

THE WESTERN STATES BENCHMARKING CONSORTIUM:

A SEARCH FOR MORE MEANINGFUL ACCOUNTABILITY

In the mid-1990's, a small group of superintendents and other key executives from a handful of large high-performing Western U.S. school districts met and decided to join forces in their efforts toward improvement in learning for all students. From its inception, this central focus on improving student learning has been the “glue” which has bonded member districts. Consortium district leaders meet periodically to engage in dialogue about “best practices” and strategies for improvement and to share learning from various members’ experiences. Active membership of the Western States Benchmarking Consortium now includes six school districts committed to continuous improvement in learning for all students. The Consortium also works in a strong partnership with the American Association of School Administrators.

- Blue Valley Unified School District, Overland Park, Kansas—Dr. Tom Trigg, Superintendent
- Cherry Creek School District, Englewood, Colorado—Ms. Mary Chesley, Superintendent
- Lake Washington School District, Redmond, Washington—Dr. Don Saul, Superintendent
- Peoria, Arizona School District—Dr. Jack Erb, Superintendent
- Plano Independent School District, Plano, Texas—Dr. Doug Otto, Superintendent
- Poway Unified School District, Poway, California—Dr. Don Phillips, Superintendent
- Vancouver School District, Vancouver Washington—Dr. Steven Webb, Superintendent

CONSORTIUM CORE BELIEFS

Democracy's Imperative.....

Public education must fully apply school and community will, skills and resources to assure high levels of learning for each student. To do less inhibits individual growth and threatens the future of our democratic society.

To Meet This Imperative.....

- We must assure ***personalized learning*** so that each student continuously grows and masters high standards for success.
- We must ***transform our policies and practices*** to assure each student's learning success.
- School systems and their broader communities must ***share accountability*** to assure high levels of continuous growth and development for each student.
- Transformation and personalization of learning must be ***guided by the continuous wise use of a wide range of data*** that guides progress toward ***specific benchmarks*** for learning and system performance.

The Western States Benchmarking Consortium VISION

“We are committed to creating world-class districts by focusing on all student learning, establishing clearly identified performance benchmarks, fostering connections to the larger society, and articulating a clear vision for the future of public education.”

The Western States Benchmarking Consortium MISSION

“We will accomplish our vision by developing benchmarks toward world-class educational organizations, sharing ideas through networking opportunities, advocating our vision for creating the future on behalf of public education, and working collaboratively to find solutions to common problems and issues.

Purpose of the Consortium Benchmarks

In their work toward creating educational excellence, Consortium members have developed common definitions of organizational effectiveness, i.e., “benchmarks” that articulate the steps toward achieving the highest quality public education. These statements are intended to assist the districts in recognizing and acting on key areas of emphasis to improve learning for all students. The statements also provide a vehicle for sharing best practices and strategies for improvement.

The benchmark statements are not designed to compare school districts. Rather, the purpose is to provide a strategic framework to help participating districts conduct organizational self-assessments – developing their own quantifiable indicators, tools for data collection, and best practices. These indicators, tools, and best practices are driven by the unique local needs of each district.

Over the past two years, each district has conducted self-assessments using selected Consortium benchmarks as measuring sticks. Results, insights and best practices emerging from these self-assessments have been routinely shared across member districts during the three meetings held each year as well as between meetings. The Consortium recently adopted the necessary bodies of evidence and a peer review process to identify and share promising, best and Exemplary practices within and outside the consortium. The Consortium Web site is also being upgraded so it can provide a user-friendly tool to conduct self-assessments and store and retrieve information about promising and proven practices among members.

BENCHMARKS FRAMEWORK

A Strategic Framework

The Consortium has adopted four strategic areas of focus in its benchmarking work, derived from research studies that correlate certain organizational policies and practices with improved student learning (see Cotton 1999; Fullan 1991; Newmann and Wehlage 1997; Schmoker 1999; Senge 1990; Sparks and Hirsch 1997). These studies suggest that targeted efforts in certain broad strategic areas can provide significant leverage in improving student performance. The literature also reminds us that an abiding focus on student performance is paramount in achieving strategic improvement.

As a result, the Consortium benchmark statements are organized in the following four strategic areas:

- Student Learning
- Capacity Development
- Learning Community Development
- Data-Driven Decision-Making

Benchmarks and Indicators

Consortium developers divided each of the above strategic areas into several key benchmarks and identified key indicators for each benchmark. These indicators are either “behavioral” or “support” indicators. Behavioral indicators include beliefs or actions that are evident in the system at each level. Support indicators include those things that support these behaviors, such as professional development, policy, or resources.

Suggested Bodies of Evidence

Each Benchmark has a guiding “bottom-line” *impact* question. Then, suggested types of evidence to document current status is provided for every indicator.

Four Stages of Development

The Consortium framework defines school systems at the following four stages of development:

Emergent

This stage describes a school system that is beginning to recognize the need for change in a strategic area. There is increasing discussion of this need, but the system has not yet decided what actions to take to bring about the change. There are frequent debates about the advisability of the change, and district policy is often silent regarding the nature of the change.

Islands

This stage describes a school system that has some “pockets” of change underway. These initiatives have emerged from discomfort with current practices in some settings. The discomfort is not yet systemic, and the pilot change efforts often tend to emerge from the bottom up within the system. They tend to be isolated from each other, but are beginning to get

some broader debate and attention at the policy and central office levels regarding their effects and possible consequences for the system.

Integrated

This stage describes a school system that is integrating significant strategic changes across the entire system—moving from isolated to systemic changes in policy, management, and instructional practices. The system generally operates from the best of what we know about highly effective organizations. Such systems are widely recognized as leaders in strategic improvement and even called on for advice in shaping state policy. While the system's strategic improvements are well defined and carefully implemented, a district at this stage continues to focus on making the changes truly pervasive across the system, including engendering strong understanding, support and collaboration from the broader community.

Exemplary

This stage describes a school system that demonstrates unusually high levels of student and organizational performance. It is constantly “pushing the envelope” – continuously learning from its data and experience, never totally satisfied with current levels of organizational effectiveness. Change efforts are clearly systemic, coordinated and have demonstrated impacts. The system monitors future trends within and outside the community to determine where new policies and practices (and paradigms) might be needed down the road. a district at this level often leads broader efforts in improving quality of life for children, youth and families—both within and outside its local community.

Western States Benchmarking Consortium

Consortium Strategic Area: STUDENT LEARNING

Benchmark: Ensuring Learning for All Students

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Western States Benchmarking Consortium
STUDENT LEARNING: Ensuring Learning for All Students

Impact Question: To what degree are all students, groups and subgroups demonstrating continuous progress?

Emergent	Islands	Integrated	Exemplary
<p>Instructional Practice Whole group instruction predominates, exclusively teacher-centered with very little variation.</p>	<p>Instructional Practice Whole group instruction predominates, though some teachers (and schools) are beginning to shift instruction toward meeting students' needs. Learning opportunities developed for special populations of students (low- or high-ability) are not universal.</p>	<p>Instructional Practice Differentiated instruction, anchored in rigorous standards, is available to students of varying performance levels. Teachers are beginning to use assessment data to guide instruction and to meet the learning needs of each and every student.</p>	<p>Instructional Practice Instructional practice meets the diversified learning needs of all students. Each student has a flexible, individual learning plan based on rigorous standards. These plans are based on real-time assessments, and students may test out of content they have mastered. Students are grouped and regrouped for small modules of content, based on need. Student time is carefully utilized and schedules are coordinated to maximize learning. Active, hands-on instruction is used in all district schools at all grade levels. Programming is articulated from level to level, and information on individual students is shared between levels.</p>
<p>GUIDING QUESTIONS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How are instructional strategies personalized to assure that each student meets or exceeds academic standards? (PROCESS)</i> • <i>What is the articulation plan, including teachers participating between grade levels, across content areas and between institutions? (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>How is continuous progress for all students, groups and subgroups measured, reported and used?</i> 		<p>POSSIBLE EVIDENCE:</p> <p>➔ <u><i>Aggregated and disaggregated reports of student achievement over time. (impact)</i></u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Surveys of teachers/students regarding instructional strategies (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Individual learning plans for all students (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Flexible grouping (tutorials, remediation, enrichment classes) formed using achievement data (PROCESS)</i> • <i>Pretest results reported by standard (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Posttest (growth) results reported by standard (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Single focus, short term offerings based upon immediate needs of students (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Surveys of parents/students regarding matriculation from graded to grade (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Observations/documentation of personalized instructional practices</i> • <i>Individual student growth data (PRODUCT)</i> 	

<p>Schooling Alternatives/Choices The prevailing mindset is “one size fits all.” If a child doesn’t respond to available instruction, the child must be in need of “special education” and be pulled out of the regular classroom. Special needs students are placed in programs that are disconnected from regular education programs. The underlying belief is that gifted students will do well – that no special provisions are necessary to meet their needs. A lack of programming options and alternatives exists.</p>	<p>Schooling Alternatives/Choices Some stakeholders demonstrate a growing awareness of the need for schooling alternatives and choices, but most are unaware or disinterested. Tentative, pilot, or small-scale efforts may be in place.</p>	<p>Schooling Alternatives/Choices The needs of exceptional students are met through well-articulated programming. A wide range of schooling alternatives, both within a school and external to traditional programs, is available for all students. “Choice” schools or programs are supported routinely by the district. Special needs students have programs that complement the regular education programs.</p>	<p>Schooling Alternatives/Choices Choices, options, and alternatives are encouraged and offered proactively. A wide range of schooling alternatives (e.g., district/building programs, internships, or partnerships) is in place and valued by both the district and the community. This valuing is based on a commonly understood view that not every child learns in the same way or learns best in the same setting. The school district is recognized as working hard to meet student needs. Programming needs for all students are interwoven throughout the educational options.</p>
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<p>GUIDING QUESTIONS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How are various learning alternatives/pathways integrated with the school/district program to achieve continuous learning progress? (PROCESS)</i> • <i>How are stakeholders informed of various strategies or pathways to attain academic standards? (PROCESS)</i> • <i>To what extent are alternative programs available and accessible to students and families?</i> 	<p>POSSIBLE EVIDENCE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ <i>Reports of student achievement over time for each alternative program. (IMPACT)</i> • <i>Descriptions of schooling alternatives available at district/school level with explanation of each are available to the public (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Satisfaction surveys of customers disaggregated by alternative programs (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Follow-up survey data (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Evidence of alternate pathways to a high school diploma (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Policies, procedures and collective bargaining agreements that allow/include provisions for “pilots”, “exceptions”, side letters of agreement in order to accomplish alternative delivery systems (PRODUCT)</i>
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<p>Resources/Facilities Staffing and other resources are allocated to meet the needs of mid-range performing students. Dollars are not prioritized to support learning (the budget structure is static), and there is no categorization of resource support for targeted populations. Classrooms are very traditional, and instructional materials are usually limited to textbooks with some teacher-provided materials.</p>	<p>Resources/Facilities Planning rarely takes into account student needs. Conflicts arise between stakeholders (e.g., parents vs. district, with teachers in the middle) regarding how financial resources are to be spent. Limited resources are allocated for targeted populations. Limited attention is given to the impact of physical facilities on student learning, including classroom arrangements. Textbooks are supplemented with</p>	<p>Resources/Facilities Human and financial resources are prioritized and adequate. Evidence supports that resources are differentiated according to need. The district budget routinely supports some option of “choice” schools or programs. There is an overall plan for the purchase of technology and standards-based integration into the curriculum. The physical environment of the school and classroom is conducive to learning with</p>	<p>Resources/Facilities Decisions on staffing and the expenditure of dollar resources follow the needs of the students. The district’s operating budget is prioritized around student learning, including professional development. Physical learning environments are conducive to a wide range of learning needs. A variety of instructional materials are present, including multiple computers and high quality software for student use) software and web-based resources that significantly facilitate both teaching and learning.</p>
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	<p>teacher-developed materials. One or two computers may be available for both student and teacher use. Software is purchased randomly by individual teachers.</p>	<p>current technologies available for both teacher and student use. Technology is available and used by the learning community.</p>	
<p>GUIDING QUESTION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How are resources prioritized around student learning needs to support the continuous progress of all students? (PROCESS)</i> 		<p>POSSIBLE EVIDENCE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Budgets that show differentiated allocation of funds based upon needs of students (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Teacher surveys regarding availability of resources (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Student work samples reflect the use of software productivity tools for research and learning (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Separate budget analyses for each program or alternative pathway (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Budgets that show differentiated allocation of funds based upon qualifications of staff or requirements of the learning environment (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Use of technology to create alternatives (PROCESS)</i> • <i>Evidence of budget allocations based upon needs/goals/priorities (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Percent of budget for instruction vs. non-instruction activities</i> 	

<p>Professional Development Scarce allocation of time and funds are made for staff development with limited linkage to student learning.</p>	<p>Professional Development Little allocation of time and funds is made for staff development linked to student learning. Some limited initiatives receive district support.</p>	<p>Professional Development Staff development activities are aligned with district priorities and state standards. (Since teachers have the responsibility of teaching all students, they) teachers are trained to implement school-level and district-wide program adoptions and to differentiate instruction.</p>	<p>Professional Development Professional development supports and sustains standards-based learning and student-centered teaching in all classrooms. In this context (All) teachers are trained in a broad array of instructional strategies to address the diverse learning needs of all students.</p>
<p><i>GUIDING QUESTION:</i> <i>How does the school/district provide relevant and sustained professional development for all teachers that ensures the accomplishment of standards by all students? (Process)</i></p> <p><i>What changes are observed in classrooms as a result of professional development?</i></p>		<p><i>POSSIBLE EVIDENCE:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Professional development plan that aligns with standards based and child-centered strategies (PROCESS)</i> • <i>Systematic professional development program for all staff that spans multiple years/multiple sessions (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Professional development fliers, notices or catalog with course objectives aligned with standards-based and child-centered strategies (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Professional development offerings focus on current research (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Professional development offerings that meet National Staff Development Council (NSDC) standard for staff development (PRODUCT)</i> • <i>Staff survey results</i> • <i>Feedback forms/analysis after each staff development session or offering</i> 	

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE CONSORTIUM

CONSORTIUM WEB SITE (includes information about the Consortium and a link to each district's web site)

www.wsbenchmark.org

CONSORTIUM COORDINATOR

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WESTERN STATES BENCHMARKING CONSORTIUM

MEANINGFUL ACCOUNTABILITY:

16 CRITICAL IMPACT QUESTIONS

STRATEGIC AREA:

STUDENT LEARNING

BENCHMARK	IMPACT QUESTION
ENSURING LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS	<i>TO WHAT DEGREE ARE ALL STUDENTS, GROUPS AND SUBGROUPS DEMONSTRATING CONTINUOUS PROGRESS?</i>
INTEGRATING STANDARDS	<i>TO WHAT DEGREE ARE ALL STUDENTS ACHIEVING ACADEMIC STANDARDS OVER TIME?</i>
INCORPORATING INNOVATIVE PRACTICE	<i>HOW DO INNOVATIVE PRACTICES CORRELATE TO GAINS IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT?</i>
INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY	<i>TO WHAT EXTENT DOES TECHNOLOGY USE SUPPORT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT THAT IS STANDARDS-FOCUSED?</i>
DEVELOPING A COHERENT CURRICULUM	<i>TO WHAT EXTENT DO ALL STUDENTS DEMONSTRATE ADEQUATE YEARLY GROWTH AT EVERY SCHOOL EACH YEAR?</i>

STRATEGIC AREA:

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

BENCHMARK	IMPACT QUESTION
EXPANDING ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS	<i>WHAT INDICATIONS ARE THERE THAT THE DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION AND SCHOOL BOARD CONSISTENTLY EXAMINE DATA AND DEVELOP PLANS TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING?</i>
PROMOTING INNOVATION	<i>WHAT DATA SHOW INNOVATIVE PRACTICES HAVE RESULTED IN IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING?</i>
IMPROVING PROFESSIONAL/ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	<i>WHAT DATA SHOW THAT STUDENT LEARNING HAS IMPROVED (AS A RESULT OF PROFESSIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS)?</i>

STRATEGIC AREA:

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

BENCHMARK	IMPACT QUESTION
DEVELOPING A STRONG COMMUNITY	<i>HOW DOES THE COMMUNITY ENSURE SUCCESS FOR ALL LEARNERS?</i>
UNDERSTANDING AND USING ASSESSMENT RESULTS	<i>HOW DO KEY STAKEHOLDERS EFFECTIVELY USE ASSESSMENT RESULTS TO PLAN AND DIRECT THEIR WORK?</i>
PROVIDING COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	<i>HOW DOES LEARNING IN THE COMMUNITY STRENGTHEN LEARNING IN SCHOOL?</i>
BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS	<i>HOW DO PARTNERSHIPS ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING?</i>

STRATEGIC AREA:

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

BENCHMARK	IMPACT QUESTION
USING A DATA TO AFFECT STUDENT PERFORMANCE	<i>HOW IS THE CURRENT DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCESS ORGANIZED AND UTILIZED TO MAXIMIZE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT GAINS?</i>
USING A VARIETY OF DATA EFFECTIVELY	<i>HOW EFFECTIVELY DO DECISION-MAKERS USE A VARIETY OF DATA TO MAKE DECISIONS?</i>
RELATING INVESTMENTS, IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES?	<i>HOW DOES THE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCESS RELATE INVESTMENTS, IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES/</i>
USING INFORMATION TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE	<i>HOW HAS STUDENT LEARNING IMPROVED AS A RESULT OF DATA-DRIVEN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES?</i>