

# **Standards-Based Middle Grades Reform in Six Urban Districts, 1995–2001**

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*A Report on the Program for Student Achievement  
of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation*

by Anne Mackinnon

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Hayes Mizell, Director, Program for Student Achievement

In the final analysis, foundations are in the business of hope. They challenge, but they do not implement. They support, but they do not control. They influence, but they do not direct. They cling to hope because, when their initiatives have run their course, hope may be the only available balm. It is useful to keep this in mind while reading Anne Mackinnon's perceptive analysis of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's initiative to foster middle school reform.

More than a decade ago, the foundation began devoting a portion of its limited resources and influence to change the hearts, minds, and practices of middle-level educators. We believed then, as we believe now, that young people in grades six through eight have more raw talent and ability than their schools ever develop. Recognizing that there is much schools cannot control, most notably the educational experiences and values students bring to school from their families and communities, the foundation chose to focus on what educators do control: school leadership, structure, operations, curricula, instruction, and professional development. We hoped a few school systems would respond positively to the foundation's vision and incentives for reforming middle-level schools so all their students would perform at much higher levels.

The school systems that ultimately became grantees of the foundation performed well. They created and implemented reforms they would not otherwise have mounted. Their middle schools gained new attention and respect, often serving as the vanguard of reform in their districts. Opportunistic educators made good use of the foundation's assistance to improve their own knowledge and skills and to engage their students in new types of learning. The performance of many students improved, although it is impossible to know whether this was because of the foundation's assistance. In all cases, the school systems acted in good faith.

Yet we had hoped for more. School systems embraced reform cautiously rather than enthusiastically. Their preoccupation with operational and bureaucratic norms prevailed, even if those norms impeded reform. The school systems were too patient with low-performing schools and too culpable in the perennial turnover of school personnel. The systems were reluctant to trust their own communities, and more inclined to manage than to engage them.

The foundation also erred. Our theory of action in 1989 was not only weak but naïve. By 1994, when we recast our middle grades work to create the Program for Student Achievement, we thought the scales had fallen from our eyes, but we still had much to learn

about the incapacity of school systems, schools, and educators. We were too slow to recognize the power of political, cultural, and collegial contexts that every day shape educators' actions and inaction. Because we had the luxury of relentlessly focusing on one issue — standards-based middle grades reform — we were too insensitive to demands on educators, who face a barrage of “priorities” emanating from many different sources.

Observers of the foundation's experience sometimes ask if we have concluded that it is hopeless to support the systemic reform of public schools. Not at all. Public schools will continue to educate most children. As has been true for the several decades during which this country has had a truly inclusive public school system, the children most in need of high-quality education are those who are most dependent on public schools. It is also true that most public schools have managed to rise above their imperfections to provide children with the basic knowledge and skills that enable them to become independent, productive citizens. Now, that is no longer good enough. Not only justice but global economic competition makes it imperative that children receive an education of unprecedented quality and effectiveness. If public schools are going to help all children cross the economic divide, and if that is going to happen sooner rather than later, school systems will have to dedicate themselves to ambitious, inclusive, and urgent reform.

Foundations are uniquely positioned to focus, encourage, and support school systems in that effort. Partnering with school systems is painstaking, maddening, uplifting work, but the fact that school systems have so few allies makes them all the more receptive to the support and influence of foundations. Moreover, there is now a deep body of philanthropic experience upon which foundations new to systemic school reform can build. Funders should exercise rigorous due diligence and more than a little humility in developing initiatives to leverage systemic reform, but there are many entry points and vast potential for good and useful work.

What, then, is the final judgment on the foundation's initiative to advance systemic, standards-based reform for middle schools? There are clear indicators of success. There are clear indicators of failure. If those successes and failures inspire both hope and learning, then the foundation and its grantees have achieved a great deal.

# Introduction

From 1995 through 2001, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement ran one of the nation's earliest and most intensive experiments in standards-based school reform, and one of the very few standards-based initiatives to work across sites in several states. Created near the beginning of what became a national wave of change in state-mandated standards and accountability systems, the program enabled its grantee districts to write standards and initiate reforms of their own design. The program also extended the foundation's earlier investment in improving the education of students in grades six through eight, the so-called middle grades.

The motivating premise of the Program for Student Achievement was that urban public schools, especially those serving predominantly poor students, required dramatic improvement. The foundation chose to focus on middle schools, as it had done through its earlier Program for Disadvantaged Youth (1989–94), because measures of student achievement showed that far too many students were entering high school without the skills they needed to thrive, graduate, and move on to college or work. Unsuccessful middle schools could not be expected to raise their performance on their own: logically, a good share of the responsibility would have to be shouldered by school districts. Yet very few districts — not even those involved in the foundation's earlier middle school work — seemed to be doing so in a concentrated and intentional way.

The foundation settled on standards-based reform as a way to address low student performance not because it favored greater standardization in education (the term “standards” had not yet taken on that connotation) but because standards seemed to be a promising mechanism for making the failure of some students unacceptable to districts and schools. If academic standards could clarify for teachers, parents, schools, and districts what all students should be learning, then all parties might become less tolerant of situations in which that learning was not taking place. Standards were the means, but a new culture of student achievement and professional commitment was the goal.

## **The Principles of Standards-Based Reform and NCLB**

The six districts began in 1995 by writing their own distinctive plans for ambitious but orderly programs of reform. As it turned out, the implementation years of the Program for Student Achievement were unusually turbulent ones. Across the country, states introduced or stepped up mandatory programs of standardized testing, revised their curriculum standards, and established new, high-stakes performance requirements for students and schools — all in the name of standards-based reform. Like many school systems, the six Clark-funded districts were buffeted repeatedly by changes in their state-mandated accountability systems. Interestingly (and ironically), standards-based reforms imposed by their states frequently interfered with the districts' own standards-based reform initiatives.

Despite complications and tactical changes, the districts maintained a fairly steady course toward their goals. That steadiness of purpose can be traced to a set principles that, although unstated, informed the foundation's planning, the request for proposals the foundation sent to the districts, and, ultimately, the plans the districts submitted. Those principles clarified how the new, standards-based approach would be different from what had come before:

- In a standards-based system, schools have a responsibility to help *all* students succeed by improving instruction to meet the needs of every student. Schools should give extra attention, as needed, to low-achieving students.
- In a standards-based system, school districts have a responsibility to concentrate attention and resources on the lowest-performing schools. No school district is justified in allowing certain schools to fail.
- In a standards-based system, schools and districts are committed to achieving rapid, measurable improvements in student achievement.

The principles are not standards: rather, they are operational, ethical guidelines for an approach to public education within which standards and related accountability mechanisms can be meaningfully applied.

Over time, districts' plans changed, but the principles remained operative: indeed, with encouragement from the foundation and consultants, district leaders returned to those principles again and again as they sought to accommodate new state and local demands, respond to evidence that their plans were not working as well as expected, and deepen their own understanding of reform and its implications. When the foundation chose to withdraw from three of the six districts, it did so because those districts did not appear to be willing or able to pursue the principles in earnest.

Today, standards-based reform is far better and more widely understood than it was in 1995, thanks in part to the learning educators were forced to do during the turbulent mid- to late 1990s. Many of the most important lessons of those years have been incorporated in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, passed by Congress in 2001. Unlike many earlier and current state programs, NCLB gives states and districts considerable latitude to write their own standards, choose curricula, and design their own accountability systems, so long as those elements conform to principles similar to those on which the Clark districts' work was based. Indeed, in both theory and practical detail, the Program for Student Achievement anticipated NCLB in several essential ways:

- The Program for Student Achievement specified that each district should begin by establishing standards, then link those standards to assessments. NCLB requires states to develop and align comparable elements: "challenging academic standards" and standardized tests.

- The program required the districts to set quantitative performance goals to be reached by 2001 in every middle school. NCLB demands improvement on standardized test results in every school by 2014, although it has also set interim goals for “annual yearly progress.”
- The Clark districts were asked by the foundation to identify low-performing “focus schools” that received extra attention, including extra services for students. NCLB also puts special emphasis on low-performing schools and stipulates extra services for students who attend them.
- The foundation assumed an upward trajectory in student performance and held districts responsible for achieving it: over the course of the program, it suspended funding to three districts that did not seem capable of delivering steady progress. NCLB likewise measures improvement at the level of the school but holds districts responsible by placing financial and operational burdens (in the form of financial set-asides and mandated student transfers) onto the school systems.
- The program came to recognize professional development as crucial to improving instruction and, ultimately, student performance. NCLB mandates that teachers in core subjects be “highly qualified” and recognizes the importance of professional development toward that end.
- Over time, as the foundation acknowledged districts’ lack of capacity to change classroom practice, it urged them to look outside their own experience for proven pedagogical techniques and to seek assistance from national experts. Similarly, NCLB requires school systems to use research-validated curricula and methodology.
- The foundation subscribed to a theory that school systems were more apt to make significant progress on a short timeline while grappling with ambitious challenges than while pursuing modest and more readily attainable goals. The same belief seems to have informed the drafting of NCLB.

If the experience of the Clark districts is a reliable precedent, the NCLB guidelines can help school districts embrace standards thoughtfully and use them to improve instruction and increase student achievement. The NCLB guidelines may also help officials and educators in states, districts, and schools deepen their understanding of the principles of accountability on which the success of the legislation depends.

### **Lessons for Future Standards-Based Reform**

The Clark-funded districts implemented their reforms at a time when standards were unfamiliar and their implications poorly understood. Much more is known today, yet the struggle to use standards constructively to drive real instructional improvement is still in its early stages. Lessons from the program’s work may be relevant as states and school systems strive to comply with NCLB and improve instruction for all students, and as foundations and others attempt to help them do so:

- Improving an entire district proved to be harder and more unfamiliar than improving individual schools and required very different strengths and skills. The foundation and the districts were caught off guard by the extent of the challenge — so much so in the foundation’s case that program staff worried that they had failed to perform sufficient advance “due diligence” regarding district capacity. Their concern is notable mainly because four of the six districts were established grantees of the program and therefore well known to the foundation.
- The school systems lacked the capacity, at least at the beginning, to formulate and implement real change. In particular, they needed more expert, on-site technical assistance than they received to prepare their initial, complex reform plans. Although available knowledge regarding standards was slim at the time the program was getting started, the districts would have benefited from working with experienced outside consultants. Technical assistance might have helped the districts to plan more rigorously and to develop more realistic goals, while also providing the foundation with insights about each district’s capacity.
- The districts probably would have benefited from a capacity-building stage between planning and implementation. In the press to implement quickly, the districts had little incentive or flexibility to identify areas where they needed to learn more and to revise their timetables accordingly.
- The qualitative and quantitative evaluations should have been developed in tandem during the planning year. In particular, better planning and integration would have allowed the districts to see the potential value of a quantitative evaluation, which would in turn have allowed the evaluators to shape the design to district needs. The evaluators might also have aided the districts in establishing more realistic, incremental implementation goals and performance targets.
- The foundation should probably have involved state officials in the program and the evaluation. Their involvement might have increased the relevance of the quantitative evaluation and aided the districts in reconciling the demands of state-mandated accountability systems and the requirements of the foundation. Contacts within state governments might also have helped the foundation understand the challenges faced by the districts while also holding them accountable for change.
- Although the foundation encouraged parent and community engagement, efforts in those areas too often lacked coherence, depth, and enthusiasm. Clearer guidelines and expectations, early technical assistance, and more involvement by groups outside the school systems might have mobilized more effective collaboration among schools, parents, and the wider community.



- In each city, a local institution capable of functioning as a “critical friend” of reform would have been an invaluable advisor to both the foundation and the district. A local public education fund — as opposed to an advocacy organization or a group that depends on the district for financial support — can play that role. If the foundation had cultivated relationships with local education funds, perhaps even supporting their establishment in cities where they did not exist and encouraging interaction among them, those collaborations could have strengthened the program, increased local understanding of what the foundation was trying to achieve, improved the prospects for continuing reform, and contributed to the growing national network of local education funders.
- The foundation should have anticipated that the districts’ progress would occasionally be stalled by political or personnel crises. Despite temporary setbacks, such crises can have a positive, galvanizing effect on local school reform. The foundation should have developed a clear protocol for consulting with district officials (including school boards) during times of transition and should have been more explicit about situations that could lead the foundation to cease its funding.
- Raising test scores turned out to be much more difficult than the districts or the foundation had anticipated. Plus, the foundation’s determination to see the districts meet their performance targets — a feat requiring dramatic growth in test scores — was frequently in conflict with its desire to see fundamental instructional change and its disapproval of “teaching to the test.” The test based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress that the quantitative evaluators began to administer in 1998 did not give the districts additional encouragement to improve classroom instruction.
- Perhaps the most important lesson is that the logic of standards was not readily apparent to most educators — or not apparent enough to motivate changes in expectations, instruction, and assessment. The foundation and the districts assumed that standards would be adopted fairly quickly by most teachers, and that the other elements of standards-based reform would flow naturally from that understanding. Instead, they learned that standards were just the beginning. Only through extensive professional learning, the development of new data and accountability systems, and a powerful focus on instruction have the Clark districts begun to establish the culture of achievement they set out to create in 1995.

This report describes an intense six-year partnership involving the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, six urban school districts and their communities, a core group of evaluators and advisors, and a wider network of national organizations. What the foundation brought to the table were financial resources and a willingness to encourage, cajole, and insist that the districts, as organizations, try to do it right: that they set clear objectives, plan rigorously, involve the right people, listen to evaluators and consultants, become conversant with research, join professional networks, find ways to measure progress, admit mistakes,

make corrections, and keep trying. These are the steps any responsible school district should take in attempting to implement major reform, yet the reality is that very few districts are able to take those steps on their own.

Did the Program for Student Achievement succeed? If the districts had delivered dramatic growth in the attainment of nearly all their middle school students, as they set out to do and as the foundation initially expected, the answer would be a clear and resounding yes. Not surprisingly, the results are more ambiguous. The Clark districts returned a mixed record of achievement, despite having had the benefit of more than common resources along the path toward reform. That fact alone is a warning for current and future efforts to use academic standards to increase student achievement.

## Standards-Based Reform in the National and Local Contexts

In April 1995, six urban school districts received invitations from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to participate in an unusual program of middle grades improvement. In its request for proposals, the foundation offered each district—Chattanooga, Tennessee; Corpus Christi, Texas; Long Beach, California; Louisville, Kentucky; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and San Diego, California—the opportunity to propose a districtwide campaign to apply standards-based reforms in all its middle schools, toward which the foundation would provide approximately half a million dollars per year. The experiment, to run through June 2001, would be among the nation’s only multi-site initiatives in systemic standards-based reform, one of the very few to work in districts in several states, and the only one supporting the creation of unique standards within each district.

To qualify, each school system was required to prepare a lengthy proposal, responding in detail to questions about the district’s philosophy, operations, and specific plans. The RFP charged planning team members in each district—and in every middle school within each district—with articulating their expectations for the reform process: reasoning back from their goals for standards-based reform, the districts were asked to predict and spell out the specific actions they would need to take to meet those goals, the problems they might encounter, and the help they might need. The foundation specified strenuous terms for the planning process itself: questions were directed to the school system as a whole, to each individual school, and to district office leaders, including questions to be answered “personally” by the superintendent. All planning was to be done collaboratively, with involvement by district office staff, all middle school principals, and selected teachers, as well as the site-based management team of any school that had one.

The planners were pressed to reach beyond their schools and district offices to local funders and influential constituencies. Each was required to identify at least \$1 million in new matching funds from its own budget, state and federal programs, other foundations, and additional local sources. Further, the RFP asked for evidence that the local school board was “committed to systemic, standards-based reform, with or without a Foundation grant,” and that the teachers’ union had participated in developing the proposal and would support its implementation. A communications strategy, by which the district would explain standards and performance goals to teachers, families, and the local public, was a required part of the proposal.

The districts were “strongly” urged by the foundation to send drafts of their proposals to external reviewers. Several national experts were listed in the RFP as being qualified and willing to review districts’ responses to particular questions. Program director Hayes Mizell reviewed the drafts and commented copiously; he then circulated the drafts (and comments) so each district could see exactly what the others were planning.

After digesting the comments they received from reviewers, the districts submitted their draft plans for perusal by program and foundation staff in mid-August 1995. Final plans, “written in the active voice. . . without unnecessary rhetoric or detail,” were submitted to the foundation in early September. A week later, district teams traveled to New York to present and defend their plans to a panel of foundation staff, advisors, and trustees. In December 1995, the foundation’s trustees awarded implementation grants to the six districts. Their work was officially under way.

### **The Foundation’s Commitment to Middle Grades Reform**

When the Program for Student Achievement made its grants to school districts in 1995, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation already had a clear identity within the field of school reform. Among the handful of national foundations interested in middle schools, Clark was known for its advocacy of higher student achievement and stronger curriculum for middle grades students, especially in urban areas. The foundation made major grants directly to school districts, supporting not only the work of implementing known reform models but also the messier process of figuring out what to do and how to do it. In addition, Clark supported projects by intermediary organizations that promulgated good instructional practices and strengthened networks of reform-minded educators. Program director Hayes Mizell was recognized by other grantmakers for his willingness to collaborate on projects to build the field of middle school reform and his intense involvement in the work of school district grantees.

#### *The Program for Disadvantaged Youth*

The Clark reputation in middle grades reform had been developing since 1988, when the foundation created the Program for Disadvantaged Youth as a successor to its Jobs for the Disadvantaged Program. The new program direction was a logical extension of a line of reasoning that led from the foundation’s earlier program on unemployment in low-income communities, through the failure of young people to make the transition to the workforce, to problems in American high schools, and finally to the lack of skills with which many disadvantaged adolescents entered high school—a line sketched at about the same time by *The Forgotten Half*, an influential report by the W. T. Grant Foundation’s Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship. When Edna McConnell Clark Foundation president Peter Bell sought advice from the commission’s chair, Harold “Doc” Howe II (a former Johnson administration official and Ford Foundation program officer, then on the faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Education), Howe suggested contacting Hayes Mizell to see if he might be interested in planning a program. Mizell was an education and civil rights advocate with experience in systemic school improvement and equity issues, both nationally and in his native South Carolina. After a national search, Mizell was recruited to the foundation in 1987.

The Program for Disadvantaged Youth made its first round of grants in 1989. At the center of the strategy were major grants to support middle grades reform in five urban

districts: Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego. The program concentrated on schools serving large numbers of poor students, predominantly in distressed neighborhoods. Each grantee district selected two or three of its most challenging schools (three each in Louisville and Oakland; two each in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and San Diego) to serve as pilot schools for reform and improvement. The stated goal was to deliver “an education of high expectations, high content, and high support” to middle grades students in the project schools.

The schools received an intense infusion of technical assistance, intended to help them learn about and implement some of the country’s most highly regarded school reform models and curriculum innovations, such as the Algebra Project, Writing to Learn, Socratic Seminars, Children’s Express, and Higher Order Thinking Skills. The foundation also supported technical assistance, evaluation, and projects such as community coalitions to encourage the reforms and build connections with colleges, employers, and other institutions. Mizell became a visible advocate for urban middle school reform, speaking frequently at national meetings and making grants to organizations such as the National Middle School Association for projects intended to steer them toward the program’s key concerns: student achievement, urban school systems, and low-performing students.

Mizell observed the five grantee districts closely and provided a near-constant stream of feedback. Yet within two years of the start of the Program for Disadvantaged Youth, he and the foundation’s consultants had become convinced that the project schools were failing to make changes profound enough to result in higher levels of student learning. The most serious problem, in the foundation’s view, was that the school districts did not seem to be motivated to provide sufficient help to the schools — schools that had been selected precisely because their needs, and the needs of their students, were very great. Indeed, the extra money and expert advice being provided by the foundation seemed actually to make it easier (or more comfortable) for overstretched district officials to ignore the plight of their hard-to-fix schools.

The program responded by heightening the pressure on schools and districts to give exclusive attention to curriculum and student achievement in the project schools. At the same time, the foundation created a set of parallel grants to help a second group of districts tackle the challenges of districtwide reform, the theory being that district offices would be more invested in helping low-performing schools within a context of systemic improvement. The school systems involved in the new districtwide approach — Chattanooga, Tennessee; Jackson, Mississippi; and Long Beach, California — were awarded planning grants in 1992. In 1993, they received two-year grants to support a new emphasis on higher student achievement in all middle schools across their districts.

Over the next two years, the work in Chattanooga, Jackson, and Long Beach went well enough to confirm the promise of a districtwide model, yet it also brought into focus the two essential shortcomings of the revised strategy. First, despite the presence of overarching plans, the districts seemed to lack overarching aims for all their middle schools and middle school students. Second, the districts’ leadership seemed not to have sufficient will or know-how to engineer fundamental change in classroom learning.

### *The Program for Student Achievement*

When the foundation renamed its middle school reform initiative the Program for Student Achievement in March 1994, it decided to continue to make grants directly to school systems and to stress academic attainment and districtwide change, yet it sought a strategy capable of overcoming districts' puzzling lack of goals and determination. Academic standards, rapidly emerging on the national scene, seemed to hold the answer.

The approach laid out for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in 1994 had several essential and distinctive features. The new Program for Student Achievement would:

- continue to focus on urban middle grades reform
- situate responsibility with districts, not individual schools, and support them in making improvements in all their middle schools
- support standards-based reform, not a particular instructional approach
- enable the districts to write their own standards in order to ensure that they understood and were fully committed to those standards
- seek measurable improvements in student achievement and encourage school systems to be accountable for the results
- provide the districts with ongoing feedback from outside sources, including evaluators and community groups
- cultivate a national network of organizations advancing middle grades reform

#### **Goal of the Program for Student Achievement**

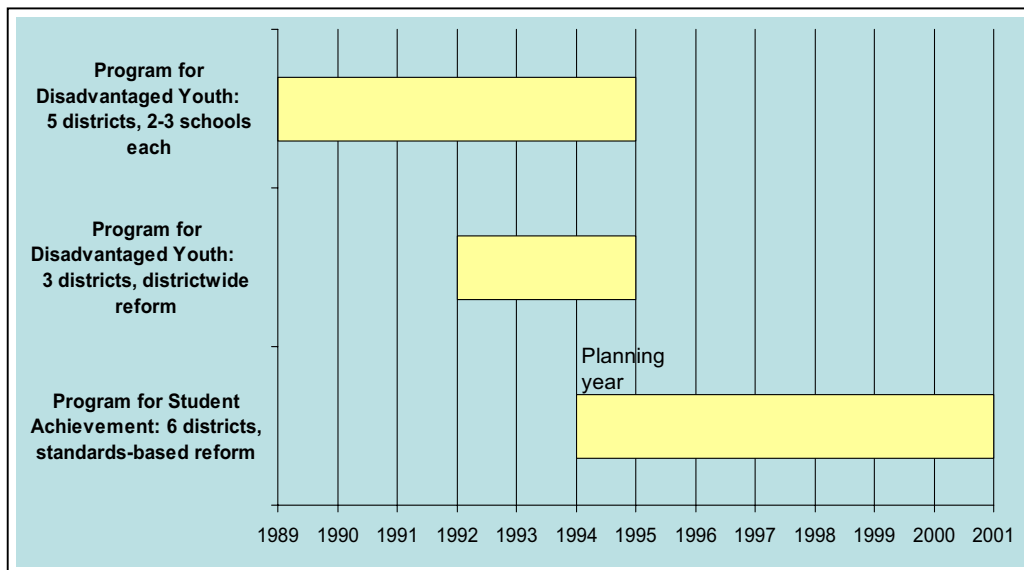
Students in urban middle schools will demonstrate high levels of academic performance by the end of eighth grade. Increasing numbers of school systems, middle schools, and organizations throughout the nation will embrace and advocate high levels of student performance as the primary goal of middle-level education.

— *From the mission statement adopted by the trustees of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, March 1994*

In deciding to stick with urban middle grades, the foundation was choosing to remain in a field that it knew well and where the need continued to be great. Middle grades educators were a receptive audience for reform: many felt marginalized within their own school systems, forgotten by researchers and schools of education, and undervalued by the public. Nationally, a loosely constituted middle school reform movement—growing since the 1970s but concerned mainly with reorganizing traditional junior high schools into middle schools and tending to the social and psychological development of young adolescents was showing signs of readiness to grapple with the need for more rigorous academic content. Clark was part of that network and had begun to make an impression. Other elements

of the program, such as the emphasis on community involvement, feedback from evaluators to benefit both the foundation and the school systems, and support for intermediary

## Edna McConnell Clark Foundation programs and strategies in middle grades reform, 1989-2001



organizations, also continued or adapted earlier themes. The use of standards, however, and the related commitment to measurable results and accountability, would take the foundation into new territory.

### The National Context: Standards and School Improvement

The program plan adopted and refined by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in 1994 and 1995 situated the Program for Student Achievement in a unique position within the constellation of major foundation-supported school reform efforts of the early to mid-1990s. The program's emphasis on standards also placed its work in a complex and ultimately unpredictable relationship with new and rapidly evolving federal and state policy on student assessment and school accountability. At a time of intense national anxiety about the implications of low achievement among many American students (as expressed, for example, in the controversy surrounding the publication of Herrnstein's and Murray's *The Bell Curve* in 1994) and faltering public confidence in the ability of public school systems to improve themselves voluntarily, the foundation structured its program to address precisely those issues.

### *Foundations and School Reform*

Foundation-funded work in the middle grades had been led since the mid-1980s by a small group of funders—notably the Lilly Endowment, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation—interested in redressing what they saw as a chronic shortage of attention to the educational needs of young adolescents. In 1989, their movement gained national attention when the Carnegie Corporation's Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents issued the influential *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* report. The report offered eight recommendations, or organizing principles, for educating students ages 10–15 and made a strong case for models that catered to the distinctive developmental needs of young adolescents. In 1990, Carnegie went on to create the Middle Grade Schools State Policy Initiative, which initially aided 15 state departments of

education in strengthening their policies regarding middle grades education. The initiative was expanded in 1993 to allow states to encourage the practical application of reforms in networks of high-poverty middle schools.

*Turning Points* was an immense public relations success and inspired a surge of interest in the education of young adolescents among educators, researchers, and policymakers. Clark's own work, however, had pointed to a danger that student achievement could very easily get lost within broader efforts to restructure middle schools or establish nurturing environments for students. Although not directly refuting the *Turning Points* recommendations, Clark had unambiguously made academic attainment a dominant theme of its work — a commitment renewed and strengthened under the new program.

Also important in the national context was the Annenberg Challenge, a \$500 million effort that cast a giant shadow across the field of foundation-sponsored school reform in the years immediately following its creation in December 1993. The Annenberg Foundation swiftly made major grants to three national school reform organizations — the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, New American Schools, and the Education Commission of the States — then moved on to invest heavily in school restructuring and wholesale reform, especially in large urban areas, through “challenge” grants to local consortia of funders, nonprofits, and other partners. Like Clark, Annenberg assumed a need for fundamental “turnaround” change in school culture — an outcome both foundations hoped to leverage by enabling local actors to plan reform programs to which they would be thoroughly committed. Unlike Clark, Annenberg channeled its money through local intermediary organizations and did not require a defining emphasis on student achievement. Another significant difference was Annenberg's endorsement of a national trend toward greater school-level autonomy and, in most cities, a diminished role for the school district.

The Rockefeller Foundation's School Reform Program also shared characteristics with the new Clark initiative. Like Clark, Rockefeller had been led by its own earlier experiences in school reform — in its case, long-term support for James Comer's School Development Program — to turn its sights toward the capacity of school districts to implement change. In 1995, Rockefeller made grants to four urban districts (including San Diego, a Clark grantee) for a program that focused initially on districts' ability to plan and deliver coherent professional development. In 1997, the program expanded to address districts' broader infrastructure for planning and reform.

The grantmaking program with the greatest relevance to the Clark initiative was the Network for Standards-Based Reform, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Like the Clark initiative, the Pew Network was designed to extend the foundation's earlier work in school reform. Since 1990, Pew had been a lead funder (with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation) of the New Standards Project, under which the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center and the National Center on Education and the Economy, along with an alliance of cooperating states and school districts, had been developing the nation's first comprehensive set of performance standards. Nearing completion, the New Standards had not yet been released or tested in practice, but they were widely known (if not widely understood) and anticipated by educators and policymakers. The new standards themselves were released publicly in December 1996.



In 1994, Pew concluded that a practical test of the New Standards would be essential to realizing the value of its investment. After a planning period, the Pew Network for Standards-Based Reform, a multi-site reform program designed to implement the New Standards across entire districts and examine their efficacy in improving student achievement, was created. In 1996, seven school systems that had been involved in developing the New Standards (again including one Clark-funded district, San Diego) received four-year grants to pursue systemic standards-based reform. The new standards themselves were released publicly in December 1996.

Like Clark, Pew concentrated on small to medium-size urban school systems and placed its emphasis, via standards, on student achievement. The Pew initiative also shared Clark's premise that change should be spearheaded by the district, not the individual school, and specified that the reform process involve professional development, student assessments, and accountability measures. Unlike the Clark districts, however, the Pew Network districts attempted to implement standards in all grades, from elementary through high school, rather than the middle grades alone. An even more fundamental difference was Pew's initial intention to employ a common set of standards and an aligned assessment system, the New Standards Reference Exam, to frame the reforms. (This objective was modified during the planning year to accommodate existing standards and assessments of the districts and their states.)

### *State and National Trends*

Another major influence on the school reform environment was the passage in 1994 of two major pieces of federal legislation, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the reauthorization of Title I, known as the Improving America's Schools Act. Together, they proposed a new and much more direct role for state and federal governments in school improvement and accountability. Specifically, in order to receive Title I money, states would be required over subsequent years to develop content and performance standards, ensure that standardized tests were aligned with those standards, set targets for improvement, and begin to intervene in schools that failed to improve.

A few states—including Texas and Kentucky—had already begun to implement accountability programs that looked fairly similar to what was outlined in the new legislation, yet none had reached the point of producing a complete set of content standards. Battles over standardized testing systems had also emerged in some states, most notably California, where in 1994 Governor Pete Wilson threw out the innovative California Learning Assessment System, effectively dictating a return to a more traditional, norm-referenced test until a less objectionable standards-based assessment could be developed. Overall, then, state-mandated standards and accountability had appeared on the horizon as the Program for Student Achievement was getting started, but the dilemmas they would raise had not yet come into focus for school districts or foundations.

### **The Foundation's Theory of Change**

The Program for Student Achievement aspired to encourage change both in the six grantee districts and on the national stage of public education policy and practice. Within the districts, the foundation's funding choices reflect a clear theory about how reform would take place and who would be involved in fostering its elements. By contrast, the foundation's efforts on the national scene were ambitious but less deliberately charted.

The foundation's theory about district-level change was grounded in observations about how school systems behave, the conventions that define their expectations, and the incentives and pressures that motivate and sustain reform. It assumed that the process would be framed by two terminal events: to begin, the creation of standards in the major content areas for implementation no later than September 1996; and to end, an assessment of districts' success in meeting performance goals, as measured by the percentage of eighth graders meeting standards by June 2001. The central tenet of the theory was that standards, and the processes of developing and implementing them, would require each district to acknowledge and root out its own internal tolerance for low-performing schools and classrooms. A secondary tenet was that the performance goals, measured in terms of achievement on standardized tests, would assure a steady pace of change and provide an objective means for reporting progress.

The districts would begin by writing their own standards and setting their own performance goals—activities the foundation believed would solidify their commitment to the work but were in any case necessary, since no complete set of standards existed at the time and no district had previously succeeded in implementing a program of standards-based reform. The expectation was that leaders of the grantee districts would articulate and codify the elements of good practice already present in the “cultures of achievement” within their own best schools (or, if necessary, elsewhere), then take responsibility for seeing those elements applied in every school and classroom.

The RFP urged the grantee districts to predict and plan subsequent phases, along with likely challenges and setbacks: communicating with school staff and the public, developing assessments, training teachers, giving extra help to the weakest schools, coping with resistance, supporting principals, and selecting and purchasing technical assistance. Districts and schools were also asked to be specific about who would be responsible for getting things done. At each stage, the standards and performance goals would serve as anchors against drift in the districts' determination to increase student achievement and narrow the gap between high- and low-performing schools and high- and low-achieving students.

To assure a basic level of readiness for change, the program chose to engage only districts that had already adopted a middle grades configuration and could document some progress toward standards-based reform. All participating districts were urban in nature, but the foundation steered clear of cities whose schools were so troubled that they might be deemed in need of “rescue”—a proviso that effectively excluded the nation's largest school systems. The foundation also sought districts with steady leadership and whose school boards would endorse the plans. The grants were designed to be generous enough to make a real impact on an entire district but not so large as to tempt school systems that were not truly interested in middle grades reform; further, each system would need to contribute additional funds from its own budget or other sources.

Although the absence of models made it difficult to predict the phasing of the reforms, the foundation sought to establish accountability for the pace of change with a constant flow of information about intermediate impacts on classrooms and schools. Rather than a traditional outcomes evaluation, which the foundation viewed as likely to create

an “adversarial relationship” with the districts, the program commissioned a qualitative evaluation to provide ongoing, independent commentary and assessment. Beginning in 1995 – 96, evaluators from Education Matters, Inc., made frequent visits to the districts, where they interviewed district officials, observed classrooms in a sample of schools, and talked with dozens of teachers, administrators, and students, then reported their findings frankly to the foundation and the districts. Hayes Mizell was also intimately involved in the work of the districts, visiting and telephoning often, convening meetings, and requiring frequent updates on their work.

Other feedback came to the districts via the Focused Reporting Project, which sent reporters to Louisville and Long Beach and published tabloid newspapers on local middle grades reforms in the two districts, and from community groups that received funding from the foundation to monitor and support reform. These projects were intended not only to strengthen the reforms but also to increase community understanding of middle grades education and diminish school system defensiveness about public input and scrutiny.

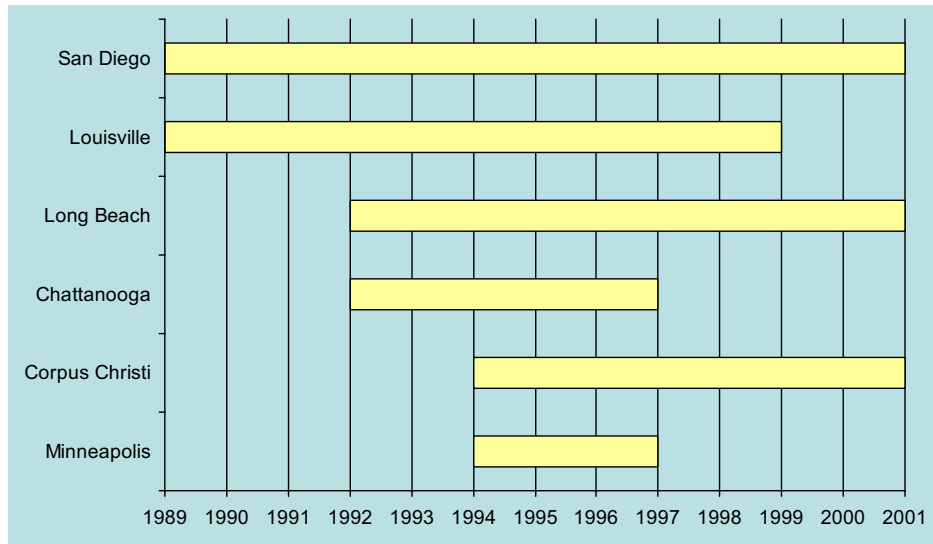
The foundation did not seek to generate a specific model for standards-based reform, but rather to demonstrate that districts could use standards to hold themselves accountable for much higher levels of student achievement in all middle schools. The program’s commitment to a “do-it-yourself,” nonprescriptive approach was consistent with that goal. The foundation provided discretionary money and access to experts, but the vast majority of the day-to-day work was carried out by staff drawn from each district’s existing pool of talent and resources. Indeed, the process of change was similar to what any school district would have to follow if it wanted to effect comparable change within the context of its own management systems and professional and political realities. Further, the work would take place within a real-world timetable of six years. If the grantee districts were to succeed in improving their middle schools and raising the academic achievement of their students, other school systems might plausibly ask themselves to do the same.

A nonprescriptive, districtwide approach was also consistent with the foundation’s aspirations for national impact. Although the foundation was embarking on an experiment in standards-based reform, its support for national organizations continued to focus primarily on strengthening the infrastructure for middle grades reform more broadly. Through grants to professional associations such as the National Middle School Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals and support for technical assistance by groups like the National Staff Development Council, the foundation sustained its long-standing emphasis on student achievement, professional development, and the struggles of low-performing urban schools within the middle schools movement. Standards might be an effective means for raising student achievement and increasing equity in middle grades education, but they were not an end in themselves.

### **The Six Districts: Reform in the Local Context**

In early 1994, the Program for Student Achievement had scanned the country for small to mid-size urban school districts that showed evidence of independent commitment to standards and a core of well-established middle schools. Hoping to screen out districts where bureaucratic distractions would compete with reform, the program also looked for

### Duration of Edna McConnell Clark Foundation support for middle grades reform in the six grantee districts, 1989-2001



stable leadership, an efficient central office, and reasonably amicable working relationships among the superintendent, the school board, and the teachers' union. More subjectively, the foundation sought districts whose leaders were eager to lead improvement and willing to collaborate with the foundation, evaluators and consultants, and parents and other members of their communities.

The foundation invited seven districts to apply for one-year planning grants for terms beginning in January 1995. Six districts completed the process and were awarded \$200,000 grants in December 1994. Of those six, four had been part of the foundation's previous middle school reform program: San Diego and Louisville had received funding since 1989 for work in a small number of low-performing schools, and Chattanooga and Long Beach had been involved since 1992 as part of the program's revised, districtwide reform strategy. The last two districts — Minneapolis and Corpus Christi — had no previous experience with the foundation but had demonstrated interest in academic standards and middle grades reform.

During 1994–95, the six districts began introducing the concept of standards-based reform in their schools while also working intensely, especially over the summer months, to prepare their full implementation proposals. Plans were submitted to the foundation in September, reviewed by an advisory panel, and returned to the districts for revision. The foundation awarded implementation grants in December 1995. Five districts received two-year, \$1 million grants, while Chattanooga received \$400,000 over 17 months owing to the uncertain state of education politics in the city.

Four of the six superintendents — Stephen Daeschner in Louisville, Bertha Pendelton in San Diego, Harry Reynolds in Chattanooga, and Carl Cohn in Long Beach — had earned

the confidence of program director Hayes Mizell through their work under earlier grants. Although they differed in their length of experience and their propensity for controversy, each seemed to have a solid command of education politics and a local reputation for talent and ambition. The other two — Abelardo Saavedra in Corpus Christi and Peter Hutchinson in Minneapolis — were popular and, in late 1994, firmly planted in their school systems. Saavedra was an insider who had spent his entire career in the Corpus Christi schools but had nevertheless made clear his intention to bring change to what he saw as a too-insular district. Hutchinson, by contrast, was a management consultant and former Minneapolis deputy mayor whose firm, Public Strategies Group, had been hired by the school board in 1993 to study and correct financial irregularities in the district. When the superintendent resigned, the district recruited Hutchinson and charged him with improving operations and closing a large achievement gap between black and white students.

The superintendents saw the Clark initiative, first, as an opportunity to get financial and technical support for changes they wanted to make in their districts. Several also believed that, by putting their districts ahead of the field in developing standards and improving instruction, their schools would be better able to weather turbulence associated with changes in state accountability systems, union strife, and local school board and governance battles.

**Long Beach** and **San Diego**, for example, were both coping with uncertainty about California’s position on standards: in 1994, the governor had vetoed the new California

### Demographic profiles of grantee school systems, 1995

	Chattanooga	Corpus Christi	Louisville	Long Beach	Minneapolis	San Diego
<b>Student enrollment grades 6-8</b>	City: 5,000 County: 5,500	10,300	21,600	17,900	7,600	30,000
<b>Student race/ethnicity</b>	City: Af-Am 61% White 38% Other 1% County: White 97% Af-Am 3%	Latino 68% White 25% Af-Am 6% Other 1%	White 69% Af-Am 31%	Latino 35% White 21% Af-Am 19% Asian 19% Other Asian 5% Other 1%	White 41% Af-Am 37% Asian 12% Native Am 7% Latino 3%	White 32% Latino 31% Asian 18% Af-Am 17%
<b>Number of schools with middle grades</b>	City: 19 (7 6-8; 1 5-8) County: 8 (all 6-8)	12 (all 6-8)	24 (23 6-8)	21 (14 6-8)	20 (7 6-8)	25 (12 6-8; 2 7-8; 8 7-9)
<b>Percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunch</b>	City: 55% County: 18%	45%	43%	71%	56%	52%

Learning Assessment System after it came under political attack from the right. Long Beach superintendent Carl Cohn believed strongly that academic standards were an inevitable and important lever for school improvement. Cohn, who was impatient with the state's indecision, saw the middle grades initiative as a means to make the district less dependent on the state. As he remembers it, "we looked at the foundation as a much more stable player in school reform than the state of California was at the time." Under the leadership of superintendent Bertha Pendelton, San Diego was already a leader in the national move toward standards through its early involvement with the New Standards Project. By the mid-1990s, however, that work was being threatened by instability at the state level and growing tension with the teachers' union. The new project would, its planners hoped, renew the momentum for standards-based reform and bring focus to the work at the middle grades.

State accountability systems also loomed large in the decisions of **Corpus Christi** and **Louisville** to enter the program. Superintendent Abe Saavedra had convinced the Corpus Christi school board that standards-based improvements would be needed in all grades to increase scores on the mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) tests. In the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation initiative, Saavedra saw an opportunity to stretch the district's professional development budget, involve his middle grades in a rigorous, state-of-the-art effort, and expand the district's horizons nationally. In Louisville, the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA) had established school-by-school reporting of standardized test results and a phased-in system of rewards or sanctions for schools that did or did not succeed in meeting specified improvement goals. Superintendent Stephen Daeschner saw that Louisville schools would have trouble reaching the KERA goals without considerable support and that the foundation's commitment to standards-based reform would fit well with the changes required under KERA.

Local political turbulence was an incentive to join the initiative for both **Minneapolis** and **Chattanooga**. Minneapolis superintendent Peter Hutchinson, with no professional background in education, had been surprised to learn soon after he was hired that the district had no established curriculum. In his view, the lack of common benchmarks had allowed many of the city's schools to lapse into failure, thus exposing the entire system to criticism. Plus, as a parent, he shared the widely held view that the city's middle schools were "a disaster." Chattanooga superintendent Harry Reynolds also saw the program as a potential source of stability in a tumultuous political environment. In November 1994, just before the foundation awarded planning grants, the city's voters passed a controversial ballot initiative to dissolve the mostly black Chattanooga city school system and, as of June 1997, merge it with the predominantly white school system of surrounding Hamilton County. The two districts assembled a team to work together on the implementation proposal, thus beginning the process of mapping a common path toward middle grades reform.

Over the course of the program, the foundation's overall theory and each of its components were tested in the diverse conditions of six very different school districts and their states, as well as in the national environment. In addition to coping with political turbulence and the rise of state-mandated standards and accountability systems, district educators faced the pure challenge of working in an uncharted area of reform, where even basic terms and concepts were not fully understood.

## The Process of Reform in Six Urban Districts

When the Chattanooga, Corpus Christi, Long Beach, Louisville, Minneapolis, and San Diego school districts began their work in 1994 and 1995, standards-based reform was a new approach. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation had expectations about the components necessary to create a standards-based school system, and about how the reforms to establish such a system would unfold. Those expectations, however, were speculative, not based on lessons from the experience of other school systems.

Without a specific implementation model to apply, the foundation reasoned that each district would do best by writing its own agenda within common guidelines. The districts would need to develop — at a minimum — content and performance standards, and ensure the alignment of those standards with student assessments. In addition, they would need strategies to apply standards in the classroom and explain them to teachers, students, parents, and the wider community. The districts would create those components for their own use, then implement them, following plans of their own devising.

The foundation's decision to allow grantee districts to write their own standards grew from a fundamental tenet of the program's theory of change: standards were not an end in themselves but a means to transform the attitudes and skills of educators by intensifying their feeling of accountability for student achievement. Hoping to foster a culture of accountability more than a particular step-by-step process of reform, the program aimed to encourage a core group of people in each district to aspire to help students achieve at substantially higher levels, recognize where their schools were falling short, and do something about the disparities. In the foundation's view, it was important that district educators feel a strong sense of ownership of the entire reform process.

For the districts and their superintendents, the program offered a chance to work with a foundation that seemed reliable and knowledgeable, but that also respected their autonomy. The districts' proposals and work during the early phases of implementation focused on creating the tangible components of a standards-based system and assembling those components in a coherent way. So, for example, they planned to begin by writing content standards, then performance standards, then creating assessments to measure whether students were meeting those standards. Those pieces seemed to be the essential ones, and the sequence

seemed logical. Each district would be taking those steps independently, within the context of its own local environment.

To establish an ethic of accountability, the foundation required each district to set quantitative performance goals, expressed as the percentage of students who would “meet standards” by the close of the program in June 2001. The foundation also asked districts to identify “focus schools,” or low-performing schools that would probably need extra help to reach the performance goals. In addition, the foundation underwrote a qualitative evaluation that produced candid insights about the strengths and weaknesses of the work. The evaluators made frequent visits to districts and schools, where they observed classroom activities and interviewed principals and teachers. The foundation also supported community engagement and funded journalists to write about reform activities as a way to increase communication with parents and citizens and help raise local expectations of their school systems.

To help the districts stay current with the latest educational research and become active participants in a national conversation about middle grades reform, the foundation supported a range of activities. District teams attended an annual foundation-sponsored conference, at which they presented their work to one another and heard from some of the nation’s most prominent education reformers, several of whom served as official advisors to the program. A new website, MiddleWeb, was created with foundation support to enable educators to share ideas and read about innovative practices. The foundation also urged the districts to hire consultants with proven expertise as “critical friends” of their reform programs.

To divide the work into manageable segments and provide regular opportunities to take stock, the foundation required that the districts write new proposals for each of three major implementation phases: in 1995, for work to be carried out in 1996 and 1997; in 1997, for work in 1998 and 1999; and in 1999, for work in 2000 and 2001. In addition, the districts prepared shorter proposals for transitional phases at the beginning and end of the program. The districts also submitted frequent reports on their work and published annual reports for distribution in their communities.

Despite the overall flexibility of the program, the built-in opportunities to adjust course, and the mechanisms for generating insights and information, the districts encountered unforeseen problems at practically every stage. Some problems were attributable to the foundation’s having chosen to concentrate on standards just in advance of a wave of national interest in standards-based reform. The school systems found their work overtaken by mandates from their states to a far greater extent than expected. In addition, district plans collided repeatedly with changes in the objective realities of running a school system: superintendents departed and arrived, and school boards took steps that altered district priorities. The foundation responded by pressing, hard and often, for new strategy — more emphatically, according to district personnel, than foundations typically do.

The national move toward standards also meant that new information and ideas were constantly appearing, and that district educators, foundation staff, and consultants had to keep up with, learn about, and incorporate new influences at an extraordinarily fast pace. Frequent



and frank feedback from the evaluators on what was working in classrooms and what was not also forced constant reappraisal and response.

From the foundation's vantage, most of the problems that eventually emerged could be traced to the districts' lack of capacity to manage change, even change of their own design. The districts seemed unable to achieve much of what they had set out to do, at least within the timeline of the program. Often, they seemed to settle for facile solutions rather than applying their reform strategies steadily and deeply. As program director Hayes Mizell and the evaluators struggled to understand the scope of the problem and its implications, they responded with encouragement, assistance, advice, and sometimes outright criticism.

Relations between the foundation and the districts tended to be sympathetic, even warm, yet they could also be quite tense, punctuated by the occasional sharp exchange. Indeed, before the program concluded, Mizell and the foundation's board of trustees took the unusual step of terminating the foundation's relationship with three of the six districts. In 1997, the foundation decided not to renew its 17-month grant with Chattanooga and also severed ties that year with Minneapolis, which had just completed its first implementation grant. The foundation suspended its funding to Louisville in 1999, after the second implementation grant. Only Corpus Christi, Long Beach, and San Diego received funding over the full course of the program.

### **Assembling the Components of a Standards-Based System**

When the program began in 1995, no school district in the country had succeeded in implementing academic standards in a thoroughgoing way. Nevertheless, the foundation, the grantee districts, and many of the nation's most prominent school reformers shared a common (if not perfectly clear) image of what the core components of a standards-based school system should be and the sequence in which they should be established:

- **Content standards** would specify what students should know in each subject area.
- **Performance standards** would clarify the content standards by specifying how well students needed to be able to perform to demonstrate mastery of the content standards, how those performances would be judged and graded, and, implicitly, how well teachers needed to teach.
- **Performance assessments** would measure students' attainment of the performance standards, thus making all students, teachers, and schools accountable for reaching a common, verifiable level of achievement.

Those components were roughly parallel to the three elements demanded of each state under the 1994 federal Goals 2000 legislation: content standards, performance standards, and annual standardized testing. The difference was that the foundation, along with most educators, believed that annual standardized testing should not be used as more than a single element in a much wider array of standards-based performance assessments.

Educators and other commentators who had studied the practical challenges of implementing standards in the classroom agreed, as well, on the need for several additional components:

- **Professional development** would help teachers understand standards and develop the skills needed to create and apply a standards-based curriculum.
- **Standards-based curriculum** would ensure that teachers covered the required content using approaches that would give students ample opportunity to learn and perform at required levels.
- **Interventions and second-chance opportunities** would be available for students needing extra help in reaching the standards.
- **New systems for using data** would enable teachers, schools, and districts to identify areas of weakness and to take steps toward improvement.
- **Communication with parents and community members** would introduce the unfamiliar concept of academic standards and enlist the help of people outside the school system in raising student achievement.

Under the first implementation grant, the six districts set out to create and assemble those components.

## District Performance Targets

*Percentage of eighth graders who will “meet standards,” according to standardized test results, in major subject areas by 2001*

<i>DISTRICT</i>	<i>TARGET</i>	<i>ASSESSMENT</i>
Corpus Christi	90% (excluding special education)	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)
Long Beach	75%	Stanford Achievement Test, 9th ed. (SAT-9)*
San Diego	53 – 77%, depending on subject area; revised to 50% scoring at or above 50 <sup>th</sup> percentile in 1998	Stanford Achievement Test, 9th ed. (SAT-9)*
Chattanooga	72 – 85%, depending on subject area	Tennessee Comprehensive Assessments Program (TCAP)
Louisville	50% “proficient,” or 61 – 99% above “novice,” depending on subject area	Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS)
Minneapolis	80%	Minnesota Basic Standards Test (MBST)

*\*First administered by California in 1998*

The foundation had required each district to include student performance targets in their implementation proposals as a way of encouraging them to focus on concrete objectives. With very little background or experience, the school systems had projected the percentage of eighth grade students who would “meet standards” in the four major content areas by

### **The Clark Coordinators**

With one exception, each district hired a full-time middle school reform coordinator, based in the district office, to manage the writing of standards, orchestrate standards implementation, and serve as liaison to the foundation, the evaluators, and other local grantees. The coordinators (called “Clark coordinators” in several districts) were not high in the chain of command, and had relatively little official authority within their districts. Even so, the superintendents showed their commitment to the work by appointing talented, entrepreneurial people to the posts and giving them strong and visible support. The coordinators rapidly became the primary contacts between the districts and the foundation, the main planners of activities to bring standards into practice, the managers of discretionary money to support that work, and the most visible advocates and strategists on behalf of middle grades improvement within their districts.

June 2001. All six districts had chosen to define “meeting standards” as scoring at grade level or above on a state-mandated standardized test. The foundation stipulated that the goals should be applied in every middle school, not through districtwide averages, a provision intended to encourage the districts to pay special attention to low-performing schools.

Without exception, the districts had set the performance targets high. Corpus Christi, for example, aimed to have 90 percent of its non-special education eighth graders achieve passing TAAS scores by 2001, an immense improvement over its 1995 passing rates of 71 percent in science, 70 percent in reading, 67 percent in writing, 57 percent in social studies, and 47 percent in math. Long Beach pegged its goal at 75 percent, far above performance levels in 1995, when less than half of students scored at standard in language arts and less than 40 percent reached standard in math. At the time, the districts viewed their goals as ambitious but not exorbitant statements of their expectations — an indication of their inexperience (and the inexperience of the field) with quantitative targeting.

### **Writing, Implementing, and Understanding Standards**

The actual work of standards-based reform began in every district with the writing of middle grades content standards—a step that each of the six districts undertook in much the same way. The goal was to have a complete set of content guidelines ready for classroom use by September 1996, with performance standards and other components to follow close behind.

During the 1994–95 school year, the districts began by assembling teams of experienced middle grades teachers in each major content area. Working together after school and during vacations, the teams produced drafts outlining what they believed all middle grades students should know at each grade level. For most participating teachers, the experience was time-consuming but energizing. Accustomed to feeling left out of the mainstream of district initiatives, middle school teachers enjoyed applying their knowledge to develop new policy, and most relished the opportunity to work with colleagues from other schools. As they worked, they deepened their understanding of standards and how standards would affect

## **Reporting on the Work of the Districts**

The foundation commissioned qualitative and quantitative evaluations to document the work and inform decisions by the foundation and the districts. The qualitative study, by Education Matters, Inc., began in 1995–96 with site visits and baseline reports by two lead investigators, Barbara Neufeld and Barbara Berns (later Judy Swanson), and support teams. The quantitative evaluation, conducted by Policy Studies Associates, Inc. (PSA), began in 1996, when the foundation asked Elizabeth Reisner and colleagues to explore the feasibility of collecting and analyzing data that would chart the effect of reforms in each district on student achievement.

### **Qualitative Evaluation by Education Matters**

Education Matters had studied the foundation's earlier middle grades work in Chattanooga, Long Beach, Louisville, and San Diego and was familiar with the internal dynamics of those systems and the expectations of the foundation. The researchers visited each district frequently, where they observed classrooms, attended district events, and interviewed teachers, staff trainers, principals, administrators, and students. Their reports offered highly differentiated portraits of the evolving course of reform in each district, documenting recent initiatives along with changes in the thinking and knowledge of teachers and principals. The evaluators described what they saw in opinionated detail, backing up their views with evidence from interviews and observation. The Education Matters reports offered insights, many of them critical, that neither the foundation nor the districts would normally have received; indeed, the reports were a crucial window on such hard-to-measure variables as student engagement, teacher morale, and school climate.

### **Quantitative Evaluation by Policy Studies Associates**

Policy Studies Associates was asked by the foundation to create an affordable method to measure growth in student proficiency in each district against a single standard, independent of their state testing systems. After piloting several possible strategies in Corpus Christi during the 1996–97 school year, PSA and the foundation decided to create a test-based on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), considered to be a reliable and sophisticated measure of student proficiency. PSA proposed a short version, using publicly available test items from previous NAEP exams in reading and mathematics. In the spring of 1998, PSA collaborated with district staff in administering the NAEP-based exam, along with an NAEP-developed student survey on attitudes toward reading and family background, to representative groups of between 220 and 300 eighth graders each in Corpus Christi, Long Beach, Louisville, and San Diego. The NAEP-based test was administered three times more, through 2001, in each district.

### **The Focused Reporting Project**

The program also commissioned education journalists to write reports on middle school reform. Anne Lewis, who had written about the foundation's previous middle school reform program, extended the series with a new book, *Figuring It Out: Standards-Based Reforms in Urban Middle Grades*, on the early years of standards-based reform. Writer John Norton produced full-color, tabloid-format community newspapers for Long Beach and Louisville, featuring profiles and interviews, vivid descriptions of teachers at work, case studies of struggling schools, and pointed analyses of decisions associated with standards-based reform. Published first in late 1996 and continuing, twice a year, through spring 2000, *Changing Schools in Long Beach* and *Changing Schools in Louisville* also became the basis for the MiddleWeb website, which Norton launched in 1996 with support from the foundation. MiddleWeb quickly grew to be the nation's most comprehensive Internet site on middle grades teaching and reform.

classroom practice—insights they carried back to their schools and began to share with colleagues. As Corpus Christi superintendent Abelardo Saavedra remembers, “The decision to use teachers to identify the standards and write them out, rather than using district office staff, was critical. Many, many teachers worked over the summer to write the standards, and they started to sell the program for us.”

Performance standards, which the foundation and districts had confidently predicted would flow naturally from the content standards, proved much harder to write. Whereas content standards drew on teachers’ considerable experience with writing curriculum, performance standards seemed to demand something different, which neither teachers nor district administrators could quite visualize or produce, something needed but not yet realized, to supplement content standards and point the way toward classroom-level change and much higher levels of accountability for student learning. Performance standards and assessments, it seemed, would be the real tools for holding teachers accountable for student learning. But how would they work? The more the writing teams thought about and discussed content standards, the more they understood the implications of the new approach—and the more daunting the task of writing effective performance standards and assessments appeared to be.

An update from the program staff to the foundation’s trustees in June 1997 reported that Long Beach and San Diego would begin to pilot performance standards on a small scale in 1997–98, and that Louisville and Minneapolis would begin in 1998–99. Because of its merger with Hamilton County, Chattanooga would not be able to roll out an aligned set of content and performance standards until September 1999—a delay that contributed to the foundation’s decision to discontinue funding to the district. Only Corpus Christi had moved ahead in 1996–97 to introduce an early version of performance standards, and the experience had not been a good one: the district established “scoring guidelines” at the beginning of the year and withdrew them within a matter of months when they proved confusing and unworkable. San Diego invested considerable time and energy in developing a portfolio assessment system to measure literacy development in the middle grades, but implementation was repeatedly postponed.

Even before they had finished drafting their content standards, the districts began to explain standards to parents and the broader community and to conduct their first rounds of professional development. In summer workshops, districtwide conferences, and other large-group events, teachers and district administrators—many of them members of the standards-writing teams—introduced the vocabulary and underlying concepts of academic standards to their colleagues, including the more complacent and even obstructionist ones. Those early sessions gave district educators opportunities to debate the practical demands of developing standards-based lessons, aligning standards-based curriculum with other requirements (such as state tests), and rethinking old practices. In smaller groups, teachers discussed articles on the use of standards and got together to prepare standards-based lessons. For many teachers, especially those who had not been involved in writing the content standards, the activities marked the beginning of their learning about standards-based instruction and signaled a new focus on middle grades education and the special challenges faced by its practitioners.

## **Community Partnerships**

To encourage community members and parents to become involved in reform, the foundation sought local organizations to develop projects that would help parents understand standards, strengthen civic commitment to school improvement, and hold schools accountable for reform and improvement. Yet relatively few organizations were equipped to take on such work in any city, and no city offered a full array of potential partners. Finding no qualified local organization in Corpus Christi or Long Beach, the foundation made grants to state-level organizations and charged them with trying to build capacity among organizations in the grantee districts, a strategy that did not ultimately produce results. Projects funded in the other districts were an eclectic group, defined primarily by the strengths of the local grantees.

## **Parent Involvement in San Diego**

The Parent Alliance for School Standards, or PASS, was established in San Diego through a collaboration involving Social Advocates for Youth, the Urban League, the Chicano Federation, the Union of Pan Asian Communities, and other groups. PASS was designed to help parents — especially members of racial, ethnic, and language minority groups — understand standards and advocate for their children’s educational success. PASS also took responsibility for coordinating an annual summit for middle school parents, publishing multi-lingual parent information distributed in schools, and running parent training programs. It cooperates with the district, but its consistent role has been to point out problems, sensitize the district to the needs of parents, and articulate parent concerns — often as basic as non-English-speaking parents’ inability to negotiate schools’ automatic phone answering systems.

## **League of Women Voters Study in Minneapolis**

In 1998 and 1999, the local League of Women Voters conducted two “shadowing studies,” using approximately 100 trained community volunteers, to document the state of the city’s middle schools. On a single day, the volunteers converged on schools and “shadowed” individual students, recording how they spent their time and observing the quality of their school experiences with a carefully designed protocol. The studies and subsequent reports made a big impact locally, in part because they uncovered compelling evidence of the need for middle school reform, but also because they engaged representatives of many of the city’s leading institutions. A League member who helped lead the study was later elected to the local school board.

## **Prichard Committee Advocacy in Louisville**

Kentucky’s Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, a statewide advocacy organization with an impressive record of marshaling support for school reform, had worked with the foundation under its earlier program to help train parents and parent coordinators. In 1998, the Prichard Committee and the foundation decided to collaborate on a major new community engagement initiative, the Jefferson County Community Accountability Team, or CAT. Composed of parents, school staff, activists, businesspeople, researchers, and other community leaders, the 50-member CAT spent a year examining the state of middle schools before determining that it would focus on closing the achievement gap between black and white students. CAT members participated in a shadowing study of five middle schools and commissioned a local research firm to analyze their findings, along with student achievement data. The team’s 2002 final report, *Every Child Counts: Raising Student Achievement in the Middle Grades*, included detailed policy recommendations and a bold argument for the elimination of tracking in the middle grades.

In the fall of 1995, for example, Long Beach presented its new content standards at its first annual Carpe Diem conference, during which the district's leaders explained their plan to implement standards and presented awards to outstanding middle school educators. Corpus Christi kicked off its standards implementation that same fall, when the superintendent pledged his support for the district's new Real World Academic Standards at an annual leadership conference for principals and district office staff. Louisville gathered more than 800 middle grades teachers and principals during the summer of 1996 for a three-day institute, titled "The Road to Reform," where the new content standards were introduced, and school-based staff engaged in their first-ever discussion of the connections between standards-based instruction and the state's KERA reforms. These large meetings may not have produced a deep understanding of standards-based reform among their participants, but they were a beginning. And they did demonstrate that the districts saw middle grades reform as a venture that included every teacher and every school.

The districts also began to move forward with more targeted professional development. During the planning year, for example, Louisville had hired master teachers known as "Clark fellows" to model more effective methods in classrooms around the district. Beginning with two part-time teacher-trainers in math and literacy, the Clark fellows program grew to four, then five, full-time specialists in math, literacy, science, social studies, and performance assessment. Corpus Christi invested in the full-scale implementation of a staff development program, John Samara's Curriculum Project, that had been used successfully on a limited basis. Over two years, every middle school teacher in the district received 36 hours of training, and Samara made follow-up campus visits to work with teachers on curriculum units they had developed. In San Diego, Clark funds enabled the district to run an innovative summer program in 1996, which brought the district's most skilled master teachers together to teach standards-based lessons to middle grades students every morning, while less experienced teachers observed; each afternoon, all joined in a debriefing and planning session.

### **Problems Emerge, Districts Diverge**

The projects proceeded fairly smoothly during the 1995–96 school year and the fall of 1996–97. Education Matters reported finding energy in the schools and optimism in the district offices. The work was hard, but the challenges seemed to be largely logistical: How to gather the strongest teachers to write the standards? How to coordinate a summer workshop for 800 people? How to schedule 36 hours of professional development for every classroom teacher? How to deploy two new curriculum specialists to make an impact across the district?

By the spring of 1996–97, however, confidence in the progress of reform was beginning to erode. The expectation that the districts would move smoothly from writing content standards to writing performance standards—more important than content standards, in the foundation's view, for motivating real reform—was not being realized. Two districts, Chattanooga and San Diego, had not even completed their content standards, owing to changes in district policy that derailed or delayed foundation-funded work in the middle grades. In practically every school they visited, Education Matters evaluators found teachers who claimed to embrace standards but whose understanding was shallow or misinformed. Many teachers admitted that they simply did not grasp what was expected of them, often blaming the district for making inconsistent demands. In classrooms, the evaluators saw little evidence that instruction was changing.

At a meeting in March 1997 of educators from the six grantee districts and affiliated evaluators and experts, program director Hayes Mizell praised the progress made so far but also told the districts that he did not believe their work was having a strong enough effect on classrooms. He urged them, as they prepared their proposals for the next round of implementation grants, to be more aggressive about changing teachers' practices and to put aside methods and habits that insulated them from unpleasant truths. The foundation wanted to see the districts diagnose problems more aggressively and force improvement in individual classrooms and schools.

In early 1998, the foundation awarded a second round of implementation grants to Corpus Christi, Long Beach, Louisville, and San Diego. Chattanooga had not been invited to apply for a new grant, and Minneapolis, under the leadership of a new superintendent, had withdrawn from the process. The remaining districts pledged to deepen their work, use new methods, and even change course dramatically.

The new round of grants marked a significant shift in style and expectations throughout the Program for Student Achievement. The foundation had initially believed that implementing standards — or, more precisely, implementing the basic components of a standards-based system — would set off a more or less spontaneous cascade of change, which the districts would manage and steer. Now it adopted a less optimistic tone, insisting that the districts be far more forceful about demanding meaningful, classroom-level change. The foundation continued to expect that districts would complete their performance standards and work toward creating aligned student assessments, but it put less emphasis on producing coherent standards and assessments and more on leading change that would raise student achievement by June 2001. If the foundation had once seen its role as coaching and facilitating the work of the districts, it now asserted an intention to hold them far more strictly accountable. The foundation's decisions to end its relationships with Chattanooga and Minneapolis were indicative of that more rigorous approach.

The foundation had not dwelt much on the districts' student performance targets during the first implementation phase, but Mizell pointedly reminded the districts of their promises as they prepared for the second. In letters announcing the start of phase two planning in March 1997, Mizell bluntly informed the superintendents in Corpus Christi, Long Beach, Louisville, and San Diego that the foundation had concluded that their districts would not meet their goals for improving student achievement by June 2001 "without major new system initiatives focused at the building level." Those initiatives should address, first and foremost, staff development, but they should also give attention to areas where strong district policies would accelerate reform: the creation of performance standards and performance assessments, the development of standards-based curriculum, support for focus schools, and improving the use of student data. The foundation did not view the new grants as simple renewals of funding.

The districts, more realistic than they had been in 1995 about the complexity of standards-based reform, responded with proposals that set a new course for the program: they were serious, analytic, and in some cases unabashedly self-critical. Compared with work during the first implementation phase, their efforts in the middle and later years of the



program were more intense, more interventionist, more directly targeted at what seemed to be the most significant local stumbling blocks, and, overall, more distinct from one another. With encouragement from the foundation, they focused on changing instruction, using standards as a tool more than an objective.

### **Different Paths, Common Themes**

Over the remaining years of the program, the districts experimented earnestly with several common strategies to support standards-based reform, combining them in distinctive ways according to local circumstances and resources:

- **In-school coaching by master teachers**, bringing professional development in standards-based instruction directly into the classroom, replacing most workshop-style training.
- **Support for principals in their role as instructional leaders** through coaching, study groups, involvement in all professional development for teachers, and data systems that allowed them to monitor classroom-level performance.
- **Focused attention on student work** to guide curriculum development and gauge students' progress toward meeting the standards.
- **Targeted help for low-performing students**, including new strategies to build literacy skills among adolescent learners.
- **Data systems** to guide educational planning and help students, teachers, parents, principals, and district administrators track student progress in meeting standards, and identify and solve problems.

Louisville, for example, had been struggling with a contradiction between the demands of the state's KERA accountability system and its own (and the foundation's) aspirations for more challenging, less standardized classroom instruction. The debate reached a crisis in 1996–97, when the district received unexpectedly dismal results on the 1996 KIRIS exam, thus prompting state intervention in approximately half its middle schools. The district responded by increasing the number of Clark fellows and adding school-level “cadre teachers” to provide in-class coaching in standards-based instruction and performance assessment. The objective was to “go beyond KERA” by strengthening classroom instruction in ways that also prepared students for the next round of testing.

Corpus Christi, by contrast, concentrated on increasing the leadership capacity of its principals after analyzing the effects of its experiment with the Curriculum Project. Although teachers had rated the program highly and claimed they had learned a lot, district administrators and the Education Matters evaluators found on closer examination that few teachers had changed their classroom practice in any way. The exceptions were concentrated in four schools whose principals had “taken charge of the change on their campus, provided support, and made clear the expectation that the innovation would be implemented,” as the district explained in its proposal for phase two funding. Over the remaining years of the program, professional development for principals remained a major area of priority, as principals learned to lead their schools in implementing programs such as Looking at Student Work and other professional development initiatives.

Long Beach also experimented with the use of curriculum coaches and professional development for principals, yet its most striking effort to impress the importance of standards on teachers and students was its so-called “multiple Fs” policy. Under multiple Fs, eighth graders who failed more than one major subject were barred from enrolling in high school. Instead, they were assigned to a separate school, Long Beach Preparatory Academy, where they got a second chance to fulfill the eighth grade standards and, with luck, catch up with their classmates. The specter of placement in Long Beach Prep had a profound deterrent effect: by the end of 1996–97, a few months after the policy was announced, only 457 eighth graders, or 8 percent, were failing two or more major subjects, compared with 748 the year before. A year later, the share of eighth graders with multiple Fs had dropped to 5 percent, or 332 students, with some of the most dramatic improvements occurring in the lowest-performing schools. One lesson was obvious: even historically low-performing schools could raise the achievement levels of a good portion of their most difficult-to-reach students.

Long Beach Prep forced eighth grade teachers and principals to worry about whether or not students were passing their courses. Educators communicated those worries to students and parents — and in a lot of cases, parents and students pushed back, demanding to know what grades really meant. Teachers’ decisions about student grades came under new scrutiny from principals, spurring debate about what constituted “passing” work and what interventions would help students produce it. Principals began to think seriously about the meaning of teachers’ pass and fail rates, and about relationships between those rates and what was going on in their classrooms. Long Beach Prep was ultimately judged a failure, and the district closed the school in June 2001. Still, it had helped to drive a process of rethinking middle grades education that eventually resulted in the development of reading development courses for adolescent learners, extra coaching for teachers in the district’s lowest-performing middle schools, and other intervention programs. The multiple Fs policy also helped spur the creation of more meaningful assessments of student proficiency.

Among all the districts, the one that took the strongest hand in forcing school-level improvements was San Diego — although some of the most profound changes temporarily sidelined Clark-funded work. San Diego had moved with confidence through the early stages of standards development: in 1997–98, the district was on the verge of implementing a full set of middle grades content standards, a complementary portfolio assessment system, and a rigorous process for reviewing school accountability. Those plans suffered a blow in 1998–99 when San Diego’s school board named Alan Bersin, a former United States attorney, to replace superintendent Bertha Pendelton.

Aided by chancellor for instruction Anthony Alvarado, Bersin imposed a new regimen. Most significant, in the two years from 1998–99 to 2000–01, Bersin increased the budget for professional development from \$2 million to \$24 million. The majority of the spending was dedicated to an intensive approach to literacy instruction, especially for low-performing students, and a large infrastructure of classroom coaching and supervision. These changes, along with others to be implemented over ensuing years, were laid out in a

plan known as the Blueprint for Student Success in a Standards-Based System, adopted by a narrow margin of the San Diego school board in March 2000. Despite the shift in district priorities, Bersin and Mizell agreed that the district and the foundation were fundamentally in accord about the needs of the district, and the foundation decided to continue its funding.

The later years of the program were also marked by districts' attempts to respond to intense and sometimes confusing outside pressures, especially from their states. The foundation monitored those pressures and tried to help the districts cope with changing circumstances, even as it attempted to hold them accountable for carrying out their reforms more or less as they had pledged.

In California, for example, Long Beach and San Diego saw the state impose new standards in 1999–2000 that superceded the districts' own middle grades standards. The California standards were quite similar to the districts' own, partly because the state had recruited many experienced San Diego and Long Beach educators to serve on the standards writing teams, and the districts had relatively little trouble implementing them. Yet their own local efforts lost momentum and urgency during the years when the state standards were on the horizon. San Diego, for example, had canceled the final stages of development of its middle grades literacy portfolio assessment system and standards-based report card while it waited to see what new mandates would come from the state.

In Louisville and Corpus Christi, state accountability programs and high-stakes tests had been in place since before the Clark program began, yet both Kentucky and Texas had continuously ratcheted up their demands in ways that kept the districts nervous and off balance. In the foundation's view, both districts were too willing to pressure their schools to tailor instruction to the tests, and neither district did enough to help low-performing schools raise student achievement. Tension over such questions as how much the district should emphasize the state test, how much help should be given to low-performing schools, and what constituted good instruction became extreme between the foundation and Louisville; indeed, those disagreements eventually precipitated the foundation's decision to withdraw from the district.

## **Suspending Support to Three School Districts**

At the close of the first implementation phase in 1997, the foundation chose to discontinue support for middle grades reform in two of the six original districts, Chattanooga and Minneapolis. Later, in 1999, it suspended funding to a third district, Louisville, after the second phase of work.

### **Chattanooga**

Between 1995 and 1997, the soon-to-be-merged Chattanooga and Hamilton County school systems made considerable progress in establishing a commitment to standards in their unified school district. The two Clark coordinators offered workshops for middle school planning teams on curriculum mapping, performance assessments, alternative grading systems, vertical teams, block scheduling, and other standards-related issues. Meanwhile, a joint committee drafted academic benchmarks for grades four, eight, and twelve to be applied when the districts unified in June 1997.

In October 1996, the local Public Education Foundation endorsed the idea of standards with a major grant to support a three-year writing and implementation process. When superintendent Jesse Register was appointed in January 1997, he announced a plan to implement aligned content and performance standards at all grade levels in 1999. These developments confirmed for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation that the new district was committed to academic standards but would not be able to reach its performance goals by June 2001. The foundation therefore sustained its earlier decision to provide support only through the end of the 1996–97 school year.

### **Minneapolis**

The spring of 1997 was a crucial time in the history of middle grades reform in Minneapolis. Results from the first administration of Minnesota's new high-stakes math and reading exams showed that more than half the district's eighth graders lacked a basic level of skills, and that the poor results were largely concentrated among minority students. Overall, 91 percent of African-American students had failed either the math or the reading portion of the test.

The city and its school board received the news with a mix of gravity and alarm. Program director Hayes Mizell traveled to the district to address his concerns directly to the school board, as reported in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*. Mizell called the results “incredibly appalling” and warned that the district was not doing enough to improve instruction. In Minneapolis, he argued, many school mission statements “speak vaguely of preparing kids for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” but fail to acknowledge that schools' real mission is to “make kids learn stuff.”

Superintendent Peter Hutchinson responded by forming a Middle Grades Task Force, led by Cheryl Creecy, a principal with a reputation for turning around a troubled middle school. A few months later, Hutchinson left the district. His successor was Carol Johnson, a former district administrator who had coordinated the writing of the middle grades standards before leaving to become superintendent of a suburban district. After her departure, the district's chief curriculum position had been filled by a series of temporary appointees, and most district-level activity to implement middle grades standards had ceased.

In September 1997, Carol Johnson reported to the foundation that the district had failed to spend 40 percent of its two-year, \$1 million implementation grant, scheduled to end in December, and that she could not commit the district to meeting its performance goals. The district and the foundation agreed that the remaining dollars would be used to advance standards-based reform during 1997–98. Over the next few years, Johnson and Creecy led the district through a deliberate redesign of its entire middle grades program, articulated in a comprehensive document known as the Middle Grades Platform.

### **Louisville**

The decision to withdraw support from Louisville originated in tensions between the foundation and the district about how standards-based reform would improve instruction, especially in the lowest-performing schools, and help all schools do well under the state’s KERA accountability system. The foundation believed that instruction would never improve so long as the district continued to emphasize test scores as the top priority, while the district held that the foundation was unrealistically asking it to ignore test scores and the demands of the state.

The problem came to a head in 1999, when a foundation evaluator found that, despite exerting relentless pressure on schools to improve scores, the district had done very little to improve instruction (or students’ test performance) in its most troubled schools. The district prepared a proposal for funding in 2000–01, but the foundation chose not to make another grant after district administrators seemed unresponsive to the foundation’s concerns. After a decade of investment in middle grades reform in Louisville, the foundation declined to renew its grant.

Looking back, Louisville educators believe that the Clark initiative was inconsistent with the challenges put to them by their state, and that the inconsistency was most extreme and debilitating in schools where reform was needed most. One district administrator attributed the problem to the state’s narrow approach: “The [Clark] standards system embraced kids doing hands-on projects and oral reports and taking real life samples of creek water and looking for pollution and making reports on it. . . . But the state system doesn’t look at that. They look at their standards, which are structured around open response test questions.” Another suggested that, “at the beginning, we thought that under KERA schools were supposed to be writing their own curriculum, improving their own performance, doing their own thing. . . . Only later did we realize that the district had to be much more intentional about getting all our schools to do the right thing.” They credit the district with learning from the foundation’s departure, establishing a more consistent approach to the state standards, and redoubling its efforts to raise performance in its lowest-rated schools.

Even so, a January 2001 report by the Jefferson County Community Accountability Team found that Louisville schools continue to struggle with a host of problems, including low expectations for students, low student motivation, too little parent and community involvement, a disproportionate concentration of low-income students in certain schools, discipline problems, high absenteeism, and inadequate teacher learning and planning time.

## Results and Implications

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's involvement in middle grades reform coincided with a period of rapid change in national education policy and practice. Those changes complicated the progress of the foundation's work, but in the long run they have also increased its relevance.

In 1994, the Goals 2000 and the Improving America's Schools Act legislation asserted a new role for the federal government in overseeing states' efforts at school reform and began to deploy standards to increase accountability for low-performing schools. Seven years later, the No Child Left Behind Act placed the burden of school improvement squarely on school districts, thus completing the chain of accountability. Under NCLB and associated regulations, districts whose schools fail to produce "adequate yearly progress" on state-mandated, standards-aligned tests are subject to strictly applied financial and operational sanctions. The annual improvement goals are calibrated to bring *all* students to proficiency, as defined by their states, by the close of the 2013–14 school year. The U.S. Department of Education has also become more stringent in applying regulations associated with standards: in 2000, only 22 states had adopted standards and assessments as required by the 1994 legislation; today, all 50 states have developed standards or have submitted a timetable for doing so in the near future.

School districts and states now know far more about standards and standards-based reform than they did in 1994. In addition to standards developed by states, the model New Standards have been available as a common reference since late 1996. Standards and standardized assessments have been debated vehemently and discussed with increasing sophistication by educators, parents, politicians, and other observers. States have also begun to take a hard look at the implications of standards for schools and students; many have introduced standards, then refined and clarified them in subsequent steps. More important, experience has shed light on the processes by which educators have tried to use standards constructively in the classroom.

With standards likely to become an ever more powerful force in school reform and improvement for the next decade, the story of the Program for Student Achievement holds important lessons. What worked well, and what didn't? What role did the most tangible components of standards-based reform — standards and standardized assessments — play in the effort? And, most basic, how effective is standards-based reform?

## **The Purpose of Standards**

Between 1995 and 2001, district officials in Corpus Christi, Long Beach, and San Diego assumed far greater responsibility for improving their low-performing middle schools—a central goal of the foundation’s program. Special training for principals, in-class coaching for teachers, extra help for low-achieving students, stronger analysis of student data, and other efforts all brought extra resources and attention to schools that had historically lagged behind others in their districts. Further, the foundation’s involvement in the other three districts—Chattanooga, Louisville, and Minneapolis—apparently encouraged them to sharpen their focus on helping schools succeed. Even so, it seems that standards *per se* had very little to do with those changes.

The grantee districts had begun by writing their own content standards. The writing process was intense and challenging, as the foundation had predicted, and many educators who participated gained a strong understanding of standards as a result. The Education Matters researchers found, however, that the presence of standards alone did not motivate instructional change beyond a core group of teachers, even after the districts had presented the standards in conferences and workshops. Only when the districts began to offer intense, in-school professional development activities and to establish policies that supported accountability for what was happening in the classroom did standards-based reform begin to take hold.

In their March 2002 summary report on the Pew Network for Standards-Based Reform, evaluators Jane David and Patrick Shields make a similar observation regarding the introduction of the New Standards in seven districts between 1996 and 2001. They report that “standards, assessments and accountability . . . did not do a very good job of communicating high expectations for students, providing information to guide instructional improvement or motivating widespread instructional change beyond test preparation.” Those objectives were met in some schools and some districts, but only because of special, explicit efforts beyond the implementation of the standards themselves.

The Edna McConnell Clark and Pew models were fundamentally different: the Clark districts began with the expectation that they would invent their own complete standards-based systems, including content standards, performance standards, and aligned assessments, while the Pew districts began with the comprehensive New Standards, encompassing both content and performance guidelines. In neither case were the standards alone an effective motivator of reform. Instead, classroom-level change was driven primarily by two arguably complementary forces: pressure to improve test scores and focused professional development.

## **Test Scores and Other Uncertain Evidence**

The foundation did not consider raising test scores to be a major objective in the design of the Program for Student Achievement, yet test scores became an important element of program accountability almost from the beginning. The districts established performance goals in their implementation proposals using state-mandated test scores, and the foundation accepted those formulations. Indeed, whatever the foundation’s initial ambivalence, test scores represented for the program almost exactly what they represent for states: a prod to get districts to pay attention to low-performing schools. In practice, the foundation persistently tried to communicate to the districts that the true path to higher test scores was rigorous

instruction, and that rigorous instruction could be attained only through deep, fundamental school reform. Yet the districts heeded that advice in different ways and showed very uneven capacities to act on it.

The districts, for their part, had selected state-mandated standardized tests as the yardsticks for their work for some very sound reasons. First, the tests were required anyway by their states (and eventually by the federal government), which meant that administering them added nothing to district budgets—an important consideration when complying with the terms of a grant that, while substantial, did not cover the costs of a major new testing program. Second, most teachers understood the tests and did not need special training to prepare students for them. Third, although critics were beginning to raise questions about the value of state standardized tests, most parents, school board members, journalists, and state officials saw the tests as meaningful reflections of student achievement and school quality. The test results also had the virtue of apparent objectivity, which would be useful should local conflicts arise about the reform initiative. Finally, the districts would be held accountable for the test results regardless: the reforms would be deemed successful locally only if test scores went up, whereas flat or lower scores would put the work, however significant, under a shadow of doubt and even condemnation.

In a 2001 article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Panasonic Foundation assistant director Scott Thompson argues that the greatest threat to authentic standards-based reform is its “evil twin,” “high-stakes, standardized, test-based reform.” Because the evil twin is the “more visible and powerful” of the two, teachers tend to respond by teaching to the test, thus giving standards-based reform a bad name. The implication of Thompson’s thesis is that districts should attempt to put test scores in their proper perspective and thereby help schools and teachers reconcile the competing demands.

In the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation districts, pressure to increase test scores worked on teachers and schools as well as on the districts themselves. The foundation attempted to urge a different, more “authentic” model of reform, but its ability to help districts reconcile competing demands—between high-stakes state accountability systems and their own aspirations for meaningful reform—was crucially limited. In general, the districts took the position that they needed to satisfy the demands of their states first, then tackle major reform. In Louisville especially, and to some extent in Corpus Christi, district officials were frequently perplexed by what they saw as the foundation’s refusal to acknowledge that raising test scores was vitally important and extremely difficult.

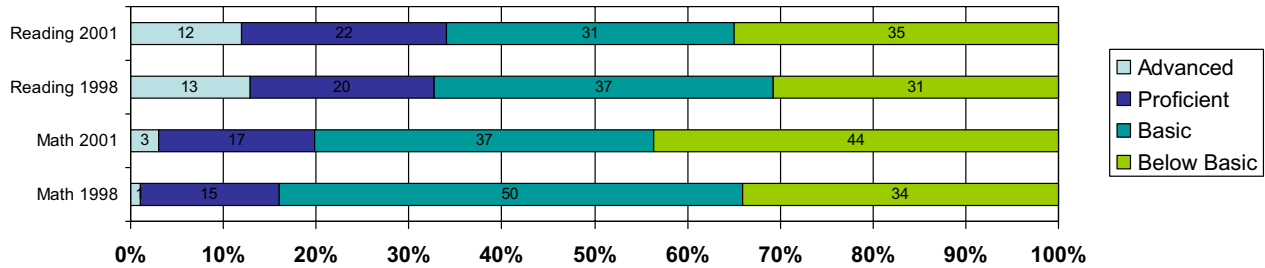
To complicate matters, test scores—even rising test scores—are exceedingly difficult to interpret. Eighth graders in Corpus Christi, Long Beach, Louisville, and San Diego improved their performance on state-mandated standardized tests, yet the causal connection with standards or standards-based reform is ambiguous.

Of the four districts remaining in the program beyond 1997, only Corpus Christi met the performance goals it had set in 1995. Despite its self-acknowledged failure to achieve substantial instructional improvements during the early years of the program, the district showed strong, steady growth in the percentages of eighth graders meeting minimum

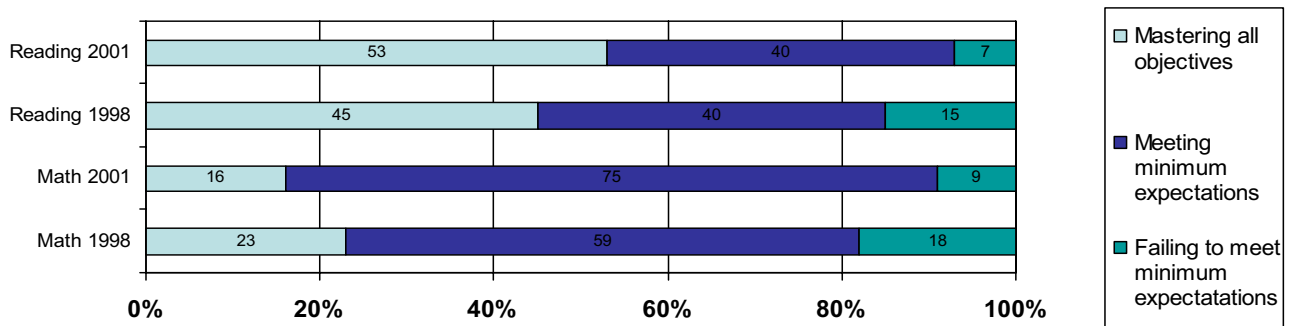


## Corpus Christi Independent School District Percentage of Grade 8 Students Scoring at Each Level

### NAEP-Based Test Results



### TAAS Test Results

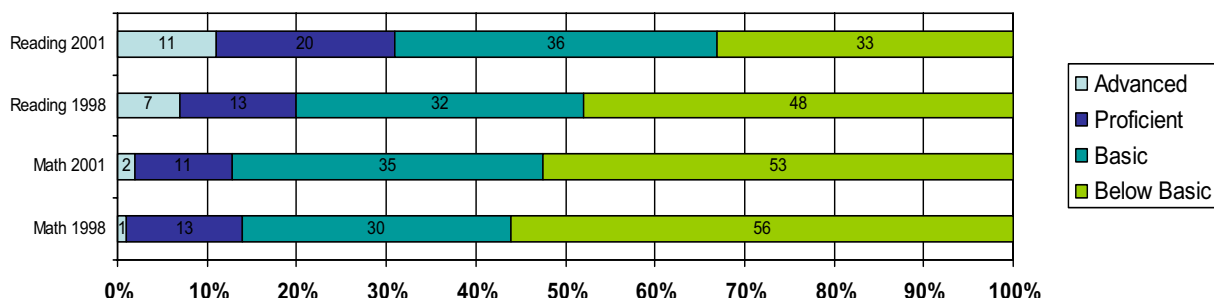


performance standards: in reading, the passing rate on the TAAS eighth grade exams rose from 70 percent in 1995 to 93 percent in 2001; in math, from 47 percent to 91 percent; and in writing, from 67 percent to 87 percent. The two California districts achieved far more modest improvements on their SAT-9 results between 1998 and 2001, despite the presence of ambitious and well-integrated reform initiatives. In Long Beach, the share of eighth graders scoring at or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile grew from 38 percent to 41 percent in reading and from 34 percent to 43 percent in math, while San Diego's results increased from 45 percent to 52 percent in reading and from 40 percent to 43 percent in math.

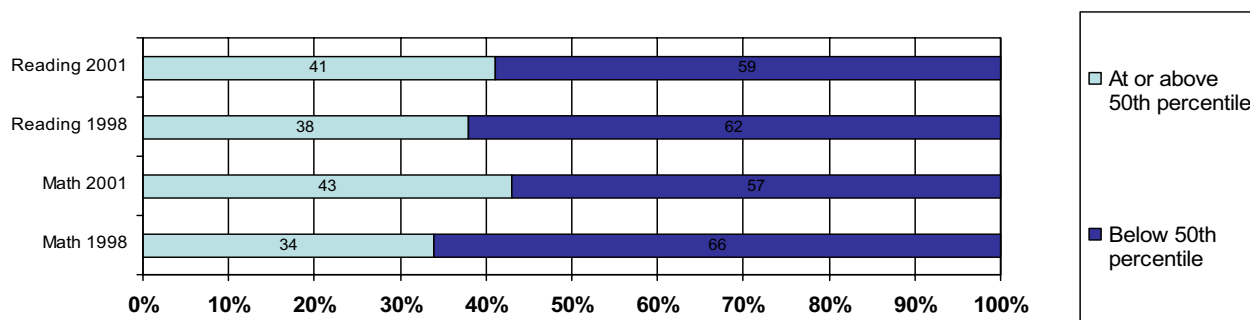
Whether or not a particular standardized test adequately measures student skill and knowledge is difficult to judge. Hoping to put the disparate testing systems into perspective, the foundation built the Policy Studies Associates evaluation around the administration of a common set of NAEP-based tests. The tests allowed comparisons among the districts and returned “standards-based” as opposed to “norm-referenced” results: in other words, the NAEP-based scores reflected students’ absolute level of skill rather than how they did relative to other students. But what does it mean, for example, that over several years students in Corpus Christi did progressively better on the state’s TAAS test (which is also standards-based) and progressively worse on the NAEP-based exam? Could it be that the

## Long Beach Unified School District Percentage of Grade 8 Students Scoring at Each Level

### NAEP-Based Test Results



### SAT-9 Results



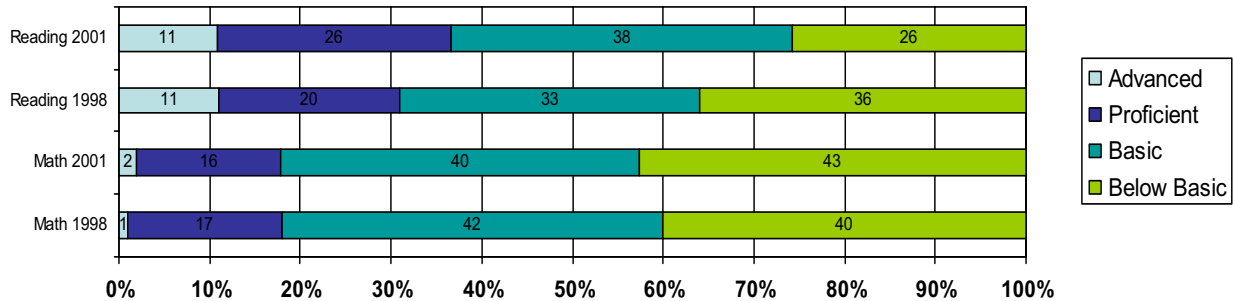
district’s attention to the TAAS test — on which its performance targets for the foundation were based, and to which its standards were aligned — was actually driving down the level of student skills?

The NAEP-based test indicated steady growth in reading in both Long Beach and San Diego, generally tracking the SAT-9 results. In Long Beach, the share of eighth graders scoring in the “proficient” and “advanced” categories on the NAEP-based reading exam grew from 20 percent in 1998 to 31 percent in 2001. In 1998, nearly half of students (48 percent) had scored at the lowest level, “below basic”; in 2001, that share had dropped to 33 percent. In San Diego, the percentage of students scoring “advanced” or “proficient” in reading grew from 31 percent to 37 percent, while the share scoring “below basic” declined from 36 percent to 26 percent. In math, however, the NAEP-based exam showed only modest improvement in Long Beach, with the share of students scoring “below basic” declining from 56 percent to 53 percent. In San Diego, the percentage of students scoring “below basic” actually rose, from 40 percent to 43 percent. Meanwhile, the SAT-9 indicated a slight increase in San Diego students’ math skills: 43 percent of eighth graders scored above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in 2001, compared with 40 percent in 1998. Was San Diego’s focus on reading having a negative effect on students’ math performance?

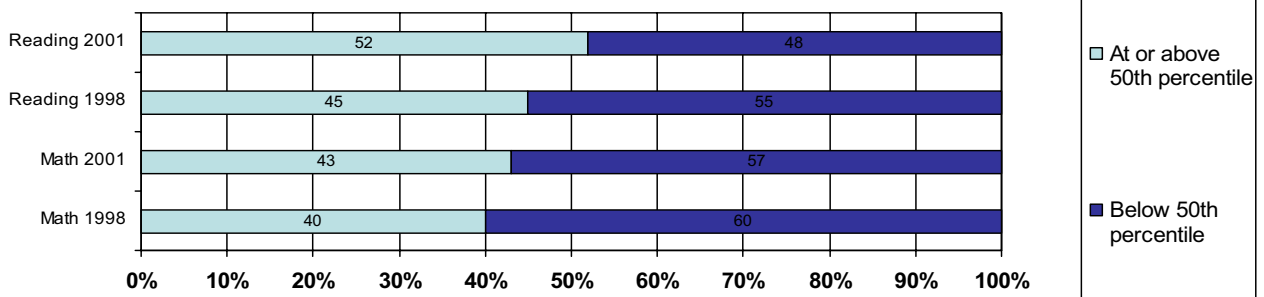
Other than confirming the foundation’s view that TAAS represented a low standard, the NAEP-based test did not produce strong or distinctive enough findings to be more useful to the districts — or useful for different purposes — than the state-mandated tests. The

## San Diego Unified School District Percentage of Grade 8 Students Scoring at Each Level

### NAEP-Based Test Results



### SAT-9 Results



foundation-supported analysis by PSA was intended to help the districts uncover lessons from their scores, but the districts had no real incentive to dig deeply into the results. Indeed, the foundation’s own attitude toward test scores had been ambivalent from the beginning. The RFP had required the districts to establish performance targets, but the foundation had offered no guidance for setting them at reasonable levels or for selecting an alternative to state-mandated tests. The evaluators frequently expressed concern that the districts were paying too much attention to testing, and foundation staff repeated those cautions to district educators—yet the foundation also reminded them regularly of their commitment to reach the performance targets.

Not that it needed to: the districts cared intensely about their test scores, and they would have done so whether the foundation took an interest or not. When Louisville and Minneapolis received unexpectedly low test results near the beginning of the program, both districts reacted with alarm and swiftly reorganized their efforts. Long Beach carefully coordinated its reading development courses to maximize its SAT-9 scores, and San Diego continues to justify the value of its prescriptive Blueprint for Student Success reforms by pointing to its slowly rising test scores. Indeed, as Texas, Kentucky, and California have increased their sanctions on schools that fail to perform as required, the districts have increasingly viewed strong test scores as necessary precursors to more fundamental reform.

## Quality, Equity, Culture: What District Educators Say

Each district, with the tacit approval of the foundation, eventually relaxed its preoccupation with assembling the tangible components of a standards-based system and turned instead to issues that had come to seem more urgent and challenging: building the skills of teachers, increasing the instructional leadership of principals, and cultivating habits of accountability that put test scores into perspective. With standards as a foundation and mindful of the need to find new ways to assess students' mastery of those standards, the districts set out to make sure their schools had the necessary resources and motivation to educate every student.

In Long Beach, for example, the district began to create data systems that would feed information much more swiftly to principals about the work of teachers, students, and groups of students. That process strengthened the relationships between instructional and research staff and helped principals think creatively about how student achievement data would allow them to track the impact of teacher performance, instructional interventions, and professional development initiatives.

- Maybe our mistake was that we didn't see right away that we had to work collaboratively with our research and assessment unit. Working with them has been hard—very hard!—but it's gotten better as we've learned how to tap into their expertise.  
—District administrator, Long Beach, July 2002
- It's really important to have focused, well-thought-out professional development in parallel for teachers and principals. We didn't do that at the initial stage of standards implementation, and I think that's one reason why it was slow.  
—District administrator, Long Beach, December 2001

Professional development focused on the needs of individual schools, but in pursuit of district-wide goals, became a priority in all three cities. San Diego, for example, invested heavily in school-level professional development by making grant dollars available through so-called collegial grants. Teachers and principals received funding to create professional development programs that would solve problems they were encountering as they attempted to implement standards. The Clark coordinator worked to ensure that the projects were rigorous and well-designed, with the result that many school-based staff members were directly involved in creating targeted professional development for their colleagues. This capacity for collegial support paid off for the middle schools as superintendent Bersin implemented his Blueprint for Student Success.

- The work we had done under the Clark grant opened the door for more acceptance of Bersin's literacy program. Teachers who had really gotten into standards realized that their kids couldn't meet the standards no matter how well the lessons were written. So the next question was, "How are we going to get them there?" When the literacy piece came in, a lot of us said, "Oh, that's going to get us there because we're talking about strategies that support kids' progress toward meeting the standards."  
—Staff developer, San Diego, March 2001

- The collegial grants really forced whole staffs to become involved in standards-based reform at their sites. I don't like to use the word "forced," but maybe that's the right word. Before that, people pretty much signed up [for standards-related projects and professional development] because they wanted to be there. . . . In some respects, the buy-in may not have been as strong, but those grants brought in people who would not normally have signed up.  
— Staff developer, San Diego, March 2001

Increasing the professional knowledge and authority of principals and classroom teachers was another common theme. In Corpus Christi, for example, middle grades principals began their own study group, then convinced the district that they needed specialized training and support. The principals eventually took responsibility for leading change in their schools and communicating to their faculty that the district was serious about standards-based reform.

- That first grant proposal, really, was written entirely by people in central office. I mean, that's how we used to do things. . . . The last grant was written almost completely by the principals, so that's been a real change.  
— District administrator, Corpus Christi, March 2001
- If I'm going to train a whole campus in a new curriculum or instructional approach, I can't just assume as a principal that every teacher is going to go and put that into effect. I have learned that I have an obligation as principal to make sure that these techniques and tools are being used in the classrooms.  
— Principal, Corpus Christi, March 2001

Teachers, principals, and district office staff have found ways in each district to build an ethic of professional learning and experimentation, along with a greater willingness to take responsibility for analyzing and solving problems. Those cultural changes may be as important to long-term school accountability as the standards themselves or the assessment systems that support them.

- Walk into one of our middle school classrooms and the kids never even turn because they're so used to principals, coaches, and other people who are supporting teachers being in those classrooms. It's a big, big reform. We have more people in classrooms watching what's going on, and that's how we're going to get significant changes. Teachers plan better because they never know who's going to be walking in their room that day.  
— Curriculum leader, Long Beach, December 2001
- Probably the biggest change for principals is that when we go out to visit them in schools, which is about four times a year, our conversation, our actions, everything we do, centers around instruction and student achievement. And that's a big paradigm shift for them. Up until last year, when the assistant superintendent came out to the school, [the conversation] was largely about operational issues, parent complaints. Rarely did the assistant superintendent go into a classroom.  
— Instructional leader, San Diego, quoted in *Education Matters* update report, August 1999

- When teachers think there are options for kids such as afterschool and summer school, they don't push as hard. Someone asked me recently, "When are we going to have an alternative middle school?" I answered, "We're not. The alternative is right in your classroom."  
—District administrator, Corpus Christi, May 2002
- We asked ourselves, "If standards-based reform is supposed to recognize that kids develop knowledge in multiple ways, how come we're still using the same old paradigm for asking kids to demonstrate proficiency?" We needed to build a body of evidence about student proficiency—drawing on end-of-course exams, portfolio assessments, student work, and so on—and understand how those measures combine. True performance standards have got to let students demonstrate proficiency using multiple measures.  
—District administrator, Long Beach, July 2002

### **Standards-Based Middle Grades Reform: Building the Field**

Through the foundation's support, the grantee districts received help and advice from some of the nation's leading organizations concerned with middle grades reform, including the Education Trust, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, or the Curriculum Project. At the same time, the districts' experiences pressed many of those organizations to grapple with the challenges of improving urban schools and to build their capacity to support standards-based reform.

In 1995, for example, when Chattanooga was struggling to span a cultural divide between the newly merged city and county school systems, the foundation's program director, Hayes Mizell, suggested that the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) help create a workable plan for professional development. NSDC had recently released the first standards for professional development, created under an earlier grant from the foundation. At Mizell's urging, NSDC subsequently provided technical assistance to Corpus Christi, Louisville, Long Beach, and San Diego. Those experiences contributed to a further project, led by Joellen Killion, to make NSDC's expertise more generally available. NSDC staff researched more than 400 existing middle school staff development programs in specific content areas, selecting 26 that met NSDC's standards and could provide evidence of positive impact on student achievement. NSDC published the results, with supporting materials, in *What Works in the Middle: Results-Based Staff Development*. A subsequent book by Killion, *Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development*, also published with foundation support, offers districts and schools materials to help assess the effectiveness of their own professional development and programs.

Mizell had been pushing the theme of academic rigor under the foundation's earlier middle grades reform program. His involvement had contributed to a decision in late 1995 by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) to amend its credo to emphasize student achievement. Plus, Mizell had consistently pushed the National Association of Secondary School Principals to make student achievement a top priority for its middle grades members. The foundation had also sought to build a constituency for urban school systems, which had lagged behind suburban districts in rethinking the philosophy and operations of their

traditional junior high schools. Despite having gained ground with major professional associations, Mizell believed that the field needed an organization with a more explicit focus on reform and improvement in urban middle schools. In 1994, he commissioned the Academy for Educational Development (AED) to undertake exploratory work that resulted in the creation, in 1997, of the Urban Middle Grades Reform Network, an organization of district-level educators responsible for middle grades reform in city school districts around the country.

Meanwhile, program officers from several foundations—including the Carnegie Corporation, the Lilly Endowment, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation—had begun to seek a common vehicle to advance the field of middle grades reform. In 1997, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation provided the initial funding to create the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, coordinated by the Education Development Center. Unlike the Urban Middle Grades Reform Network, the National Forum welcomes membership from school districts, state departments of education, foundations, research organizations, advocacy groups, professional associations, and schools of education. Over the next year, the National Forum hammered out a three-part vision statement, which argues that high-performing middle grades schools must be “academically excellent,” “developmentally responsive,” and “socially equitable.” The foundation also supported the Forum’s Schools to Watch initiative, which identifies and showcases schools that meet high standards of progress in each of the three areas.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), which functions as a “compact” among government and education officials in 16 southern states, is another cross-sector organization that received support from the foundation. SREB conducts research, provides technical assistance to school districts seeking to improve their performance, and advises states on policies to improve their educational systems. Nationally known for its earlier High Schools That Work project, SREB is applying techniques from that work to a new program, Making Middle Schools Matter, launched in 1999 through a major grant from the foundation.

Foundation-supported work by Education Trust helped clarify the role of standards in school improvement. In a related project, Collaborative Communications group created videos and other tools on standards for parents, teachers, and principals.

### **Conscience and Collaboration: Foundations and School Districts**

In an April 2000 essay on the contributions of the Annenberg Foundation to school reform, Chester Finn and co-author Marci Kanstoroom, of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, describe standards-based reform as an approach that “generally rests on a tripod of externally set academic standards, externally mandated assessments, and externally imposed rewards and interventions.” Its “underlying (and highly behaviorist) theory,” they argue, “holds that the [school] system isn’t capable of reforming itself because it lacks clear goals and standards, lacks feedback loops concerning its actual performance, and lacks the ability (or the will) to reward its members’ successes and discipline (or intervene in) their failures.” This is a strong but fundamentally on-target summary of what most people think when they hear the term “standards-based reform.”

The model of standards-based reform pursued by the Program for Student Achievement and the six grantee districts was almost completely at odds with the one Finn and Kanstoroom describe. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation began with a theory that districts could take responsibility for setting standards, establishing feedback loops, and rewarding or intervening in schools as necessary—and that standards-based reform, then an experimental approach, would be a useful framework within which to do so. Unlike states, which dictate the standards districts will adopt, the assessments they will use, and the rewards and sanctions that will follow, the foundation attempted to support the districts in creating their own systems and putting them into place. To hold the districts accountable, the foundation had only one sanction at its disposal: to withhold further funding. It used that sanction three times, in half the original districts.

Mizell knew he was asking local educators to make a huge leap, and he therefore offered them much coaching and many prods. His personal influence reached far down into the districts' organizations: he built relationships not just with superintendents and deputy superintendents but also with principals, district staff, teacher trainers, and classroom teachers. Although usually encouraging, even inspiring, he did not shy from being critical, blunt, or annoying. Mizell had done service as an activist school board member in Columbia, South Carolina, and he often acted the part.

In ceasing its support to three districts—Chattanooga and Minneapolis in 1997 and Louisville in 1999—the foundation expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to fulfill the specific goals they had established. Losing the program's support sent a message to the Chattanooga and Minneapolis school systems that they would need to bring order and unity to their turbulent districts if they wished to see increases in student achievement. In Louisville, a mutual spirit of recrimination seems to have blunted the foundation's primary message: that the district was ignoring its most troubled schools. Even so, the loss of the foundation's support appears to have bolstered a more general local determination to collaborate on behalf of middle grades reform. A local "community accountability team," established with support from the foundation, has attempted to capitalize on that sentiment. The team draws in part on lessons gained during the foundation's ten years of involvement with school reform in the district, and it may yet yield significant results.

It is worth noting that the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation did not provide nearly the total amount spent by the districts on middle grades reform during the implementation years. The foundation initially required a formal one-to-one match from each district, but even the grant and match combined did not cover the work required to write and implement standards. Standards-based reform went to the heart of the districts' middle grades programs and leveraged change throughout schools and central offices, making it impossible to say precisely which accomplishments are attributable to the foundation's support. That arrangement also meant that districts whose grants were not renewed were able to pursue at least part of their reform agenda with their own funds.

Do the foundation's investment and high level of engagement mean that lessons from the program are irrelevant to other districts? Probably not. Rather, the experiences of the foundation and the districts point to some very relevant cautions, especially in light of the growth of the standards movement, intensified now by federal regulation:



- The districts started out believing that they would make much larger gains in test scores than they actually achieved. Their work proved that, even with foundation money and much support, test scores are extremely slow to budge.
- Seven years after they began, district educators are still struggling to understand what standards mean for instruction and assessment. The term “standards” appeals to a commonsense notion of how public education should function in society, but it is not at all obvious how the promise should be fulfilled in practice.
- Although the foundation provided precious discretionary money to districts whose budgets were otherwise almost entirely tied up in mandatory expenditures, the threat of the foundation’s withdrawal did not change the behavior of three of the six districts. Whether those districts were right or wrong, that fact alone says a lot about the limited applicability of financial incentives and sanctions in education policy and school improvement.
- Local educators appreciated the advice and information they received from the foundation, its evaluators, and other experts, yet they often had little idea what to do with it, simply because they lacked experience in dealing with independent analysis or data. The near-total isolation in which public school educators typically operate raises serious questions about a governance system that is supposed to guarantee engagement with concerned outsiders and about the network of schools of education that are supposed to keep public education infused with fresh talent and ideas.

In terms of national reform, the program opened new avenues for learning between national leaders of middle grades reform and practitioners in six ambitious, real-life urban school districts. The program showed that standards-based reform requires far more flexibility, cooperation, professional growth, complex knowledge, and pure problem-solving than the rhetoric of “standards” and “accountability” implies. Many schools can summon those strengths, but what about schools that are not so strong? They must rely on their districts. Ambitious districts can probably meet the requirements of their state accountability systems while also pursuing their own high standards of learning and instruction, but doing so requires unity, skill, and confidence within the district itself.

## Sources and Methods

This report draws extensively on internal documents of the Program for Student Achievement and progress reports submitted to the foundation by the six grantee school districts. It also relies on unpublished reports prepared by the program's evaluators, Education Matters, Inc., and Policy Studies Associates, Inc., and by George Perry and other advisors.

Additional information and reflections come from dozens of in-person and telephone interviews with administrators and teachers in the six school districts and with other grantees, program staff, evaluators, and advisors to the program. Many of the most probing insights were offered by participants in four structured conversations with groups of 15–20 educators each in Corpus Christi, Long Beach, Louisville, and San Diego. The conversations were facilitated by Kris Kurtenbach of Collaborative Communications Group. Program director Hayes Mizell and program associate Ruth Galm provided much background and explanatory information. Other background information came from local newspaper reporting in the six cities where the Program for Student Achievement provided support.

This report also relies on documents published by or with support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. Many of those documents are available through the foundation's website at [www.emcf.org](http://www.emcf.org) or at [www.middleweb.com](http://www.middleweb.com), a site created and maintained since 1996 by John Norton with support from the foundation:

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