



BUILDING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP:
A CASE STUDY OF THE
PROVIDENCE PUBLIC SCHOOL DEPARTMENT

A Project of the Learning First Alliance

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Prologue

The Providence Public School Department case study is one of five case studies that stem from a two-year study of improving high poverty districts conducted by the Learning First Alliance. The five case studies culminated in an analytical report entitled *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. The report looks at how districtwide strategies to improve instruction have helped the five study districts raise student achievement across races and ethnicities.

More specifically, the study sought to address the following questions:

- How did the districts create the will to begin instructional reform?
- What strategies guided these reform efforts?
- In what ways did districts change their approaches to professional development?
- How did interactions among the stakeholders facilitate or hinder instructional reform?
- How was leadership distributed across stakeholders to facilitate improvement?

To explore the questions, we studied five school districts: the Aldine Independent School District (Texas); the Chula Vista Elementary School District (California); the Kent County Public Schools (Maryland); the Minneapolis Public Schools (Minnesota); and the Providence Public Schools (Rhode Island). We selected the districts based on their ability to exhibit at least three years of improvement in student achievement in mathematics and/or reading across multiple grades and across all races and ethnicities. We also sought districts that represented a cross section of characteristics, including size, region, urbanicity, and union affiliation.

While this case study is largely a story of improvement, a few caveats are in order. First, although the district demonstrated improvements, all students had not achieved high levels of proficiency; instead, the district was on an upward trajectory toward improving student achievement. Second, this study concentrated on district efforts to improve instruction. The district employed additional strategies that may have contributed to academic success but were beyond the scope of this study. Finally, this case study represents a snapshot of the district in 2001–2002 and not a longitudinal study of district progress.

We do not presume that Providence or any of the districts in this study has all the answers. Stakeholders we interviewed were candid about the challenges they faced. Nonetheless, we believe this case study and the report of which it is a part provide valuable lessons for districts interested in improving teaching and learning across entire systems.

The individual case studies of the five districts we studied, as well as the analytical report (*Beyond Islands of Excellence*) and a Leadership Brief summarizing its findings, can be downloaded or ordered at <http://www.learningfirst.org/bie/bie.html>.

District Overview

The Providence Public School Department is the largest of Rhode Island's 37 school districts in student population and staff. It is also the state's most challenging district in terms of ethnic and linguistic diversity and the high level of poverty. Of the district's 27,192 elementary and secondary school students, 52 percent are Hispanic, 22 percent are African American, 17 percent are white, 9 percent are Asian, and 1 percent is Native American. A large majority (80 percent) of these students qualify for free or reduced lunches (See Table 1, page 2). The district has experienced significant population shifts in the last 30 years. The Hispanic community has grown from 2,000 residents in the 1970s to around 60,000 today and is united by language but not by origin. Many Hispanic students are second or third generation immigrants, and the percentage requiring English language assistance and bilingual education is less than might be imagined (22 percent). Increasing diversity in the city has been intensified by the outward migration of white middle and upper income families to other cities and towns in Rhode Island. Furthermore, as in many high poverty urban districts, student mobility is problematic. Of returning students in the fall of 2000, 25 percent had moved at least once in the previous year.

The district's teaching and administrative staffs do not reflect the social diversity of their student clientele. Approximately 85 percent of Providence teachers are white; only 6 percent are Hispanic, and the remainder are African American (9 percent). The figures for principals are about the same (77 percent white, 8 percent Hispanic, 15 percent African American).

The governing structure of the district is unusual. The nine members of the board of education (referred to in Rhode Island as the School Committee) are appointed to three-year terms by the mayor of Providence, subject to ratification by the city council. The city council has governing authority over the district's budget, expenditures, and the policy and operational decisions of the board. All expenses over \$5,000, for example, are subject to approval by the board and the city council. The board is also involved in hiring central office personnel and approving teacher and principal appointments. School board members sit on city council committees such as finances and personnel.

For academic year 2001–2002, total expenditures for the Providence Public Schools amounted to \$254,492,680, averaging out to \$9,897 per pupil. To aid its reform initiatives, the district obtained numerous external grants, which infused about \$28 million to finance professional development and other program costs. Additionally, Providence schools benefited from substantial discretionary funds for school-level professional development activities.

**Providence Statistical Data
2001–2002 School Year**

Per-pupil Budget (\$)	9,897
Number of Schools	48
Number of Students	27,192
Student Racial/Ethnic Distribution (%)	
White	16
Black	22
Hispanic	52
Asian/Pacific Islander/ Filipino	9
Native American/ Alaskan Native	1
Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility (%)	80
English as a Second Language (%)	22
Number of Full Time Equivalent Teachers	2,100

Initiating Systemwide Reform in Providence

As state education leaders in Rhode Island pushed for education reform in the late 1990s, the Providence Public Schools came under increasing scrutiny. Evidence of generally poor student performance became a topic of growing public discussion in light of the state's new emphasis on standards, performance, and fiscal accountability. The district was mired in traditions of laissez faire management of education quality and improvement. Administrative promotions were based largely on seniority. Low levels of fiscal accountability existed, and political in-fighting and micro-management characterized the leadership of the school board and municipal government.

It would be incorrect to imply that there was no prior history of education improvement activity in the district. Reportedly, however, previous efforts were not coherent in focus and approach, and there was little basis for judging success. Numerous elementary schools, for example, had bought in comprehensive school reform models, such as Core Knowledge and Accelerated Schools, but not as part of a coordinated district strategy for school improvement. Similarly, individual schools and departments pursued external grants in an opportunistic way without contributing to a broader shared vision or goals for change. District resources, human and financial, were pulled in many directions without a clear relationship to student performance and needs.

Of course, there were exceptions. The district's bilingual department, for example, created profiles of student performance levels and a system for assessing student work samples and progress on a regular basis. Some comprehensive school reform projects were considered successful. Overall, however, schools tended to operate independently of one another and projects were isolated rather than districtwide.

Amid this context, the district superintendent resigned in 1998. Influenced by a concerned school board chair and under pressure from state education officials, the board and city government sought a reform-minded superintendent outside the district rather than an internal appointment that was more likely to preserve the status quo. Due to the lack of local experience with this kind of search, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) officials stepped in to assist with the search process. The commissioner of education and other influential community leaders sat on the search committee that recruited and recommended the appointment of Diana Lam for the position. Superintendent Lam had earned national recognition for her success in turning San Antonio's largest school district from one of the lowest to one of the highest-performing districts in Texas. Her fluency in Spanish was also a strong selling point, given Providence's large Hispanic population. Superintendent Lam took the reins of the Providence Public Schools in August 1999. Concurrent with her appointment, the board confirmed the appointment of a new deputy superintendent, Melody Johnson, who had

worked closely with Superintendent Lam in designing and managing the reform process in San Antonio.¹

In the coming pages, we will tell the story of the first three years of reform under Superintendent Lam, focusing specifically on the most prominent strategy: building instructional leadership across all levels of the district.

A Strategic Perspective on the Strategic Plan: A Look at Reform Efforts 1999–2002

One of Superintendent Lam’s major accomplishments in her first year was to create a strategic plan for education reform. The plan, entitled *Rekindling the Dream*, not only was adopted by the board and city council as the district improvement plan, but also became the basis for the *Providence Compact*. The *Compact* was a three-year agreement among the Rhode Island State Department of Education, the legislature, and the Providence school district to use *Rekindling the Dream* as the basis for strategic reform. The *Compact* provided additional funds to Providence to support the reform efforts and gave state officials leverage to hold the district accountable for results.

The strategic plan committed the district to ensuring all students, regardless of background, met or exceeded state and local standards. The plan specified three major goals:

1. Increase student achievement by focusing on teaching and learning
2. Build capacity for continuous learning to improve student achievement
3. Strengthen parent and public engagement.

These goals were supplemented with 10 strategies for achieving those goals and action steps for each strategy.²

The strategic plan was a complicated document, and while not all parts of the plan had been fully implemented by 2001–2002, the district had initiated multiple components since its adoption. Providence leaders recognized that for the plan to succeed, they needed to concentrate on a few core strategies in the initial years of reform. As a result, district leaders sought to articulate an initial set of strategies to jumpstart the reform. The elements of this theory included:

1. Create a common focus for improvement
2. Build school-level leadership capacity
3. Hold leaders accountable for results
4. Emphasize professional development over curriculum development
5. Create a balance between central direction and site-based needs.

¹ Superintendent Lam left Providence at the end of her three-year contract to take up a senior position with the New York City school district in the Fall 2002 as this case study was being written. Deputy Superintendent Johnson was then appointed Superintendent. For purposes of this case study, references to “the superintendent” are to Superintendent Lam.

² To review *Rekindling the Dream* in detail, please visit www.providenceschools.org/pdf/rkd.pdf.

While this study will focus primarily on the second element, building instructional leadership, we will outline briefly the district’s work on other elements of the district’s theory of change.

Create a common focus for improvement. The strategic plan established a systemwide focus on improving student performance in literacy in all grades and curriculum areas. This type of central office-led focus was new in Providence and deepened the emphasis on increasing literacy skills throughout the district.

Build school-level leadership capacity. The plan gave precedence to building instructional leadership capacity as a key strategy to improve instruction. District leaders believed that teacher professional development was unlikely to result in widespread improvement in practice without effective leadership. The concept of leadership envisioned by district leaders embodied notions of “distributed leadership,” meaning central office leaders sought to build a system in which leadership was shared by the central office, principals, and teachers, with members of each group leading in areas they were best positioned to influence. This component of the district strategy is discussed in greater detail in the following pages.

Hold leaders accountable for results. As part of the overall strategy, the reform plan proposed that principals and other district and school-level change agents should be held more accountable for results and for enacting their redefined instructional leadership roles. District leaders spoke of “two-way accountability” between teachers and principals, principals and district office personnel, and so on, such that all parties were mutually accountable for carrying out their respective responsibilities.

During the initial years of reform, the major focus of change in district accountability practices was to hold principals more accountable for instructional leadership and school performance. The superintendent and deputy superintendent quickly established clear expectations for principal performance and compliance with reform plans. They resurrected a little-used principal evaluation policy, added research-based performance criteria to principal behaviors targeted in the policy, and conducted year-end evaluations of all the principals.

As part of its focus on leadership accountability, the district also strengthened its system for monitoring student achievement. Prior to the Lam administration, the district administered the New Standards Reference exam in grades 4, 8, and 10, as required by the state. Lam and her colleagues wanted a process to monitor student progress annually and instituted the nationally normed Stanford Achievement Tests during the “off years” when students were not being tested by the state. The district hired an assessment specialist to assist with management, coordination, and utilization of the state and district testing programs. Plans were also underway to provide increased aid to schools in the interpretation and use of student and survey data.

Emphasize professional development over curriculum. In its strategic plan, the district endorsed the state-adopted New Standards as the district standards. As a result, the major

thrust in the initial years of reform was less on “developing” curriculum at the district level, than on developing teacher understanding and use of the New Standards for course and lesson planning and for assessing the progress and outcomes of student learning. While the reform plan outlined district needs for professional development *and* for curriculum development, it gave strategic priority to professional development.

The priority on professional development was based in part on the need to increase awareness and use of the New Standards. District leaders also gave preference to professional development initiatives focusing on literacy development and instructional leadership.

Initially, professional development in these three areas was targeted to principals and to those teachers selected to fill the newly created literacy coach positions in elementary schools. Coaches were responsible for introducing teaching practices associated with these areas of instructional innovation beginning in year two, and for relating these practices and teacher discussions about student learning to the New Standards.

While district leaders placed a priority on professional development, they also attended to curriculum development. At the most basic level, this meant ensuring that every school had a copy of the New Standards documents (which was reportedly not the case prior to initiation of the strategic plan reforms). The district also invested considerable funds in acquiring teaching materials that were consistent with grade-level literacy standards to support the implementation of balanced literacy practices (e.g., texts for guided reading). Thus, alignment of teaching materials to the New Standards and to the district priorities for classroom improvement represented another focus of school-based curriculum development activity. This extended to the districtwide adoption of the new elementary school mathematics textbook series introduced in the 2001–2002 school year.

Although the district adopted the New Standards, it did not develop a district curriculum (scope and sequence) by subject and grade level. As described in one interview, the “curriculum” was practically embodied in the textbooks and materials used by teachers in the classroom. In year three, however, the district contracted with an external agency to assess the content and alignment of the taught curriculum with the New Standards. Middle and high school subject heads, district curriculum directors, and the literacy coaches were expected to participate in the assessment process and in any curriculum development activities that followed. It is significant from a strategic perspective that curriculum alignment was addressed as a long-term goal, not as a precursor to pedagogical change in the classroom. Despite perceptions of greater centralization tied to the literacy initiative, curriculum decisionmaking at the school level remained decentralized and school-based as in the past.

Create a balance between central direction and site-based needs. The plan for reform emphasized the alignment of professional development with district priorities (e.g., literacy). At the same time, it suggested that district priorities should be adapted at the school level according to data on student needs and to teachers’ prior expertise. Strategically, the plan set forth a commitment to more site-based, job-embedded, and

collegial forms of teacher learning. District and school leaders claimed that this professional development approach stood in contrast (and in conflict) with prior norms and forms of professional development in the district. Traditionally, professional development was more individualistic—determined by personal interests and re-certification requirements, disconnected from data on student learning or from school or district goals for students or teachers, and often delivered in the non-sustained and anti-learning format of one-shot workshops and presentations.

Funding for Reform

During her first year, Superintendent Lam and her supporters at the district, city, and state levels took bold steps to acquire additional funding needed to implement the reform agenda outlined in the strategic plan. Their quest for funding took three paths.

First, the district realigned existing expenditures to focus on the system goals and needs defined in the plan. The superintendent lobbied for cutbacks in programming and funding for adult education, as these were peripheral to the focus on students' literacy development (the district was committing significant funding to federal matching grants for adult education). This action was said to have created a political firestorm in the community and at the city council because numerous community agencies were benefiting financially from the district's involvement in adult education. The superintendent also acted swiftly to cut or reduce funding for "pet projects." This affected mainly nonprofit organizations that were drawing upon district revenues and were unable to prove their effectiveness.

The second funding strategy was to acquire external grants based on the strategic plan. This strategy was highly successful, resulting in two major grants that kicked in during year two of the reform plan. The William and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded the district a five-year \$13 million grant to purchase teaching and learning resources and to support school-based professional development activities for the balanced literacy initiative. In addition, the district partnered with a coalition of Providence health care institutions and universities to obtain an \$8 million grant from the Carnegie Foundation to support mobilization of the district's high school reform efforts.

Finally, the commissioner of education and the state legislature took action to help ensure that the district would receive additional state resources to launch the reform initiatives. This process will be discussed in the next section of the case study.

The State Context and Its Impact on Education Reform in Providence

One of Superintendent Lam’s important contributions to the Providence reform effort was to situate the reform in a way that allowed the district to leverage state policy to its advantage. Unlike ever before, the district began to incorporate state initiatives around literacy, standards, and accountability into its improvement efforts. As such, before addressing instructional leadership in detail, it is worth briefly unpacking state initiatives relevant to the Providence reforms.

State Reform Initiatives

State involvement in Providence school reforms began in the mid-1990s when the state legislature, responding to district and community complaints about inequities in state funding for education, undertook an investigation. This led to a broader review of elementary and secondary education and a recognition by the state government that students in many schools across the state were not performing well in core subjects like reading and mathematics. The problem was particularly acute in Providence. This realization led to the adoption of two key education policies in 1997: Comprehensive Education Strategy (CES)—the state’s blueprint for education—and Article 31, which reformed the state system of basic education funding and redistributed funds to core policy goals including additional funds for professional development. Among other functions, CES and Article 31 directed the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to establish and implement a standards- and performance-based accountability system.

Curriculum standards and accountability. In response to CES and Article 31, RIDE established statewide standards in core subjects. The state adopted the New Standards for curriculum in language arts and mathematics and developed its own curriculum standards for writing and health. To support the standards, RIDE developed curriculum “frameworks” to provide specific guidance to teachers for curriculum planning.

The state also looked to external and internal resources for testing. For mathematics and language arts, the state adopted the New Standards Reference Exam, administered annually in grades 4, 8, and 10. RIDE developed its own student performance tests for writing (grades 3, 7, and 11) and health (grades 5 and 9). Test results were reported over a three-year period to avoid confusing normal fluctuations with actual trends, and were disaggregated by student race/ethnicity, English language proficiency, poverty indicators, and participation in special education programming. Moreover, in February 2002 the state released its first school ratings (School Performance Groupings) derived from three-year averages of student performance on the state assessment tests. Schools were rated as “high performing” or “low performing” and “improving” or “not improving” based on the percentage of students achieving proficiency on the tests.

The state accountability system has continued to evolve. One recent change was the introduction of district-level “face-to-face” discussions between state education department staff, school district leaders, and personnel from low performing schools to

jointly consider strategies for improving student performance in those schools or even entire districts. The state plans to integrate other performance indicators into future ratings, such as pupil absenteeism and school climate data from SALT surveys (see below).

RIDE also established guidelines for district and school-level school improvement planning, including the expectation that districts and schools would set and annually update three-year targets for raising student performance to state standards. Movement toward these targets would be used as a basis for judging "adequate yearly progress" and performance.

SALT reviews. Another component of the state accountability system was the School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) policy. The SALT had two major requirements: periodic school self-study and state peer review. The SALT peer review was an extensive process that included stakeholder surveys of teachers, administrators, students, and parents,³ and a one-week site visit involving interviews, classroom observations, and examination of student work by an external team of teachers and administrators from peer districts. A report of findings and recommendations was disseminated to the school, district, and community. In addition to providing feedback to schools, SALT reviews were a source of professional development for teachers and administrators who participated in the reviews. Data from the reports provided input for school improvement plans, although implementation of the recommendations was not mandatory.

Leading and supporting. According to state officials, CES and Article 31 marked a shift in the state's approach from a traditional emphasis on compliance to a new emphasis on leading and supporting school improvement. The "leading" function was manifested primarily in the adoption of state standards and in the establishment of the accountability system. The "supporting" function was associated more with the changes in education funding and in the state's efforts to build capacity for improvement through curriculum, professional development, and technical assistance to districts and schools.

The state's efforts to develop an effective technical support system, however, have been hindered by a simultaneous downsizing of the state department of education's staff. As a result, RIDE staff have rationalized their assistance by concentrating on those schools in greatest need of improvement and by holding districts more responsible for school quality and improvement than in the past. When the state meets with district leaders about low performing schools, for example, the emphasis is on partnership building among local stakeholders—district administrators, school board members, teacher and principal unions, and faculty from targeted schools. State department officials also have begun developing support strategies that encourage more local problem-solving and collaboration within and across districts.

³ The SALT survey instruments were developed and are administered in collaboration with research faculty at the National Center on Public Education and Social Policy (NCPESP) of the University of Rhode Island.

Improving Instruction and Instructional Supports: Distributing Instructional Leadership

When Dr. Lam came to Providence, she brought with her a vision for improving student achievement. The key strategy to fulfilling this vision was to improve leadership at the school level by distributing instructional leadership among principals and teacher leaders. Over the course of three years, 1999–2002, the district undertook intensive efforts to build the instructional leadership capacity of these actors. We will address in detail Providence’s efforts to support principals and teacher leaders as a major vehicle for improving instructional capacity.

A Vision for Instructional Leadership

District leaders recognized that an instructional leadership transformation would not come about without tremendous support. So, they turned to the Institute for Learning (IFL) at the University of Pittsburgh for help. The concepts and practices advocated by the IFL strongly influenced Providence’s vision of instructional leadership.

According to IFL’s vision, leaders should:

- Contribute to high standards of learning for all students
- Have a deep understanding of curriculum and learning standards for students
- Have content-focused expertise
- Be knowledgeable of ways to facilitate change in teacher beliefs and practices
- Be able to discern quality teaching
- Effectively observe teaching, examine student work, interpret test results, and provide feedback to teachers
- Be able to lead participatory school improvement planning processes
- Work with teachers to create school cultures of professional collaboration
- Hold teachers accountable for student learning and high quality teaching.

Officials in Providence were attracted to the IFL leadership model not simply because of the concepts it advocated, but also because it promoted a notion of distributed leadership that matched the district outlook. The district and IFL vision encouraged educators throughout the system to become responsible for providing “leadership” for improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. In their vision, leadership was not vested simply in principals or in central office administrators. Rather, leaders worked together at all levels to support the implementation of district and school priorities for learning and improvement.

Tools for Building Instructional Capacity

The IFL vision of instructional leadership appealed to district officials in Providence not only for its conceptual coherence with their own thoughts about leadership, but also because IFL offered training in the use of specific leadership tools around the vision. Among these tools were:

- Principles of Learning
- Learning Walks
- Instructional coaching
- Analyzing student work

We outline these tools below and describe how they contributed to the district's leadership strategy.

Principles of Learning. The nine Principles of Learning (See Figure 1) provided the district with a research-based framework for conceptualizing the characteristics of an effective learning environment. Three fundamental beliefs undergird these Principles: that intelligence can be learned; that districts need clear standards for learning; and that under the right conditions, all students can achieve to high standards of learning. The Principles of Learning include nine core principles accompanied by a set of indicators of how each Principle can be recognized in beliefs and practice. Space does not permit a detailed review of all the Principles of Learning here. Our intent is to highlight the Principles as a core set of beliefs about pedagogy and the conditions of effective learning that have been a common focus of leadership development and teacher training in Providence. Instructional leaders in Providence are expected not only to understand the Principles of Learning, but also to assess and support their implementation in the classroom and in adults' professional learning.

Figure 1
Principles of Learning

1. Organizing for Effort
2. Clear Expectations
3. Recognition of Accomplishment
4. Fair and Credible Evaluations
5. Academic Rigor in a Thinking Curriculum
6. Accountable Talk
7. Socializing Intelligence
8. Learning as Apprenticeship
9. Self-management of Learning

Source: Institute for Learning (© 2001 University of Pittsburgh)

Learning Walks. Learning Walks were an instructional leadership practice that enabled principals and other leaders to assess teaching quality. Walks consisted of visiting classrooms, looking for evidence of teaching and learning practices associated with the Principles and the district literacy initiative, and talking to students about what and whether they are learning. A critical component of the Learning Walk process was not merely to observe and assess what was happening in classrooms, but to debrief those observations and assessments with teachers and perhaps with other leaders.

Instructional coaching. Instructional coaching was another tool associated with the IFL-supported leadership development program in Providence. Under the IFL model, coaching referred to a process whereby one person assisted another in learning to put new ideas and behaviors into practice, typically through a combination of observation and feedback, reflective questioning, joint planning and problem-solving, and even modeling. In Providence, with advice and technical support from IFL, a deliberate decision was made that instructional coaches should have technical expertise and be able to model and advise teachers in the use of instructional practices associated with the literacy initiative and the Principles of Learning. This “content-focused coaching” approach was consistent with the vision of instructional leadership as being grounded in an understanding of effective pedagogy and standards.

Analyzing student work. One of the core instructional leadership skills emphasized by district leaders was the capacity of principals to interpret and use student work to determine progress. While IFL did not provide principals and teachers with a specific protocol for analyzing student work, the training program included opportunities for participants to practice comparing and judging samples of student work in relation to locally relevant standards for curriculum and student performance.

Instructional Leadership Development and Practice

In the previous section, we discussed the district vision for instructional leadership. Now, we will tell the story of how this vision was put into practice by principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders.

Developing Principal Leaders

Prior to the current reform effort, principals noted that they had little opportunity to engage in districtwide, systematic, and sustained professional development. We were told that historically, principals acted as building managers with little accountability for the quality of teaching and learning. All that changed with Diana Lam's administration, for as the superintendent explained, "Unless you focus on instruction and make that explicit in your quality indicators, instruction won't improve." Within a year of Superintendent Lam's arrival, all principals were immersed in the regularly scheduled, intense professional development program led by IFL. Participation was mandatory and the expectations of and pressure for change in principal beliefs and leadership were high.

Principal development. True to the strategic plan, the major focus of reform activity during the early years was instructional leadership development for principals. Consultants from the Institute for Learning held monthly training sessions for all principals. These sessions focused on developing principal understanding of the New Standards for literacy, the IFL Principles of Learning, and the pedagogical components of balanced literacy. Intensive training also was provided in the conduct of Learning Walks.

During years two and three of the Providence reform, the district continued to lead an extensive professional development initiative for principals. Principals revisited in greater depth the Principles of Learning and continued to practice instructional leadership skills such as Learning Walks and student work analysis. In year two the deputy superintendent also established an advisory group of principals identified as effective instructional leaders to assist her in tracking and responding to principals' ongoing needs for professional development. By year three principals began identifying their own topics for professional development consistent with their new leadership roles and district focuses for reform. With help from an IFL consultant, principals also assumed more responsibility for organizing and delivering their own professional development.

Assistant principals began lobbying for similar training. As a result, a training program for assistant principals (two days per month), also led by IFL consultants, was introduced in year two. That same year planning began for the development of an in-house "aspiring principals program" in cooperation with faculty from The University of Rhode Island. Implementation of this 18-month program began the following year. The extension of principal development programs to assistant principals and to teachers aspiring to be principals was prompted by a desire to ensure sustainability of the vision and practice of principals as instructional leaders, and by the high incidence of principal turnover that accompanied the first two years of reform.

It is interesting to note that district and IFL training were designed to model collegial staff development techniques that principals could use with instructional coaches and with classroom teachers. With the Learning Walks, for example, principals gained experience with peer coaching. They visited each other's schools in teams to practice and debrief Learning Walks together. Central office administrators reinforced the coaching process as a regular feature of school visits. When principals began learning how to assess student work in relation to the New Standards, they were organized in study groups to tackle this challenging task collaboratively with their peers. The trainers envisioned that collegial problem-solving and learning would transfer to principals' work with teachers, and that this might contribute to the development of professional learning communities.

The institutionalization of principal leadership development was another key feature of the district's initiative. This was evident in several ways. The most obvious was the deliberate extension of leadership training to future principals, beginning with assistant principals in year two and then followed with the initiation of the aspiring principals' program in year three of the reform. In addition to formal training for future principals, the deputy superintendent and principal's advisory group initiated a process for mentoring new principals on the job in year three. The need for an in-house professional development program for future principals was critical with the departure and replacement of about 70 percent of principals by the end of the second year of Superintendent Lam's tenure.

Several other indicators of district efforts to institutionalize leadership development for principals emerged in year three of the reforms. First was a shift from principal development as a prescribed "program" delivered by external (IFL) consultants to a continuous "process" organized by local leaders, albeit with assistance from consultants. The change involved establishing a way of identifying continuing and emerging needs of principals and then shifting responsibility for planning and delivering training to principals and district leaders with aid from the IFL consultants. Second was the shift from a pre-planned "curriculum" for inservice principal development to one that was more responsive to principal needs in the actual context of implementing system goals and reform initiatives. Third, some of the initial training content delivered by IFL consultants was transferred to CDs and video so the training could be replicated with future groups at lower cost using local expertise for follow-up support. Fourth was incorporation of principal development activities into semi-monthly principal meetings in addition to the monthly inservice training days already blocked into the principals' calendars.

Professional development activities were evolving into a routine dimension of principals' work, and the district gradually disengaged from its dependency on IFL for leader training. Instead, during year three, the deputy superintendent drew increasingly on other external sources of expertise. Local university consultants, for example, held sessions with principals and coaches on test data analysis, and The University of Rhode Island was a key player in planning and implementing the aspiring principals program.

Beyond the centrally organized professional development activities, some principals reported that the most significant professional learning for them occurred when they met to discuss improvement efforts with other principals and teachers during common planning times. In speaking about the ways in which the reforms were shifting practice, one principal noted,

The biggest change in the culture of the position of principal [is that] no longer are you an island out there by yourself. You have your colleagues to talk to. We can call the central office... if we need to... We're being provided support so that we can learn the job.

Principals were also expected to attend in-school professional development events organized by the coaches. This ensured that principals were aware of the New Standards and instructional methods that teachers were learning to put into practice.

A final cog in developing the instructional leadership capacity of principals was to ensure that principals had the human and financial resources to fulfill the new demands of their role. On the human resources side, the district supported a network of school-based teacher leaders to provide principals with additional leadership expertise and to assist teachers with the implementation of literacy, math, and other initiatives. On the financial side, the infusion of external grant funds from multiple sources made it feasible, at least for the duration of the grants, for principals to pay for the material resources, inservice consultants, teacher time, substitute teachers, and teacher compensation for after-hours professional activities required to implement changes in teaching methods, student learning, and student performance. At the time of our study, schools were reportedly benefiting from about \$100,000 a year for reform-focused professional activities and resources. District officials made approval of school improvement plans contingent upon use of these supplementary funds to support district improvement priorities.

Increasing Principal Accountability

The professional development work with principals was strengthened by the measures taken at the district level to increase principal accountability for good instruction and student achievement. District leaders revised the principal evaluation policy to incorporate criteria drawn from research on principal effectiveness. As part of the evaluation, central office leaders conducted school visits and reviewed school improvement data to monitor implementation of district initiatives in the classroom and in principal leadership. Principals judged as not meeting the new district expectations were placed on professional growth plans with the potential for termination if they failed to improve. A clear message had been delivered: principals in Providence could either get on board with the new vision of the principal's role and with the district reform agenda, or they could leave. Those principals who remained in Providence seemed to appreciate the new supports and high expectations. According to one principal,

One of the most important parts of the professional development that's occurring districtwide is that we administrators are getting constant... professional development with accountability connected to that.

However, the departure or retirement of so many principals in the first two years of the district reform is indicative of the large gap between the new expectations for principals and those that existed before the arrival of the superintendent and adoption of the strategic plan. District leaders capitalized on the large-scale turnover in principals and became more intentional in recruiting principals who were likely to succeed as instructional leaders. We were told, for example, that a rigorous selection process was introduced to screen teachers for the aspiring principal program. Principal appointments based on seniority fell by the wayside as district expectations for instructional leadership among principal candidates became institutionalized. District administrators also began to shuffle principals around, strategically placing some of those who had demonstrated strong instructional expertise in the neediest schools.

Principals' Leadership Practices

Variation in effectiveness. As a result of the leadership training and the increased accountability for performance, the vision of principals as instructional leaders was widespread in the district and among principals themselves. According to one principal,

[Principals] are viewed as instructional leaders, not the person that's doing the discipline.... There's an expectation by the district that we're in classrooms for two and a half hours every day going in, doing observations, talking to kids, asking questions.

However, district officials were skeptical about how uniformly and effectively principals enacted the vision. For example, one principal was described as doing little more than making morning announcements such as "Today we're working on clear expectations," while another was portrayed as visiting classrooms on a daily basis, conducting read alouds with students, and inquiring about their learning. This variation was not surprising. Due to the turnover in principals, many were new to the job and still becoming acclimated. Moreover, although middle and high school principals took part in leadership training, they had had less opportunity to practice their new instructional leadership role. Organizational and classroom reforms at that level (coaches, lead teams, disciplinary literacy, high school redesign) began in year three.

Variation in goal orientation. Most of the teachers and coaches interviewed reported that their principals provided a clearer focus and direction for school improvement than they had been experienced previously. This was manifested in the setting of goals, in the development of plans for school improvement, and in the linking of those goals and plans to key resources: data on student performance, curriculum standards, system priorities, and professional development. Not surprisingly, however, we did encounter some variation in goal orientation. Some principals defined their school goals primarily in terms of the district priorities; others established school-based goals for change that

included but were not limited to the district priorities. For example, in one elementary school the principal and teachers decided, based on data, to invest their efforts in professional development around the math and health curricula. In another, the principal and teachers decided to rotate the focus of professional development during the year across four topics: literacy, mathematics, inquiry-focused pedagogy, and technology. A high school principal and staff decided to emphasize inclusion and a new approach to bilingual programming, in addition to disciplinary literacy.

All agreed that the district priorities were important and could not be ignored; however, they needed to determine how to address school-specific needs in concert with the district goals. District administrators accepted site-based variation in school improvement focus and resource use, so long as the district priorities were attended to and other focuses for change were justified by data and linked to the New Standards. In the words of one official, “it’s not that negotiation can’t go on, but you better have your ducks and your data lined up.”

Professional interaction with teachers. Principals reported that as a result of IFL training, they felt more knowledgeable and comfortable interacting with teachers about student learning and change in the classroom. The Learning Walk was the most visible manifestation of the new approach to leadership because it moved principals out of the office and the corridors and into the classrooms to observe and interact with students and teachers. From all accounts, principals were regularly conducting “walk-throughs” in their schools, although no principals claimed that they could manage the district expectation of two and one-half hours a day in classrooms. Generally, principals reported that Learning Walks had “opened up communication with teachers” and that their role had shifted from evaluating teacher compliance to collaborating and providing support for implementation of change in the classroom.

Learning Walks were not a substitute for teacher evaluation, but principals did provide individual teachers with written feedback based on their observations, which could include recommendations for development where expectations were not being met. Initially, teachers in some schools expressed concerns through the union about the intent and practice of Learning Walks. In response to this concern, district officials arranged for IFL consultants to meet with union leaders to explain the Learning Walks and to accompany teams of school administrators on Learning Walks. This intervention led to union leaders publicly endorsing the Learning Walk process, and to the production of a video on Learning Walks that could be used with teachers in schools as well as in aspiring principal training programs.

Creating time and opportunities for teacher collaboration. Principals, working with their teacher leaders, were figuring out ways to create common planning times for teachers to meet and collaborate on efforts to implement the literacy initiatives and other changes. Their efforts were subject to several contractual constraints. One was that the official workday for Providence teachers was five and one-half hours, the minimum required to comply with state instructional time policies. That left little flexibility during the workday for joint meetings of any kind. Second, meetings after school had to be

compensated, and teacher participation could not be required. Third, the contract did not require teachers to prepare lesson plans. Time created for teachers to meet to share, plan together, examine student work, and so on could not be defined officially as a lesson planning time. Rather, euphemisms such as “Professional Development/Student Support” and “Team Instructional Planning/PD” were invented to avoid contractual disputes. Fourth, any changes in teachers’ schedules after September had to be ratified by all teachers in a school and arrangements for common planning times had to be negotiated into the school calendar before or at the onset of the school year.

Despite these constraints, elementary school principals reported that they found ways to create shared planning time—especially for grade-level teams. Some principals who had access to itinerant teachers for subjects like music and art scheduled them so teachers could be freed up regularly (e.g., once a week) for an hour or so by grade level. One principal reported that he hired substitute teachers to fill in for a half day on a quarterly basis to enable teachers in selected grade levels to meet as a team. In addition to finding time for grade-level teams to meet, principals also needed to set time aside for lead team teachers to meet with coaches and principals. Middle and high school principals reported difficulty getting teachers to agree to common planning times by subject or by student cohort teams during the workday. This difficulty was portrayed more in terms of norms of teacher individualism than in terms of logistical and contractual constraints.

Principals tried in various ways to help coaches and lead teachers share instructional practices with regular classroom teachers. Several principals said that they offered to arrange for substitute teachers or to schedule itinerant teachers so that teachers could visit lead team teacher classes or colleagues in other schools that were further along with the reforms. This did not seem to be happening on a wide-scale basis as yet.

Principal collaboration with teacher leaders. Principals were expected to work closely with teacher leaders, and, in fact, most of the principals and coaches interviewed stated that they communicated daily on school improvement and professional development matters. Principals’ interaction with coaches and teachers in these situations strengthened teachers’ perceptions of them as instructional leaders. As well, principals became more knowledgeable not only about the changes being implemented in the classrooms, but also about teachers’ needs for support and assistance with those changes.

Tapping external resources. Principals did not claim to be directly involved in leading professional development sessions on balanced literacy and other focuses of change in the classroom. For training in literacy, they deferred to the technical expertise of the literacy coaches, external consultants, and lead teachers. Beyond the literacy training provided to coaches and lead teachers through IFL, the district empowered principals and their school improvement teams to recruit literacy experts from outside the district to deliver workshops and on-site consultation at the school level during and after school hours. This was feasible because of the funding for school improvement provided to individual schools through external grants and the state’s Article 31 policy. District personnel, such as the literacy coordinators and the deputy superintendent, helped

principals and coaches access cutting-edge external expertise. Principals talked of bringing in expert consultants from as far away as New York City, Colorado, and Texas.

School improvement planning. School improvement planning was the primary tool for organizing improvement efforts at the school level. In accordance with state policy, schools had to establish three-year student performance targets and to account for the use of Article 31 professional development funds in local school improvement plans. District officials in Providence took advantage of this existing school improvement planning process as a way of enhancing implementation of the local school reform efforts. During year three of the reforms, the deputy superintendent provided principals with planning guidelines and offered inservice training on school improvement planning. Emphasis was placed on participatory planning and alignment of school plans with standards, data, district priorities, and funding sources. Several of the principals interviewed stated that they had restructured pre-existing school improvement committees to get broader representation, including teachers, coaches, parents, and community representatives. They all reported that they looked at student performance data from the state and district testing programs in consultation with their school improvement teams. According to the deputy superintendent, however, effective school improvement planning and data utilization skills were not yet widespread across schools.

Challenges to implementation of principals' instructional leadership role. Implementing the principals' role as instructional leaders was challenging in many ways. We highlight three of the challenges here:

- Overcoming a legacy of ineffective instructional leadership
- Changing teacher attitudes and beliefs about the role of principals
- Addressing expectation overload

While we are wary of stereotyping the prior status of principal leadership across the district, it seems that the traditional norms and practices of principal management in Providence had grown out of sync with emerging state policy pressures that emphasized standards, student testing, public accountability, and school improvement targets and plans. Whatever the previous basis was for appointing principals, and whatever the expectations were for their performance on the job, the conventional building manager role played by many principals across the district was no longer viable.

Many principals did not have the vision, skills, commitment, and support to mobilize and lead the growing external demands for improvements in student learning and teaching. However, this was not true of all principals. A few with whom we talked had gained instructional leadership expertise prior to the reforms. These principals, though, were not the norm, and there was no mechanism for extending their leadership expertise across the system. The "solution" to the crisis in school leadership was to mandate a clear vision of instructional leadership, mount an intensive leadership training program to support that vision, hold principals accountable for following through on the vision, and facilitating if not encouraging the departure of those who either chose not to or could not get on board with their new responsibilities and expectations. The subsequent challenge was how to address the ongoing professional development needs of a large number of new principals.

The change in principal knowledge and behaviors also involved a change in principal–teacher relationships, which was at odds with what the majority of teachers had become accustomed to over time. Teachers were not used to seeing and working with principals as instructional leaders. Now principals and other administrators were regularly visiting classrooms to talk to students about what they were learning and to ask teachers about their utilization of teaching and learning methods associated with the Principles of Learning and literacy initiatives. Principals not only were organizing time for teachers to meet in grade-level or other teaming arrangements, but also were sitting in on those meetings and talking with teachers about instruction, standards, student outcomes, and the like. Thus, it seemed reasonable that, at least initially, some teachers expressed concerns and even resisted this involvement.

In year three of the reform, it became apparent that the range of expectations for principal performance had reached overload proportions. The deputy superintendent expressed concern that many principals were feeling overwhelmed. New training sessions on effective school improvement planning and on interpretation of student test data were offered, but without expectations for immediate follow-through in all schools. Another related challenge was the recognition that once the core instructional leadership training program had been delivered to all principals and incoming principals, there would still be variation in principal expertise in enacting the new vision. The time had come to begin thinking strategically about how ongoing principal leadership support could be differentiated based on principal skills, not just experience.

Building a System of Teacher Leaders

Providence leaders recognized from the outset of their reform that principals could not lead instructional reform alone. Thus, as one administrator explained, “the district sought to create a distributive leadership model where everybody has leadership responsibility.” As a result, the district set out to devise a two-tiered system of teacher leaders: instructional coaches and lead teachers. Instructional coaches were to be full-time teacher leaders who would work with teachers to build instructional excellence in literacy. Lead teachers would be full-time teachers from each grade level who would work with instructional coaches to deepen instructional support.

Instructional coach selection and development

In the first year of the reform, the district recognized that it needed to target professional development for instructional coaches. Given the district goals, elementary literacy became the focus for this professional development. To ensure that the most qualified individuals were appointed as instructional coaches, the central office worked closely with the teachers union, as positions such as instructional coaches would normally have fallen under contractual regulations for seniority.

Three strategic decisions were made regarding the recruitment of instructional coaches. First, candidates were required to present evidence of their literacy teaching expertise (e.g., portfolios, videos, student work samples). Second, the district posted the

instructional coach as a central office position, even though the coaches were to be deployed full time (four days a week) in specific schools. This made it possible to select coaches based on their qualifications rather than on the seniority policies governing in-school teacher leader appointments. Third, the district established a committee of principals to screen applications and interview the candidates to avoid perceptions of favoritism and to ensure a rigorous selection process.

The elementary instructional coaches were appointed in the spring of 2000 with the expectation that they would be trained over the summer and take up their positions in the fall. District administrators obtained a waiver from the state to use class size reduction funds to pay the salaries of the elementary coaches. Thus, funding for the coach positions came out of the district's regular operating revenues. Those funds were not available, however, to pay for coaches at the middle and high school levels. This delayed the selection and appointment of those coaches for another year.

For several months prior to taking up their positions in schools, the coaches received intensive training from IFL consultants. For elementary coaches the training focused on the Principles of Learning, content-focused coaching skills, and balanced literacy practices to ensure that coaches were skilled users of the instructional methods. In addition, the training provided the coaches with modules and demonstration lessons that they could use with lead team teachers and other teachers in their schools. Even after the elementary coaches were on the job, an IFL consultant continued meeting with them on a monthly basis. The consultant also attended meetings of coaches in school cluster groups and sometimes visited coaches in their schools to observe and give feedback on their work with teachers. Coaches reported that some of their most useful professional learning occurred through their communication with other coaches in meetings and professional development events. A similar program of development was undertaken with the middle/high school instructional coaches to prepare them for their in-school work on disciplinary literacy in year three.

Coaches were also responsible for organizing professional development at the school level. Individually or in school clusters, coaches brought in external consultants to deliver literacy-focused professional development for lead teachers and other teachers in their schools. Coaches attended these sessions as well.

Content-focused professional development for coaches was not limited to that provided through the IFL-managed training program. The deputy superintendent and two literacy coordinators supported the training and work of the coaches as well. For example, in year three, the deputy superintendent sought regular input from coaches on their evolving needs for professional assistance, marking a transition toward a more responsive process of assistance from district leaders—similar to that experienced by principals. In addition, the literacy coordinators participated in meetings with central office administrators, IFL consultants, and local university consultants to arrange for the ongoing professional development of coaches. They were on call to respond to requests for information, resources, and assistance from coaches and principals. They served as linking agents to help coaches access external expertise to support in-school professional development

activities. Finally, the literacy coordinators were the communications link between coaches in the schools and districtwide planning by curriculum directors.

Teacher leader selection and development

In addition to instructional leadership from principals and instructional coaches, the district's plan included the appointment of a cadre of teacher leaders in all schools. These lead teachers were to be the vanguard for implementation of instructional strategies associated with the Principles of Learning and with the balanced literacy program. In theory, the addition of lead teachers would create a critical mass of leadership and content expertise for implementing balanced literacy practices in the schools, thereby increasing the likelihood that those practices would spread to other teachers and have a significant impact on student learning across the schools. Lead teacher positions were posted at the school level, and the principals appointed one lead teacher per grade level in each elementary school. In some schools, special education or bilingual education teachers were appointed to lead teacher positions. The lead teachers did not receive stipends, extra time, or adjustments in workload, but they did have access to additional inservice training.

Professional development for the lead teachers focused mainly on the pedagogical components of reform: knowledge of the New Standards and teaching practices associated with the Principles of Learning and with the literacy initiatives. IFL consultants participated in after-school lead team teacher training, but the instructional coaches initially provided much of the lead teacher training. At the school level, coaches were expected to model practices and lessons for lead team teachers, to observe and coach them in the use of those strategies, and to talk with them individually and in meetings about implementing the Principles of Learning, the literacy-focused teaching methods, and evidence of student learning (e.g., work samples). Principals facilitated lead teachers' learning by creating time for them to meet together with the coach, arranging for them to visit and observe other teachers, and providing access to additional professional development inside and outside the school.

In hindsight, some of the district administrators, principals, and coaches consulted in our study believed that expectations surrounding the role of lead teachers could have been better communicated across the system. Reportedly, some of those initially appointed were not ready to act as "leaders" in the reform process; that is, they did not attend lead teacher meetings, welcome instructional coaches into their classrooms, and help the coaches with in-school professional development activities. This led to an unexpectedly high degree of turnover in lead teachers during the early stages of the literacy initiative, and thus some coaches found it challenging to create a nucleus of teacher who were on board with the reforms in their schools.

Instructional coach and lead teacher practices

Instructional coach leadership strategies. The district relied heavily on instructional coaches as part of its strategy to improve instruction. Coaches acted as resource providers to teachers and in-house consultants in the implementation of new instructional strategies,

in the use of New Standards as a basis for lesson design, and in the analysis of student work and test data. Coaches encouraged peer learning among teachers by offering to cover classes so individual teachers could observe lead teachers or other colleagues. Through their contacts with other coaches, they arranged inter-visitations across schools. Coaches met regularly in their coach clusters to share experiences and concerns about their work as coaches and to access professional support from the literacy coordinators and IFL consultants. While district officials reported wide variation in coach–principal relationships, all the coaches and principals we spoke with said they communicated daily.

The middle and high school coaches were only a few months into their role at the time of our site visits, and their work with teachers was inhibited by a work-to-rule campaign. Furthermore, it was apparent that as a group, they were having more difficulty being accepted by teachers and even being invited into lead team teachers’ classrooms. For some, contact with teachers was restricted to talking about the new instructional strategies in lead team meetings or in grade-level team meetings, or to making teachers aware of literacy resource materials that coaches could provide. Some created literacy resource rooms and reported that teachers were beginning to drop in to chat with them about the use of the materials.

As in the elementary schools, the middle and high school coaches reported close communication and working relationships with their principals. Their similar IFL training in the Principles of Learning, New Standards, and so on helped to create a shared basis for consultation among the coaches and principals. The fact that many principals were newly appointed and were under pressure from the central administration to provide instructional leadership undoubtedly contributed to their willingness to collaborate with the coaches.

Lead teacher leadership strategies. Lead teacher teams were established as school-based support groups of teachers committed to implementing the instructional practices associated with the Principles of Learning and balanced literacy. In high functioning schools, lead teacher teams were dedicated to working collaboratively with each other, the coaches, and principals. Their "leadership" consisted of being the early innovators in their schools, both in regard to the teaching strategies and in regard to fostering a professional community. Ideally, their evolving instructional expertise and commitment to the reform goals and processes would spread to other teachers in their schools through grade-level team meetings, through their contributions to in-school professional development activities, and by welcoming other teachers into their classrooms to observe and talk about the new teaching methods. A principal explained that the lead teacher teams were important in large part because they provided “embedded professional development.” The principal noted that other teachers are released “so that they can go in and see modeling... and then take it back to their classrooms.”

We were unable to ascertain how fully this vision was being enacted across the system. At a minimum, lead teachers were attending their own after-school training sessions, meeting with coaches and principals, and participating in grade-level meetings in their

schools. As previously noted, however, not all were opening their doors to the coaches, much less to other teachers within their buildings.

Challenges to implementing the coach and lead teacher roles. As suggested earlier, the distributed leadership model in Providence required a change in culture and expectations among the stakeholders—especially teachers. The main challenge to implementing the instructional coach role centered on teachers’ willingness to allow coaches to enter their classrooms to demonstrate lessons, observe, and provide feedback on the use of targeted instructional strategies. These in-class coaching processes conflicted with long-standing norms of teacher privacy, individualism, and non-interference in the classroom.

Soon after they took up their new positions, the coaches, who were still classified as teachers and members of the union, banded together and approached the teachers union for support. Union leaders endorsed the coach role in general, while taking the public position that coaches should go into the classrooms of other teachers only if invited by those teachers. While this did not resolve the problem, it provided a clear operational guideline. Several coaches described their frustration with this situation and their efforts to break through the walls of privacy by dropping into classrooms to make teachers aware of literacy resources available to them through the in-school professional libraries.

Part of the problem was confusion in teachers’ perceptions of the differences and connections between the administrators’ Learning Walks and the instructional coaching process. As previously noted, many teachers initially were suspicious of the evaluative overtones of the Learning Walks. This led some coaches to distance themselves from their association with administrators’ Learning Walks. The decision that coaches would go into classrooms only if invited, of course, reinforced this position. The coaches emphasized that when issues of teacher competence surfaced, it was the principal’s responsibility, not the responsibility of the coach or lead team teachers, to intervene. On the other hand, principals noted that one kind of intervention in such circumstances might be to encourage a struggling teacher to connect with the coach or lead teachers.

Variation in the skills with which coaches carried out their new position represented another important challenge for developing the coaching role. Through their ongoing interactions with coaches on the job, IFL consultants discovered that some coaches were spending too much time working with individual teachers and not enough time working with groups of teachers. They also found that some coaches were doing classroom demonstrations as one-time events with no follow-up to observe and coach teachers when they tried to replicate the demonstrated teaching methods in their classrooms. Awareness of these variations prompted IFL consultants to provide supportive interventions and reiterate the expectations regarding the coaching role for coaches and classroom teachers alike.

Supporting Instructional Reform: The Role of District and External Stakeholders

Reform in Providence involved the input and guidance of many stakeholders. In this section, we outline the relationships formed and challenges faced as the district worked to implement reform.

The State Education Department

Earlier, we reported that the state education department had undergone a transformation from seeing its role as ensuring compliance with policies to one of leading and supporting schools and school districts in the quest to align student learning with the new state standards for curriculum and student performance. The supporting function was reflected through changes in education funding and in the state's efforts to build capacity through curriculum framework development, professional development, and technical assistance. The state's capacity to provide technical support, however, was constrained by reductions in staffing at the state level.

State accountability policies and practices provided a certain degree of stimulus for change in Providence. For example, the state commissioner of education provided significant political support for district improvement. He was closely involved in the hiring of Superintendent Lam, played a major role in engineering the *Providence Compact*, and sought ways to help the new district administrators learn to work within the local policy and political landscape. Additionally, the district used the state standard policy as a way to leverage support for higher expectations for practice and outcomes. Yet, other than funding through Article 31 and the *Providence Compact*, there was little evidence of state resource support for the district's professional development and curriculum development initiatives. District leaders in Providence chose not to participate in several programmatic initiatives supported by the state that were similar in focus to the district's own literacy reform efforts.

Teachers Union

In the first years of instructional reform in Providence, district and union leaders found some common ground and established a workable rapport. Union leaders supported the central office in a few key reform initiatives, including helping to facilitate the hiring of instructional coaches outside of traditional seniority procedures. Yet as the reforms progressed and the contract talks of 2001 approached, the district reform initiatives took their toll on relations between the district and union leaders. Relative harmony transformed into significant tension.

The evidence of widespread low performance in most schools across the district, and the public pressure from the state and board to do something about it, cast a negative light on teachers as well as on the incumbent administration at the district and school levels. The reform initiative had the look and feel of an external intervention. Superintendent Lam and Deputy Superintendent Johnson were "outsiders" hired with an explicit mandate to

create change. Moreover, the Institute for Learning, which was deeply engaged in the strategic plan and in delivering inservice support for leadership development, was not a local organization.

The strategic plan was commonly perceived as the superintendent's vision rather than a plan for change that emerged from widespread input from teachers or other local stakeholders. Furthermore, one of the goals in the strategic plan was to renegotiate contracts with the district's unions to try to align better with reform efforts. Portions of the teachers' contract were singled out as "obstacles" to reform.

District leaders felt that the teachers union had focused more on member salaries and working conditions and less on the issue of teacher professional growth. Furthermore it appeared that over the years, the teachers union in Providence had negotiated numerous provisions into the contract that seemed to inhibit implementation of different elements of the district's strategic plan. The five and one-half hour workday, for example, made it difficult to arrange times for teachers to plan, share, problem solve, and learn together in small groups or as whole faculties. The contract required cancellation of in-school professional development activities during the regular workday if substitute teachers could not be found for all of those teachers involved. Given the shortage of qualified substitute teachers in Providence, this was often the case. Moreover, school administrators were not permitted to ask teachers to cover a colleague's classes in such circumstances. Contractual restrictions on altering teachers' schedules after September made it difficult for schools to experiment with alternative arrangements of time for teachers' joint work and for dealing with unexpected shifts in student enrollment during the academic year. Waivers that might be agreed upon by a majority of teachers in one school were subject to approval by the union membership across the district before they could be granted.

Anecdotal accounts from staff in schools where there had been a history of failure suggested that the union's traditional stance might have been well justified due to the dysfunctional management styles of some principals and the frequent principal turnover that had existed in the past. What's more, the situation was exacerbated in part by the apparent failure of the district administration to successfully involve the union in the original design for reform, thus treating the union more as an obstacle than as a fundamental partner. In a sense, rather than forging a more collaborative relationship, this perpetuated long-standing adversarial relations between the district leadership and the union.

The challenge of working together was further complicated by an apparent division within the union between those who supported the reform initiatives and plan and those who were opposed to it for reasons stated above. The union executive during Superintendent Lam's tenure reportedly was more disposed to seeking ways of working with the administration, and this support was manifested in several concrete actions.

Union executives helped craft the hiring process for instructional coaches in a way that gave precedence to the technical and interpersonal skill requirements of the job over

contractual provisions favoring seniority. They mediated member concerns about the intent of administrator Learning Walks and about the coaches' perceived interference with professional autonomy. The union executive also suggested a strategy for building lesson planning into the teacher appraisal process through the contractually authorized teacher evaluation labor-management committee, thereby mitigating the need to insert lesson planning into the contract. In the 2001–2002 contract negotiations, the union agreed to a process whereby teachers, with financial compensation, could voluntarily provide coverage when substitutes could not be found for in-school inservice activities that did not involve all staff.

The union executive leaders who took part in these actions, however, had reportedly been elected by a slim majority. When they presented the draft of a new contract negotiated with the district to the membership in February 2002, it was defeated in what the media portrayed as an acrimonious public vote. A new contract was finally approved late in the school year.

School Board

The system of governance in Providence was unusual. Board members were not elected by voters, but rather were appointed by the mayor, subject to the approval of the city council. The board was empowered to make policy recommendations, also subject to approval by the city council. Additionally, board members sat on city council committees. While council members represented neighborhoods, school board members had a citywide mandate. However, the mayor and council had reportedly worked to balance board appointments to reflect the city's racial and ethnic make-up. Historically, the relations among the board, the district administration, and the city government were described as more adversarial than collaborative.

The school board's story was not unlike that of other "leadership" groups in the district prior to the initiation of the reforms. The board was struggling with a traditional mode of operation that was not in sync with the changing education policy environment. Board members themselves noted that the lack of clear standards and system goals in the past created a situation in which board members had no real basis for decisionmaking. The overriding authority of the city council further muddled the board's "role" in policymaking. The board had evolved into a micro-management mode of operation, debating minor expenditures and seeking input into all phases of district personnel and other decisions.

Reportedly, the board was struggling to find its role in the district reform initiatives. For example, board members were uncertain as to the kinds of information they needed and when to monitor and react to implementation of the district's strategic goals and plans. District administrators attempted to respond to this concern by providing background information on district initiatives (e.g., adoption of the math textbook), by creating a decision map for the year, and by offering professional development sessions for the board on such things as data-based decisionmaking. We were told that an attempt to hold

a retreat for the board to discuss its role apparently failed due to the ineffective facilitation and factionalism among the members.

Ultimately, the challenge for the board in Providence was not just to assemble political support for the superintendent and district plans, but also to find a new way of conceptualizing and enacting their own role to function as a policy-setting rather than management body.

The Community

A primary goal of district leadership was to strengthen the engagement between the district and the community. School system personnel commonly expressed the view that parents and community organizations needed to take greater responsibility and accountability for student learning in partnership with the district and the schools. Parent–teacher groups at the school level, for example, were practically non-existent. Through its new Facilitator for Family and Communities, district efforts focused on establishing better communications with community groups and on encouraging principals and teachers to make their schools more inviting to parents. For example, the superintendent began holding monthly breakfasts and coffee hours with local community organizations; announcements about school system activities were communicated over the Spanish language radio station; flyers with information about upcoming events were posted in public places (e.g., laundromats, supermarkets); and for the first time, a parent/teacher conference day was organized to distribute report cards. In addition, sessions on parental involvement were incorporated into the aspiring principal program.

Historically, community involvement in district affairs had produced mixed results. We were told that prior to Superintendent Lam’s appointment, numerous local organizations received significant funding to provide services to the district without being held accountable for results. In accordance with the strategic plan, those arrangements all came under review. Many grants were terminated as the district determined that the organizations made insufficient contributions to student welfare and learning. One leader praised this shift, noting, “In the past, the schools and the district would sort of run for any money that they could get. This superintendent has been much more deliberate about her strategies.” However, such actions created some political hostility toward the superintendent and heightened the importance of effective communications and public relations.

Yet Providence also enjoyed highly productive partnerships with community organizations such as Volunteers in Providence Schools and HELP. Each of these organizations defined its role as one of supporting district and school initiatives, not as one of promoting an independent agenda. As a result, these organizations sought to provide services that complemented the district goals rather than worked outside of them.

The Providence experience with community agency involvement in schools highlights a fundamental challenge. Historically, community organizations have looked to the district as a source of revenues, resources, and clients to support the organizations’ internal

agendas. The key challenge (and source of frustration) now is for community organizations to rethink their roles in terms of how they can work with and support district agendas and the needs of teachers in schools. Where this has worked in Providence, it has worked well. A contributing factor to the success of Volunteers in the Providence Schools and HELP is that these agencies had direct communications and working relationships with teachers. The organizations' activity was not mediated by the district, but rather was facilitated and shaped by the district.

Conclusion

The reforms in Providence were stimulated and shaped in part by interactions between an evolving state education policy environment and evidence of low test scores throughout the district. However, the story of education reform in Providence from 1999 to the present is really a story of changing leadership. Superintendent Lam's arrival symbolized a shift from the adversarial and ineffective climate in which Providence education leaders had been operating to one of clear direction with a well-articulated vision and a strategic plan for reform.

All of the district's activities and decisions were aligned to a vision of improving student learning. Responding to the initial emphasis on building leadership capacity at the school and district office levels, the district adopted the strategy of instructional leadership and instituted intensive, ongoing professional development for current and future principals and for teachers. In addition to providing principals and teachers with more support, the district increased its expectations of them. Principals and teachers were held accountable for school improvement planning and for aligning their resources and activities to the New Standards, student performance data, and other indicators of school performance. By the end of Superintendent Lam's three-year tenure, significant changes in leadership personnel and approach had taken place at the school and district levels. This occurred despite the often-tenuous relationship with the board and the teachers union.

The reforms implemented in Providence significantly enhanced the capacity of school district personnel to address recognized needs for improvement in student learning across the district. However, three years into implementation there were still parts of the strategic plan that had not been fully implemented. Serious questions remained as to whether changes in leadership and organizational support for teacher development had made a widespread difference in teaching practices beyond the lead teacher or in student learning outcomes in reading and writing. It was too soon to tell. Active implementation of the support system and the literacy initiative in elementary schools was scarcely a year and a half old at the time of our study and was in only its first year in the middle and high schools. District officials spoke of a need to incorporate methods to assess the quality of implementation of the expected teaching practices into the teacher appraisal process, but felt that it was too soon for this to be accepted by staff.

The approach to reform in Providence highlights some important strategic issues, two of which we mention in closing. The first concerns the feasibility of scaling up the school-based support system created around the literacy initiative to other areas of need. The district managed to fund about 50 full-time instructional coaches focused on literacy. Whether the district could create a similar system of mathematics coaches and lead teachers without abandoning the in-school support system for literacy development so early in the game was unclear. Second, the district invested heavily in leadership development up front, in the hopes that this would pay off in terms of strengthening capacity for continuous improvement. It could be argued that a more systematic initial emphasis on curriculum alignment might have led to more immediate evidence of gains in student performance, regardless of principals' leadership practices, or even the

teaching methods employed by teachers. On the other hand, once the alignment of content taught and tested was achieved, any further improvement in student learning might well plateau if principals, teachers, and other leaders had not engaged in continuous efforts to identify and address needs for improvement in student learning and teaching.

Providence's reform efforts attest to a community and an education system working to improve the educational opportunities of their students.

Appendix I

Providence Public Schools

Achievement Data

Table A.1 Providence Public Schools

Percentage of Students Who Met or Exceeded the Standard on the New Standards English Language Arts Reference Exam—1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
Grade 4						
All students	35	53	57	44	47	12
Grade 8						
All students	24	22	25	27	23	-1

Table A.2 Providence Public Schools

Percentage of Students Who Met or Exceeded the Standard on the New Standards Mathematics Reference Exam—1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
Grade 4						
All students	24	26	34	58	35	11
Grade 8						
All students	23	27	26	13	18	-5

Notes: As Providence had focused its reform efforts on the elementary grades, the district was selected based on data that revealed improvement in elementary school students' reading scores from 1998 to 2000 (e.g., according to the originally provided data, the percentage of fourth-grade black students who met or exceeded the standard on the English Language Arts Reference Exam increased from 28% to 42%, and Hispanic student achievement increased from 21% to 37%). These disaggregated data were provided by the Rhode Island State Department of Education. However, due to changes in the state's methods for disaggregating data, the original data we received have been withdrawn from public access. Therefore, we print here the aggregate data provided by the Providence Public Schools. The district began to disaggregate its own data again in 2002.

Source: These data were provided by the Providence Public Schools.

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For more information about the Providence Public School District, please visit:
<http://www.providenceschools.org>.

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Research that Informed the Study

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