategic plan is the notion that everyone is a learner and professional learning communities are essential. The photo and caption at the beginning of this paper exemplify the efforts of this district to assure that staff understands their role as learners as well as teachers.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are "communities of continuous inquiry and improvement" (Hord, 2004). According to Eaker, et al. (2002), "The characteristics of a professional learning community are essential to the sustained improvement of any organization." They recommend the following framework, exemplified in Spokane:

The PLC conceptual framework can be grouped into three major themes that are evident in the policies, programs, and practices of the school or district. The themes are: (1) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (2) collaborative teams that work independently to achieve common goals, and (3) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement. (p. 3)

In Spokane, the focus on learning includes administrators and teachers as well as students, and plays out in the multi-pronged professional development efforts. Change efforts began nearly 20 years ago with key individuals looking at what was working in other schools and districts and spearheading the use of research-based strategies. This emphasis on research underlies current reform efforts and is summed up by one administrator: "Learning by reading research now permeates the district." Administrators and teachers in Spokane frequently reference experts in the field. Many echo the words of

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2 The 2004-2007 Strategic Plan can be found at: [http://www.spokaneschools.org/StrategicPlan/#top](http://www.spokaneschools.org/StrategicPlan/#top)
an administrator who says, "We are now more intentional about what we do and we work to make the process transparent."

In other words, information about change processes must be shared with others across the district; these efforts—both successes and challenges—need to be made very public. The Instructional Coaching Work Team, a committee started in April 2004 to research existing coaching models and develop the district coaching model, provides one example of this philosophy in action. The team recently made its work transparent by:

1. Sharing plans in progress with representative groups
2. Holding meetings that are open to any staff or community member wishing to attend
3. Posting drafts of plans on the Internet so that district staff could see the ideas being considered even before the entire team discussed the ideas and reached consensus

Strategies that support the reform agenda, described below, include:

1. A systems approach that permeates the district.
2. Raising expectations for all students, especially those living in poverty.
3. Intentionally developing collaboration and building relationships among staff members, different role groups, and with the community.
4. Effectively using data to drive instruction.
5. Professional development focused on building professional learning communities that are intentionally embedded in the work and foster collaboration and relationship building.
6. Leadership development aimed at building instructional leadership skills in administrators while also building a strong cadre of teacher leaders. Teacher leaders include site-based facilitator/coaches and mentors who deliver professional development and work closely with teachers.
7. Developing a districtwide curriculum aligned with Washington Essential Academic Learning Requirements or standards (EALRs) and Grade Level Expectations (GLEs)
8. Building community support.

1. Systems Approach

An overarching theme in this district is a systems approach as articulated by Peter Senge (1994) and Senge, et al. (2000). This means viewing each school and the district itself as a learning organization. Embedded in this approach are strategies for ensuring collaboration, developing leaders at all levels, building capacity so programs continue in the absence of a particular leader, and breaking down “silos” of isolation by creating closer relationships and better communication between the district office and school sites.
In addition, the district has been influenced by the work of Michael Fullan (1993, 1999, 2001a, b) in understanding change, building relationships, developing a knowledge base, and creating coherence.

Superintendent Brian Benzel believes in helping others "extend their spheres of influence out to the larger system because ultimately we are responsible for every child in the Spokane school system." To accomplish that, it's important to create avenues to share what is working as well as what's not working. This happens through training administrators and involving instructional coaches, mentors, and many teachers in designing and sometimes remodeling processes and structures that ultimately influence classroom instruction.

One way this started to play out during the 2003-2004 school year was developing a network of school directors to replace the area supervisors. School directors have supervisory responsibility for a smaller number of schools and, as a result, spend more time in schools getting to know the staff and supporting principals. They often accompany site administrators on a "walk-through" and thus develop a more intimate view of the teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms. Knowing a few schools in this way helps them provide direct, useful advice and assistance to principals.

Nancy Stowell, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, talks about the need for "the whole system to move forward, not just creating a few islands of excellence out there." She says, "Those schools that aren't moving forward, it's not just their problem. We now view it as a system problem, to get them to be more successful. … That is why we now have people from the Teaching and Learning central office staff out in buildings, because that's where the action is. That's why we're working as a team in our buildings with our principals and the staff, so they see that this approach is much broader than anything we've done previously. We don't want schools thinking it's their problem. … We want to create a different way to look at our problems and solve them."

An important aspect of this systems approach is being clear about the focus, goals, and mission of the district and making sure that classroom teachers as well as building and central administrators understand them. Administrators now view the district as one system and feel that they are responsible for the progress of every child in the district, not just those in their own building. They have moved from a system of schools to a school system where everyone takes ownership of and responsibility for student performance. Administrators communicate this to teachers and expect the same expanded responsibility from each teacher. This means that no one can shut his or her classroom door and work in isolation. Working as a member of a team, collaborating, and being part of a professional learning community is an explicit expectation within the district.
2. Raising Expectations

As a new superintendent in the district in 2001, Brian Benzel and the school board established a stretch goal for 90 percent of all students to meet standards by 2007 and stated the belief, "We can do this." This created a sense of urgency that built on the strong foundation in a district that, as a result of ongoing efforts, often approaches, and sometimes exceeds, the state average for achievement. For teachers, the focus is shifting toward maximizing learning for all students and away from using perceived student deficits as an excuse for low test scores. These high expectations are coupled with intentional, research-based school change plans that are subject to ongoing revision that reflects changing needs. As a result, there is now a clear focus on teaching and learning with significant clarity about instruction, and the achievement gap is closing with many high-poverty schools making faster gains than some of the more affluent schools.

3. Collaboration and Building Relationships

The foundation of many of Spokane's change efforts appears to be a conscious focus on building relationships and developing avenues for working collaboratively. Nancy Stowell emphasizes the importance of "becoming more relational." Roberta Glover, principal at Glover Middle School, sees relationship building as the umbrella along with developing community support and celebrating success, almost the overarching principal that guides change in this district. While relationships alone will not enhance student achievement, it is essential to be able to talk with everyone on staff in an atmosphere of trust that creates a safe environment to discuss thorny issues and engage in collaborative problem solving without fear of reprisal. This emphasis on trust and relationship building is central to creating a healthy, collegial school climate where people feel free to ask the necessary questions. In most of the district schools, there is a relational strand woven into interview questions asked during the hiring process in order to assure that new employees hold the district's value on relationship building. Engaging in activities through professional learning communities (PLCs) contributes to relationship building. A highly productive and trusting working relationship also exists between the Spokane district and the teachers' union.

A major player in collaborative efforts - the Spokane Education Association

One of the more interesting collaborative efforts in Spokane is the Joint Restructuring Committee (JRC). This effort, which has evolved over time, involves three important bodies: the district administration, the school board, and the Spokane Education Association (SEA) or teachers' union. Following the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, union leaders decided to examine the role of the association, its leadership, and its relationship to the Spokane Public Schools. Association leaders began reading and discussing the literature on challenges facing public education. They invited key district administrators to join the discussions which progressed to deep dialogues and resulted in the formation of the JRC. This larger committee started questioning the status quo and
exploring what needed to occur within school communities to make a real difference for students.

Maureen Ramos, SEA president, provides a view of the nearly seamless working of this committee:

The JRC jointly developed a strategic plan—a living document that was research based and would be evaluated and adjusted as needed. This required significant trust building for these three entities to work together in what may be an unprecedented action of co-writing the strategic plan. This took individuals who possessed both integrity and communication skills as well as a powerful commitment to do what is best for the students in the district.

We learned together. When you learn together and share that deep dialogue and develop common vocabulary and understand decisions versus judgments, those things build relationships. … And the relationship is deep enough that if any of us leave, it will continue. So it is not based on people [and personalities]. It is based on premises of beliefs and commonly shared beliefs that are supported and valued. When someone from either anchor forgets, you can count on somebody else to say, 'No, you can't do that.' It's quite amazing.

The SEA and administration have developed trust agreements that guide their work and negotiations. The SEA was also instrumental in developing both the Mentor Program described below and the Spokane Alliance, a community effort engaging churches, local labor unions, and other community organizations in efforts to accomplish positive change for the entire Spokane community. The Citizens for the Levy group worked with the alliance to pass both a bond issue and a tax levy to support district efforts.

**Recommended Steps for Collaboration and Building Relationships**

To develop a collaborative relationship similar to the one between administration and the teachers' union in Spokane, the following steps are recommended:

- Read and learn together.
- Value every anchor—union, school board, and administration.
- Build trust—this is crucial. Develop written trust agreements and define the relationships among all three anchors ahead of time.
- Consider using interest-based negotiations. This method determines the interests of both parties and brings the two sides of the negotiating table closer together to study and solve the differences in a collaborative manner.
- Separate labor management issues from the strategic team work.
- Develop relationships among key administrators including principals and union leaders.
- Recognize that time is an issue—provide time and pay people for their time.
- Provide for teacher renewal. Whenever possible, give teachers time during the school day to accomplish the work.
• Support, honor, respect, and value the professionals doing the work through monetary compensation and other ways.
• Understand that change does not happen overnight: it is an ongoing process that cannot be dictated. People need time to adjust, digest, and catch up when multiple changes are taking place simultaneously.
• Celebrate and have fun!

Student Relationships

Developing relationships with and among students is part of this mix. Two of the high schools are restructuring into smaller learning communities (SLCs) in order to break down into more personalized units. In this way, staff will be able to work with limited numbers of students and build stronger relationships with groups of students. Lewis and Clark High School has chosen not to break into SLCs, responding to community and staff requests to remain more traditional in structure. Nevertheless, in order to encourage relationship building and closer bonds with students, Lewis and Clark has developed a Student Advocacy program with advocacy groups meeting daily. Each adult in the school has responsibility for a group of students. In addition to team building, their activities include Character Counts, community service, and associated student body activities. Advocacy groups are also present in some of the middle schools and contain both seventh and eighth grade students in the same group to help break down barriers between grades. At Shaw Middle School, students connect and build relationships with each other and a significant teacher in smaller groups each day during Home Base, similar to homeroom. During this time they also work with the six pillars of character in Character Counts. Many teachers have also been trained in and apply the principles of Love and Logic in their classrooms.

4. Using Data to Drive Instruction

Effective use of data to influence instructional decisions is another core strategy for positive change and student achievement in the Spokane school district. Assessment Director Joe Kinney recalls past experience in the district with standardized testing. "We had to give the test, results were sent out, but no one paid attention to them," he says. That attitude has shifted and the office of assessment and evaluation is now inundated with requests for data. Training helps administrators and teachers understand data, which

3 Character Counts is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonsectarian character-education framework that teaches the Six Pillars of Character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. The CHARACTER COUNTS! Coalition includes thousands of schools, communities and nonprofit organizations. http://www.charactercounts.org/

is presented in user-friendly formats that provide an honest, clear picture that drives change.

Developing a culture that values data starts at the top with the superintendent and assistant superintendent lending importance and building interest among administrators and teachers. They begin by understanding, using, and sharing the data with the public to start building curiosity. Superintendent Brian Benzel uses data charts and scatter plots that he calls "bugs on the windshield." These charts graphically indicate the narrowing of the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers. Whether a school uses data is greatly influenced by the principal. At Bemiss Elementary School, for instance, data are prominently displayed in the principal's office and staff members know how to interpret and use these results in their planning. Student achievement shows consistent gains, a cause for celebration at Bemiss.

As soon as data are available in Spokane, someone from the central office sits down with the school to help staff learn how to use the figures. This provides a connection to a knowledgeable person from "downtown" who can talk about data. These conversations eventually move to what needs to be changed in classroom teaching and learning. When data are broken down to the classroom and student level, teachers really start to pay attention. Putting a name and a face on a score gets their attention. This is the logical entry point to introduce further professional development around teaching and learning.

In September, each school receives a report with both WASL and Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores in a variety of formats; scatter plots linking the two assessments; a Z score study showing the relationship between test scores and free and reduced-price lunch; and other assessments and school environment data. It is necessary to show that data are actually a reflection of what is taking place in classrooms as well as to guide people in interpreting and using data effectively. Some rules of thumb developed by Spokane are:

1. Display data graphically in a variety of user-friendly formats—bar graphs, scatter plots, and tables. Use more than one type of display.
2. Provide data to teachers as early as possible during the school year.
3. Present and use data in a non-threatening way, keeping it objective and letting teachers do the analysis.
4. Provide training to help staff learn to interpret the data:
   a. Look at strengths and celebrate them first; then ask the harder questions.
   b. Provide guiding questions [see appendix B] or ideas of what to look for in the data.
   c. Provide guidance so teachers make the tie between data and the instructional program.
5. Require site administrators, their supervisors, and appropriate professional development staff to attend data sessions along with teachers.
6. Add levels of complexity to data over time:
   a. Start with individual school data and then use district and state data to look at the larger picture.
b. Disaggregate data to make comparisons by gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic level.

c. Encourage people—once they're comfortable with data—to make connections among district tests, state tests, and norm-referenced tests so that each measure isn't taken as an independent slice of data.

7. Work to build linkages among levels—rescaled data enables a teacher to look at an individual student's performance over time, from grade to grade.

8. When possible, provide teachers with their own printouts that they can refer to over and over, rather than continuously going to the Website.

This intensive and thorough use of data influences curriculum and instruction; feeds into professional development needs and plans; and calls for training both administrators and teacher leaders to address the needs of their schools uncovered in the data. As Joe Kinney reports, "The correlation between schools with the principal using data and those not using data is night and day." Learning-focused conversations around data are invaluable in guiding school change that positively affects student achievement.

An Historical Look at Using Data

State testing provided an impetus for altering the way schools and teachers analyzed and used data in Spokane. The district looked for ways to display data graphically and then compiled individualized data packets for each school. District data were included for comparison. District staff scheduled meetings with each school to help them understand and use the information. Three to four hours of uninterrupted time was provided so the school administrators, the area director, and site facilitators could learn to interpret the data. The process included a set of questions to guide the exploration.

Data packets included state and district assessments as well as norm-referenced test information—in this case the ITBS—so teachers could start making connections between them. Correlational studies between WASL and ITBS indicate a fairly positive correlation from one test score to the other. Later on, schools were provided with data on students over time so teachers could look back and see how students did in previous grades. Once teachers start looking at data from the classroom level, they become concerned about their own students and this focuses their attention. With the ITBS, they can look at the break-out of items by subcategory and see patterns indicating needs in subgroups of students. In order to accomplish this level of data analysis, the district had to write its own software.

Important aspects of the focus on data include:

1. Capturing and presenting data in easily interpretable formats.
2. Sitting down with teachers and using specific questions to guide their analysis.
3. Giving teachers at least two to three hours of uninterrupted time to focus on their data and to analyze and plan around it—teacher by teacher.
4. Training a representative group of teachers who then work with other small
groups of teachers.
5. Having administrators present at these sessions.
6. Providing the big picture first and then drilling down to more specific information
that assists in planning for instruction.
7. Looking first for evidence of success and then guiding teachers to tie the data on
their instructional program with the need for improvement.
8. Looking at how well students are meeting standards.
9. Adding economic information to spur teachers to investigate how to narrow the
achievement gap between students living in poverty and those who are more
affluent.
10. Using several types of assessment data to help guide planning.

5. Professional Development

Professional development can be delivered to teachers and administrators in many ways,
including the site-based instructional coach/facilitator model, mentoring, and leadership
training for administrators (described below). Staff training efforts are based on the
national standards published by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC)\(^5\).

Spokane channeled some of its Title I and state Learning Assistance Program (LAP)
funds into professional development aimed at changing teacher practices. The district
hoped this would help narrow the achievement gap and address the fact that many staff
members held lower expectations for low-income students. The intent was to refine and
deepen content knowledge and pedagogy while training teachers to work collaboratively
in professional learning communities rather than in isolation. Professional learning
communities are intentional, embedded in the work of teaching, ongoing, and based in
part on the work of Robert Eaker and Rick DuFour (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker &
DuFour, 2002).

A five-year grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, referred to as SHAPeS
(Spokane High Achieving and Performing Schools) provided a significant stimulus to
reading and discussing research. As one teacher said, "People were actually paid to read
and think in the planning process. Teacher leaders became excited and were willing to
give more and more time." Professional development, in the words of one administrator,
is now "research-based, systemwide, driven deeply, and seamless."

\(^5\) http://www.nsdc.org/
One outcome of the professional development focus in Spokane was the birth of the Facilitator Project 13 years ago. In most of the schools that are eligible, Title I funds are being used to support this model in lieu of hiring paraprofessionals. Facilitators/coaches with deep content knowledge are trained to deliver professional development directly to their own schools. They also meet with teachers in grade level groups as well as one-on-one to help develop effective collaboration skills, lesson plans, and effective use of data. In addition, they provide training in using best practices and research-based strategies; offer current research information; and guide book studies. They also offer in-classroom coaching which includes modeling lessons, team teaching, and observing a teacher and giving feedback. Facilitators work closely with the principal and participate in a support network with their colleagues, meeting bi-weekly to exchange ideas and learn new strategies.

Most facilitators spend about 80 percent of their time in the classroom working directly with teachers and students. They strive to use a team approach and develop a partnership in working with teachers. Relationship building is seen as central to their work as it is to the work of all adults in this district. The facilitator's role is to serve as a resource and source of support for teachers and specifically not to supervise or evaluate teachers. In the most productive cases, teachers and facilitators engage in ongoing dialogue around teaching and learning; view each other as resources; and come to value the time spent together.

When successfully integrated into a school, the facilitation process can-and has-turned schools around. However, this is not accomplished in short order. It has taken three or more years to witness significant progress in some schools. Change is contingent on the skills and sensitivity of each facilitator, as well as the rapport he or she builds with other staff members. Again, relationship building—while not sufficient alone to raise achievement—is a central and necessary ingredient in the success of this program.

Thus, productive collaboration is at the heart of the facilitator process. "Real collaboration" does not mean serving on building committees and doing some mutual planning. In the facilitators' context, collaboration occurs when teachers begin to solve problems together and ask some of the tough questions around teaching and learning such as, "How can we do this better? I tried this lesson and it isn't working. What can I do to make it work?"

By leading book studies and reading articles, facilitators strive to build the theory base and guide teachers to put it into practice as they work side-by-side in classrooms. After applying some of the "how to" strategies that affect students' learning, they then attach the theory to the strategies rather than feeding it up-front. Facilitators support adult learning by stepping back much of the time instead of offering their own solutions; they are constantly being challenged in their quest to develop a balance between their own knowledge and expertise, and their need to guide teachers in ways that allow them to

http://www.spokaneschools.org/ProfessionalLearning/
learn, to make room for their own "aha" moments. Skilled facilitators learn to ask more questions; listen more and say less; use a constructivist teaching style; and develop their own facilitative leadership skills.

This model is a powerful process for building a professional learning community within each of the facilitated schools. Teachers tell their stories and discuss curriculum, lessons, strategies, and classroom applications. As they do that, they learn to listen to each other; to use each other as resources; to validate and respect each other; and to develop the working relationships necessary for collaboration, powerful teaching, and learning to take place.

The district now has 75 coach/facilitators. The number assigned to a school varies, from a .5 FTE coach at one school, up to four coaches at some of the high-poverty schools. Some of these Title I facilitated schools now exceed the academic achievement gains of the more affluent schools in the district. Thus, a challenge is to provide the same kind of services to schools that are not eligible for poverty funds. As with any effective program, the coach/facilitator model is continually being tweaked and the focus is now geared more toward a coaching model. At its best, the facilitator/coaching model is instrumental in moving a school toward becoming a high performing learning community (HPLC).

**The Mentor Program**

A more recent professional development effort is the Mentor Project, called Career in Teaching (CIT). CIT, now in its second year, is a collaborative effort between the Spokane Education Association and the district, developed and jointly administered by both entities and included in the bargaining contract. All new teachers are required to participate as a condition of hire. Some teachers changing teaching levels or schools and a few of the more experienced teachers who can benefit from the program are also involved.

The CIT goal is to help new teachers have a more successful first year and accelerate their growth as teachers by putting into practice what is known about teaching and learning and supported by current research. Learning from the past, the district and teachers' union spent an entire year planning and studying the research and mentoring programs across the state of Washington. The primary resource for the program is *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships* (Lipton, Wellman, & Humbard, 2003). The process centers on learning-focused mentoring, planning, and reflective conferences. During such conferences, participants engage in dialogue about what was planned and how it went; they also reflect on the experience. In embracing the process, the district now has a cadre of district Mentoring Matters trainers in addition to the eight fulltime mentors, called Consulting Teachers. Mentoring Matters

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7 [http://www.sedl.org/change/facilitate/welcome.html](http://www.sedl.org/change/facilitate/welcome.html)
8 [http://www.spokaneschools.org/CIT/](http://www.spokaneschools.org/CIT/)
trainers include program coordinators, facilitator/coaches, principals, assistant principals, and some principals' assistants.\(^9\)

As with the facilitator/coaching model, mentoring is purposefully not evaluative so feedback to new teachers can be focused and concrete. Consulting teachers meet with new teachers to set goals and develop professional growth plans. They also assist the teacher in crafting a lesson and provide feedback on the delivery. They spend daily time in classrooms modeling lessons and strategies; team teaching; observing and providing feedback; and arranging for teachers to observe expert teaching in other classrooms. They sometimes cover the mentee's classroom if a substitute is not available so the teacher can observe others. They also videotape lessons to use with the teacher in evaluating his or her own teaching. They always meet to debrief on any activity, engaging in "learning focused" conversations by asking reflective questions that facilitate the new teacher's growth. In these conversations, the mentor will paraphrase but not rush in to "fix" or solve a problem. This helps the new teacher learn to problem solve and develop his or her own solutions.

Mentors also contribute to the development of professional learning communities as they help new teachers form relationships with their colleagues by participating in small cadres to develop mutual support and professional relationships. In Spokane, the entire Career in Teaching group meets monthly to receive information about district organization, procedures, curriculum, effective instructional strategies, classroom management, and record keeping.

**Other professional development**

In addition, Spokane has a vast array of within-district professional development opportunities.\(^10\) The district is in its second year of using *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) systemwide. Almost 100 district teachers have been trained as trainers in *Understanding by Design (UBD)* in an effort to continue to build capacity within the district beyond facilitator/instructional coaches; the cadre of UBD trainers includes many teachers who are both classroom teachers and workshop facilitators. These teachers have been identified as having leadership potential within their buildings. This helps build capacity by developing classroom teachers as additional instructional leaders and keeps training as close to the classroom as possible.

Groups of teachers and administrators have also been trained by the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC),\(^11\) a Denver-based organization that works to support and promote academic excellence in public education by linking business with education;

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9 A Principal’s Assistant, similar to a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA), receives a teacher's salary and spends at least one full year working closely with an individual school administrator.
11 http://www.pebc.org/home/index.html
developing community collaborations; providing professional development for teachers and principals; applying the latest research to classrooms; developing leadership skills; and redesigning curriculum.

Teaming for Success is an in-district conference held twice each year. District teachers and administrators present workshops at this event, showcasing and sharing effective practices in Spokane schools. The conference was so popular teachers had to be turned away in spring 2004.

**Additional Instructional Coach/Facilitator Information**

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By leading book studies and reading articles, facilitators strive to build the theory base and guide teachers to put it into practice as they work side-by-side in classrooms. After applying some of the "how to" strategies that affect students' learning, they then attach the theory to the strategies rather than feeding it up-front. Facilitators support adult learning by stepping back much of the time instead of offering their own solutions; they are constantly being challenged in their quest to develop a balance between their own knowledge and expertise, and their need to guide teachers in ways that allow them to learn, to make room for their own "aha" moments. Skilled facilitators learn to ask more
questions; listen more and say less; use a constructivist teaching style; and develop their own facilitative leadership skills.\(^{12}\)

### 6. Leadership Development

Developing leadership is central to both the theory of action and the ways change efforts actually play out in Spokane. If building relationships is an overarching theme, developing leaders is the foundation of change efforts leading to building capacity to sustain change in this district. While the district strives to develop strong central and building administrators who are first and foremost instructional leaders, they also aim at developing an increasing number of teacher leaders.

Principals' Conferences take place monthly and replace routine administrative meetings—"the information dump" in the words of one principal—with the aim of shifting the focus from management duties to building the capacity of principals to be instructional leaders. These administrators are trained in conducting a "walk-through," using reflective questioning with teachers, productive use of research and best practices. Administrators now model engaged learning and working in collaborative teams. The district "design team" develops the direction and content for these conferences, articulating to others how the plan fits together, and provides relevant and related professional development. Principals are regularly asked to reflect on what they have learned and how they will take this back to their respective staff members.

In order to build coherence, the same content from Principals' Conferences is presented to assistant principals, teacher leaders, coordinators, and facilitator/coaches in their own meetings. By holding separate trainings, groups are kept to a manageable size that allows more interaction and helps build supportive relationships. The groups can also feel free to share and problem solve with peers from their common perspective.

**Walk-through Information**

Based on the work of Carolyn Downey, Betty Steffes, Fenwick English and others (2004), the walk-through is a structured process that specifically develops a snapshot of a group of classrooms at a particular moment in time. The walk-through is a significant step in influencing real change in schools by getting administrators close to the classroom and building their capacity to become instructional leaders. As such, it is purposefully kept separate from any teacher evaluation process. The walk-through is usually conducted by the principal and an assistant principal or principal's assistant, accompanied by the school's supervisor and/or curriculum content coordinator when possible. In this way, the site administrator can discuss concerns with the supervisor during the process and the supervisor gains first-hand knowledge of teachers and students in the school. In

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\(^{12}\) [http://www.sedl.org/change/facilitate/welcome.html](http://www.sedl.org/change/facilitate/welcome.html)
addition, this is an opportunity to observe curriculum and teaching in action. Administrators discuss their perceptions with each other after visiting each classroom, a practice that deepens their understanding of classroom teaching and learning.

This process helps both central office and building administrators become more visible and understand the teaching and learning process as well as the needs of teachers and students. Building administrators develop stronger professional relationships with their supervisors. The supervisors maintain and deepen their understanding of the daily demands and challenges at the school site as well as develop more powerful ways to support building administrators.

In Spokane, during the walk-through, administrators look for three Cs and an E, or evidence of student engagement as well as 1) the curriculum content being taught, 2) the level of expected cognitive ability according to Bloom's taxonomy, and 3) the classroom and lesson context. As principals grew more comfortable with conducting the walk-through, it became apparent to them that students who were looking at the teacher were not necessarily engaged. To better understand engagement in learning and the level of cognition, an administrator may now ask a student questions like, "What are you learning? Why are you doing that?" Engagement is indicated by students having an opportunity to think and demonstrate their learning. Students and teachers have become comfortable with struggling and being persistent, not just looking for the correct answer. Administrators also "walk the walls," looking for displays of student work and other evidence of the learning environment. They note what the teacher is doing and saying and the amount of teacher talk as well as students' activities—are they working in pairs, in cooperative groupings, using individual chalk or white boards, involved in whole group discussion, listening to direct instruction, etc.

Initially there was some teacher resistance to the process. However, in Spokane many teachers now ask for feedback and invite school leaders to do more walk-throughs and focus less on evaluation. At Sacajawea Middle School, principal Herb Rotchford notes that many teachers are now teaching to a higher level of cognition. Students have come to accept the process as part of the routine and continue their work disregarding the presence of visitors.

An important addendum to the walk-through is sharing perceptions with teachers. When discussing the walk-through, an administrator will often pose reflective questions, encouraging teachers to engage in thoughtful dialogue as they think more deeply about the lesson, their teaching strategies and the curriculum being taught. They may also refer to the research literature in these discussions. As the year has progressed, administrators talk about seeing more student engagement, students working at higher cognitive levels, and teachers questioning their own practice and making appropriate adjustments.
7. Curriculum

The systems approach means developing a districtwide core curriculum aligned with Washington state standards, the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs), and grade level expectations (GLEs). The recently developed GLEs require revamping the curriculum to match these guidelines. Assuring alignment of curriculum with GLEs connects the district in a responsive way to the larger state system. Currently 10 curriculum coordinators work with teacher leaders and teacher teams across the district to develop curriculum guides. Karin Short, Executive Director Instructional Programs, tells us, "We start with understanding what graduates need to know and be able to do when they enter the economy in a democracy and map back from that to the curriculum guides, program guides, and assessment of programs and instructional delivery so that the system is aligned and accountable." The aim is to develop a districtwide curriculum while aligning the written curriculum with what is taught and tested. Teachers will be held accountable for implementing the new curriculum.

8. Community Support

The school district has built a powerful base of community support by actively seeking and listening to input from citizens; involving volunteers in a variety of duties; and developing the Spokane Alliance made up of community organizations. Central administrators are also visible at community functions and serve on community groups. The success of these efforts was evident when the community passed a bond issue to provide schools with enhanced technology and a recent tax levy to remodel aging school buildings. The Citizens Advisory Committee is composed of citizens who provide advice and suggestions to the board of directors about the education of students in the district. Members are appointed from each school and select community organizations to provide broad-based input. This committee provides two-way communication between the board and parent advisory committees on site councils at each school.

The district recruits and trains community members to serve in a variety of volunteer roles. Some serve as general classroom assistants to help teachers. Others tutor or mentor children on a regular basis and some chaperone events or field trips. Community members who are unable to volunteer during the school day are encouraged to serve on advisory committees, assist with take-home clerical tasks, and help with after-school events or clubs. During the 2003-2004 school year, there were 10,938 cleared volunteers (background checks completed). This includes everyone from one-time volunteers for field trips to those who donate many hours on a weekly basis. During this same year, volunteers put in a total of 126,013 hours for Spokane Public Schools.

9. Celebrating

Sustaining staff through the demanding change process poses a challenge. Acknowledging and celebrating success is one powerful strategy employed in Spokane.
When Bemiss Elementary received a Title I distinguished school award, the principal took 17 staff members with her to New Orleans to attend the ceremony and receive the honor. They were all members of the team responsible for the school's success.

Regal Elementary School held an ice cream social after school to celebrate when their WASL scores went up. They also recognize teachers' accomplishments at staff meetings and use reflection as a part of the celebration. In addition, they organize fun social events like a staff breakfast and barbecue prior to the opening of school.

Celebration efforts can be seen with supervisors out in the buildings, acknowledging that the work is hard and that it is worthwhile. Supervisors and administrators use notes, cards and letters and hold holiday breakfasts, some of the more obvious symbols of celebration. Time for celebration is included in every collaboration day in many schools. Teachers are often asked to acknowledge and celebrate the success of their colleagues working with students in the school. Sharing stories and recognizing each other builds community and helps sustain everyone.

**Conclusion**

Spokane, as a district, is relentlessly focused on teaching and learning, and on creating ways to continually build student success as measured by state and norm-referenced tests. This focus starts with the superintendent and flows through the other district administrators to building administrators and the entire teaching staff. Staff members regularly read and apply research and best practices as they train administrators and teachers to use data effectively. Significant resources are focused on aligning curriculum to state standards and creating professional development opportunities that are embedded in the work of teaching and reach directly into classrooms to affect teaching and learning. Improvement efforts are intentionally aimed at building capacity by increasing instructional leadership skills in administrators as well as developing teacher leaders. In all of this work, there is an ongoing effort to inform and involve the community.

However, as one principal stated, "It is really the one-on-one relationships [that make it all work]. Developing relationships is one of the district non-negotiables. We need to continue to work on feeling connected and having relationships, so that we can do the hard work." Assistant Superintendent Nancy Stowell states, "You can't get to the work without the relationship. It is about engaging with each other and valuing what we bring to the conversation and valuing our own ability to solve our own problems. I just have such huge respect for everyone that I work with. I think, as we become more of a system, we are better able to see what everybody brings to the table. It's not just [one principal] out there who does this incredible job of being a principal. It is about understanding that everybody has some real talent." It is also about developing a coherent vision for change that evolves as conditions shift. In Spokane, this vision includes taking responsibility for and working with the larger system while not losing sight of each individual child and adult within that system.
How has Spokane managed to develop capacity that continues to increase student achievement and narrow the gap between students living in poverty and their more affluent peers? This district is notable for its thoughtful, sustained and focused effort to implement a long-term strategy of reform rather than import a patchwork quilt of programs and reform strategies. Shannon and Bylsma (2004) identified 13 common themes clustered into four broad categories in districts showing significant improvement. Those clusters are: Effective Leadership, Quality Teaching and Learning, Support for Systemwide Improvement, and Clear and Collaborative Relationships. All of these interrelated categories and underlying themes are evident in Spokane. In addition, there seems to be a concerted effort by leaders to build leadership capacity in others so they can pass the baton when they move on. Underlying the change strategies is a home-grown quality that reflects the local context and works to build ownership in most individuals. Much of the professional development efforts originate within the district. Those that rely on some outside form of training are eventually shaped to fit the Spokane culture to assure continuity. Last, but certainly not least, the infusion of money from the Gates Foundation bought vital time for individuals to read, think and plan, to build a solid foundation for reform efforts.

It remains to be seen whether the district reaches its stretch goal for 90 percent of all students meeting standards by 2007. The outlook is hopeful.

Recommendations from Spokane for districts embarking on school change

- Collect the research to support decisions and programs. Look at successful programs in your own state and region.
- Develop a representative oversight board.
- Allow adequate planning time that includes provisions for reading, discussing, and deciding how to use current research and best practices. Include time to plan specific programs as well as to develop the overall strategic plan.
- Secure funding to support both the planning and the proposed changes.
- Develop a cadre of instructional leaders, both administrators and teachers, who can in turn develop those skills in their colleagues.
- Provide time for professional development and collaboration during the school day whenever possible and pay people for time spent outside of the school day.
- Build capacity within schools and the district by keeping training as close to the classroom as possible. This means training local trainers who may be both classroom teachers and workshop facilitators.
- Build relationships based on trust.
- Create avenues for two-way communication—inform all stakeholders about what is taking place and involve them in the design, whenever possible. This means talking, listening, and responding to the needs of classroom teachers, union members, classified staff, students, parents, and the community to build bridges of understanding and ensure broad-based support for change.
• Set coherence as a goal. Assure that all programs and strategies aim in the same direction and enhance teaching and learning.
• Remember, it is possible to raise achievement while still personalizing relationships with students.
• Provide for renewal of all staff-administrators and teachers.
• Celebrate success vigorously and often.
Appendices

Appendix A: Methods

This case study is based on interviews with 27 individuals in multiple roles at the district office and school sites over several visits. The information gleaned from these individuals was triangulated by document reviews and school observations. Interviews were transcribed and pertinent chunks of information were pulled from the interviews to inform the study. Document reviews and school observations triangulated the interview data.

A shorter, preliminary version of the study was written and presented at the October, 2003 National Forum on Comprehensive School Reform held in Seattle, Washington. The following team discussed strategies and process in the Spokane School District in a fishbowl panel at the forum:

Brian Benzel, Superintendent
Susan Legel, Parent, Co-chair of Citizens Advisory Committee
Julia Lockwood, Elementary Facilitator
Matt Menastas, Rogers High School, Student Advisor to the Board
Christie Querna, Board President
Lorna Spear, Principal, Bemiss Elementary School
Nancy Stowell, Associate Superintendent, Teaching & Learning
Jon Swett, Principal, Lewis & Clark High School

Proceedings from that forum and the shorter case study can be found at: http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/re-engineering/forums/2003/index.asp

The web-based case study can be found at: http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/re-engineering/SpokaneSD/index.asp

In addition to the interviews, observations and document reviews, I have conducted training in several sessions at one Spokane Middle School in the Professional Learning Teams (PLT) process. The PLT process is being developed by the Quality Teaching and Learning Team in the Center for School and District Improvement at NWREL. These additional visits and a subsequent focus group with five district administrators also inform this study. The aim of the follow-up focus group was an attempt to further delineate details of how the district moved from low capacity to high capacity.
Appendix B: Sample Questions to Drive Staff Thinking When Looking at Data

List areas where students are doing well:

- What did we do to contribute to their success?
- What do we need to do to continue to ensure success with our students in the future?
- Can we use these strategies to improve areas where our students are not proficient?

List challenges:

- What do we need to do differently to improve?
- What other data do we need to consider?
- What can we learn from our successes?

Additional questions:

- When looking at subtest and strand information, what trends or patterns do we see?
- Using the data (scatter plots), can we predict which students will need intervention in order to be successful at the next level?
- Reflecting back on last year's activities, what has contributed to our success in certain areas?
- What instructional practices have we uncovered in our research that might help explain successes and address concerns revealed in our data?
- What data was most helpful to us? What other data might we need?
- When examining reading or math data from several sources (norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, etc.) what trends or patterns do we see?
- When examining data from our school, the district and the state, ask: How is our school doing? How does it compare to the district and state? How does it compare to previous years?
- What do these comparisons tell us?
  - Celebrations?
  - Challenges?
- What don't these comparisons tell us?
- What else do we need to know?
- What other data has our building collected that describes student learning?
- What statements about student learning in our building can we make from the data?
- How do those statements relate to planning activities for the coming year?
- How will we share this information with the rest of our staff?
- How do we plan to involve our school community in examining our school's data?
- What resources or activities can the central office provide that would be most helpful to our building?
References


