

**The California Center for Effective Schools —
Oxnard School District Partnership to Implement the
Effective Schools Process**

Published in Phi Delta Kappan

January 2002

By

Janet H. Chrispeels

**California Center for Effective Schools
Gevirtz Graduate School of Education
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490
jchrisp@education.ucsb.edu**

The California Center for Effective Schools — Oxnard School District Partnership to Implement the Effective Schools Process

In the late 1970s Ron Edmonds, one of the pioneers of research on effective schools, asserted that “all children can learn the intended curriculum” and that what prevents us from reaching this goal is lack of political will.¹ Charles Teddlie and Sam Stringfield² in their longitudinal study of Louisiana schools, found that to become effective requires the mustering of political will as well as new knowledge and skills. Outside help and support are often needed to build the political will for change and to enable a district to gain insights into its existing practices and cultural traditions.

In the past 20 years we have learned much about what makes schools effective³ but translating research into action remains a daunting task. The California Center for Effective Schools which is housed at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is part of the National Alliance for Effective Schools, is helping schools to become more effective by building on the firm foundation laid by national and international effective schools research of the last two decades.³⁶ In addition, the Center Director, four facilitators and myself also incorporated current knowledge of school improvement and organizational change as well as our

many years of field experience to address the often intractable and complex problems faced by districts and schools that under-educate students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In trying to bring about change, particular attention must be paid to systemic issues and the impact of the nested structure of schools within the district.⁷ From my early work with the Effective Schools Process in the 1980s⁸ I learned the critical importance of working simultaneously at the district, school, grade (or department) and classroom levels. Without support from the top and system coherence, individual school change efforts can be quickly undermined.

Our Center provides a number of essential services at different levels of a school system to support an Effective Schools Process, which enables the participants to implement specific initiatives. There are strong feedback loops between the services we offer and the actions taken by the schools and districts. This process is illustrated in Figure 1, where the services are shown in the outer ring and the work that the schools and district undertake to move along the road to effectiveness are portrayed in the inner ring. This figure attempts to conceptually bring together effective schools research with the

33

school improvement knowledge base. We used the concepts of circles and interlocking rings to indicate the work is not linear but a process of continuous learning and development. The process moves back and forth among the different services provided and the work of the district and schools, and there is constant interaction between the inner and outer rings as each level of the system is engaged. For example, teachers early work with the standards-based curriculum raised questions about assessments, which then are incorporated into the data management system. As teachers learn to use the data management system, they gain insights into how to modify instruction to address gaps in students' knowledge.

Building our partnership with the Oxnard School District (K-8)

In this article, I tell the beginning of the story of how Effective Schools Process works using as my example our initiative with the Oxnard, California, School District (K-8). In 1999, the District adopted a strategic plan for school improvement, which included reaching out to community resources for assistance such as neighboring community colleges and universities. In the spring of 2000, the Oxnard School District and the University of California, Santa Barbara, which houses the California Center for Effective Schools, formed a partnership to implement the Effective Schools Process as one way to help the District achieve the goals of its

newly adopted strategic plan. The overarching purpose of our partnership is to increase the number of students who achieve the California K-8 Curriculum Standards and are prepared for college prep classes in high school. As will be seen as each component is discussed below, the work involves all organizational levels: the board of education and administrative staff, the union, principals, school leadership teams, and teachers at the grade and classroom level.

The Oxnard School District (K-8) is a rapidly growing district of 15 elementary schools, three intermediate schools, and one alternative school with a total of 16,000 students. Two-thirds of the students are from low-income families and 52% of its Spanish-speaking students need ESL instruction. The four-track year-round schools are filled to capacity (700 to 1100 students each). The district spends \$5900 per pupil, which is about average for the state. On the Stanford-9 Achievement Test, students received among the lowest scores in the region, making Oxnard an important test case for the Effective Schools Process.

Components of the Effective Schools Process: How does it work?

District Profile: Starting the Effective Schools Process by Taking Stock. Reviewing current district demographic, organizational, and achievement data as well as information about existing

instructional or intervention programs is a logical place to begin the Effective Schools Process, as shown in Figure 1. Multiple measures of student achievement, including norm-referenced test data as well as other district performance assessments, are collected and prepared for analysis by teachers and administrators. Effective Schools surveys⁹ are administered to teachers, support staff and students to determine their *perceptions* about the presence of the Effective School Correlates (e.g., clear school mission, instructional leadership, home-school relations, frequent monitoring, opportunity to learn, high expectations, safe and orderly environment). This first activity of taking stock of the district implies that a robust data acquisition, processing and analysis capacity exists in the district. This capacity may have to be developed as part of the process (see below).

A curriculum audit helps to identify current strengths and gaps in teaching and instructional practices and the alignment of the curriculum to state standards. Especially important in the case of the Oxnard School District was reviewing its strategic plan to identify how the Effective Schools Process could help the district achieve the goals it had set for itself. For example, Strategy 1 of the Strategic Plan calls for “alignment of curriculum, instruction and assessment practices so that students can meet or exceed district standards.” This strategy is being met through several components of the Effective Schools Process,

especially Standards-based Instructional Redesign¹⁰, grade level meetings, and implementation of a data management system. Taking stock of what already exists and what the district wants to accomplish helps to immediately engage district and school teams in the work of improvement and ensures that the process is data-guided and results oriented.

Establishing the District Leadership Team.

Both early effective school research and more recent studies have confirmed that although change at the level of the individual school has the most profound impact on student learning, boards of education must approve and district staff must be actively engaged in supporting that change. For change to be sustained, many systemic issues must be addressed, especially the lack of coherence in district policies and procedures, which undermine change at the individual school level. From the beginning our university team met with a district leadership team composed of key administrative staff to collaboratively plan the implementation process. Key administrators participated with teachers and principals in seven school leadership team seminars, two week-long Instructional Redesign workshops and many subsequent meetings in language arts and mathematics, a three day training in data management, and in a week-long national Principals’ Institute. In addition, they attended grade level

meetings at the schools sites to gain insights into how that process was working. They also have made regular presentations to the Oxnard Board of Education on the progress of the Effective Schools work. This intense level of involvement has actively demonstrated district commitment and has provided a forum for addressing challenges as they arise.

To guide the process in the future, an Effective Schools Advisory Panel, composed of a union representative selected by teachers at each participating school, two principals, district representatives, and members of the California Center team, will soon be put in place. This group will help to address districtwide problems that may emerge and suggest future implementation strategies. Still to be accomplished is greater coordination of all district programs and initiatives so that teachers in schools do not perceive each district action “as one more project that will soon pass” but instead experience program coherence and coordinated efforts. As can be seen in Figure 1, the work with the district leadership team flows into support and professional development for principals, another key component of the Effective Schools Process.

Encouraging Instructional Leadership. The first studies of effective schools identified instructional leadership by principals as key to increased effectiveness. Since the

1970s, the importance of the principal has surfaced in almost every study of school effectiveness and improvement.¹¹ To help principals engage in the actions and activities indicated in the inner wheel of Figure 1, a national week-long Principal’s Institute sponsored by the National Alliance for Effective Schools brings principals and other administrators together to gain an initial understanding of the components of the Effective Schools Process. With this informational head start, principals are better equipped to lead their staff. Learning how to work and lead with a leadership team, collect and analyze achievement data, and conduct teacher observations in standards-based classrooms require new skills, which frequently have not been developed in traditional administrative preparation programs. Oxnard principals who attended last year’s Principals Institute not only worked with their own schools’ leadership team, but also helped the other 12 principals in the district understand the Effective Schools Process through presentations at administrative staff meetings and by organizing a weekend retreat for their colleagues.

In spite of much enthusiasm about the Effective Schools Process by the first cohort of principals, bringing about substantial change presents its challenges. One principal captured well the frustrations that can occur.

We are a very early start school and making sure that the guest teachers have shown for their

assignments and that their assignments reflect changes caused by teachers being absent is truly an administrative nightmare. This initial phase of implementing the program tested my commitment to the Effective Schools Process. Teachers, I felt, were having a difficult time adjusting to being a 'Critical Friend'. I figured why bother. However, today, I see how teachers have evolved into incredible facilitators and collaborators of learning and instruction...The administrative nightmare is of no consequence compared to the potential teacher impact.

Our first year of implementation, however, has shown that a one-week institute does not provide sufficient support. The challenges of school change are overwhelming, especially in a district like Oxnard with its academically and economically needy student population and its year-round school schedule. Therefore, in 2001-2002 the principals and the UCSB team will jointly plan monthly skill building and reflective seminars to further assist site administrators in the difficult work they have undertaken.

Developing School Leadership Teams. Important as the role of the principal is, studies in the last ten years have repeatedly shown that successful

implementation of school reform requires active participation by teachers and the development of teacher leadership teams.¹² As can be seen in Figure 1, the work to be undertaken by principals and the school leadership team merges once the school commits to shared instructional leadership and the implementation of an effective school-based governance structure. Together the principal and the leadership team guide the staff in setting improvement targets and developing action plans. These plans are designed to move the school toward the enactment of the effective schools correlates, especially high expectations for students success, a safe and orderly environment that promotes student learning, and developing positive home-school relations. The critical need for shared governance is one more reason why the district and the school board have to buy into the process. As teachers and principals try to implement shared leadership, principals often are caught in the middle of the hierarchical web of district/school relationships, which can undermine site level collaboration.¹³

Once created, teacher leadership teams need training and support to function effectively. Providing initial and ongoing professional development for the teams is an important service provided by the California Center for Effective Schools. During the three day fall retreat and four follow-up sessions, team members learned how to collect, analyze and use data to develop action plans, engage in team building activities

and plan how to work with the rest of the staff. For example, in a recent training session, each team brought data on how time is allocated during each grade level's language arts block. Teams were then mixed by grade level across the district, with each grade level looking at the data from all school sites. They identified patterns and trends that emerged from the data and charted these for future reference. Teams then reformed to share what they had learned from colleagues, read a research article about how time was used in schools serving low income, second language learners, and discuss the implications for their school.

These leadership teams also help their colleagues to implement the Standards-Based Instructional Redesign process and other key components of the Effective Schools Process. After one such meeting, a teacher commented that the "Leadership team has caused me to reflect upon my values as an educator. ..." This statement illustrates the importance of providing teachers time to reflect on their practice. A team member at another school reported that through their participation, team members had learned how to assume active roles in their respective grade level meetings. They also learned how to present ideas to their whole staff and engage them in dialogue. One participant commented, "because of the effective schools process, I have taken the role of 'leader' at my school. I am, and feel more involved." The work of the leadership

team is captured in the words of another participant who said, "I have also enjoyed being on the leadership team as the time spent in depth planning has been well organized and helpful to understand and focus on the big picture as well as the specific target areas". Although these leadership teams are in the nascent stages of development, several teams actively addressed the correlate home school relations. At one school, teachers at each grade level met to assemble a parent packet on the SAT-9 test, which offered suggestions about how parents could help prepare their child for the test. Over three hundred parents attended the evening sessions—well exceeding the teachers' highest expectations. In another school a team member reported, "We have successfully held several parent involvement workshops, the first one was 'Homework and Study skills,' the second one was 'Family Math Night,' the third one was a literacy workshop. All of the workshops were very well attended with over 250 parents at each one." These comments show that through team training, teachers are taking on new leadership roles, designing programs to reach out to families, and are helping their colleagues develop as well.

Implementing Standards-based Instructional Redesign. Aligning curriculum and examining instructional practices has always been central to an effective schools process. The

Standards-Based Instructional Redesign component shown in Figure 1 greatly strengthens this aspect and enables a district to effectively align its curriculum to state or national standards. Teacher curriculum leaders in each subject area work to develop performance indicators that specify what students will do to show mastery of the state standards, thereby deepening teachers' understanding of the California Curriculum Content Standards. Once performance indicators are established, the teachers develop curriculum maps to help pace instruction, identify core content, and suggest instructional strategies needed for students to master the standards.

In Oxnard, 80 teachers worked in grade level teams for a week in August 2000 with Drs. Judy March and Karen Peters from Kent State University, Ohio, (also a National Alliance for Effective Schools Center) to align the language arts curriculum. An additional 80 teachers addressed mathematics in January 2001. This high level of involvement provided each school in the district with a cadre of teachers who were familiar with Instructional Redesign and thus able to help their colleagues. As one teacher reported, "I have learned the standards for my grade level. I have found the Instructional Redesign process a real positive for planning and implementing the curriculum in my classroom." A second teacher said, "The work that my colleagues and I have done has really

focused in on our curriculum and targeted the California State Standards. It has really helped me reflect on my own teaching that I am continually trying to improve." These sentiments were echoed by teachers at other schools as well. "Because of the opportunity to examine and discuss the curriculum maps, I have felt more aware of the language arts content standards. This has enabled me to ensure that my students were exposed to 3rd grade skills and content". Although the overall response from teachers to the two-weeks of Instructional Redesign work in language arts and mathematics was positive, teachers still acknowledged the process was a "difficult" one, the work to teach to standards is "a bit overwhelming" and that there is an enormous challenge ahead in getting "the elder or more established teachers to buy into the program".

Teachers at all 19 schools in the district were invited to suggest changes and add to the maps as they worked with them. A second iteration of the performance indicators and curriculum maps will be used in 2001-2002 school year. In addition, district-wide assessments of student language arts and mathematics achievements are being refined to better align with the standards.

Instituting Facilitated Grade level Meetings. One of the challenges of school reform is finding time for teachers to meet together to share ideas, design curriculum, discuss instructional

strategies, learn new skills and reflect on their practice. Developing performance indicators and curriculum maps will be of little use if teachers do not use them. As Linda Darling Hammond has said, “It is now clear that most schools and teachers cannot produce the kind of learning demanded by the new reforms—not because they do not want to, but because they do not know how, and the systems they work in do not support their efforts to do so.”¹⁴ This concern for increasing teachers’ pedagogical knowledge was recently reiterated in a Los Angeles Times (April 6, 2001, p. 1) article that stressed if low-reading achievement is to be overcome, more teacher professional development is needed.

A significant design element of the Effective Schools Process is the grade level, interdisciplinary team or department meetings. As can be seen in Figure 1, it is during these grade level meetings that teachers have time to become familiar with the Instructional Redesign work. They share instructional strategies, design standards-based units, discuss how to provide rich learning opportunities for their students, and collaboratively analyze student work generated from standards’ based lessons. Interviews with teachers indicate how important the grade level meetings have been in helping school reform enter the classroom door. One reported, “I feel that it has been invaluable being able to work with other teachers...I have been teaching for 11 years and this is the first

year that I have had the experience of really being able to work with other teachers. I have noticed that when we set our goals we really strive to meet these goals”. Throughout the year teachers repeatedly echoed this perspective about the value of having professional time to share and to gain a deeper understanding of the performance indicators and curriculum maps. Several others expressed their enthusiasm about having time to plan units together. “The process has enabled a huge amount of professional ‘sharing’ to occur.” Another said, “We have begun to implement unit planning and it is working well”. And a third teacher reported:

I felt it was an invaluable experience creating a social studies unit with my peers in grade level meetings. We started with a group decision, and followed through by looking at the curriculum map to determine our Performance Indicators. All our grade level teachers have been sharing how we are developing the unit. There is a continuous process of sharing and helping each other. Personally this has made the work environment a friendly workplace where ‘judgment’ has been

replaced with
collaboration.

These bimonthly meetings in Oxnard are facilitated by trained UCSB facilitators and are held during the school day. Teachers are released from their classroom by a *guest teacher* who usually arrives with a prepared lesson plan. The goal is to keep disruption of the instructional program and the extra work of the regular classroom teacher to a minimum.

Data Management System. Effective schools research repeatedly shows that frequent monitoring of student progress and program implementation is essential to continuous improvement. Effective schools are data guided and results oriented. However, many school districts have not tapped into existing technology to ensure that classroom teachers and principals have ready access to all the data they need to help make sound instructional decisions. A key component of the Effective Schools Process is the implementation of an Academic Data Analysis and Management System (ADAM),¹⁵ which brings the wheel full circle to where we began the process: with data. Through ADAM, teachers, principals, and district administrators in Oxnard will have available records of the achievement of students by class, school and district. Teachers will know in which intervention programs the students have participated, will be able to track parent contacts and responses to requests for

assistance, and they will be able to generate reports for parents to indicate how well their children have achieved the standards. Through simple disaggregation of data, teachers and principals will be able to diagnose achievement gaps and strengths and plan instructional programs accordingly. ADAM should provide the leadership team with much of the information it needs to engage the staff in a process of continuous improvement.

Conclusion

The Effective Schools Process began in Oxnard a year and a half ago. We expect it will take three to five years of strenuous work before we see the full benefits of the partnership effort between UCSB and the Oxnard School District. A true measure of school effectiveness is sustained annual improvements for all students over at least three years. Nevertheless, promising changes are occurring in Oxnard after one full year of implementation. One significant change is a shift in attitude among teachers. As an assistant superintendent recently commented, "At the beginning of the year (August 2000), in our first workshop on language arts standards, I heard lots of 'Our kids can't do that.' Now, as I go out to schools, I am hearing a lot fewer 'can'ts.' That is a real culture shift."

A second change is that teachers' perceptions in the seven district elementary schools receiving leadership team training and regularly scheduled and facilitated grade-level meetings differed significantly from the other matched district schools not receiving this intense level of support. On a districtwide survey about the level of implementation of the Instructional Redesign process, teachers receiving in-depth training reported they were more knowledgeable of content standards and that they felt they had the ability to teach to the standards, and to help students master them. These data were supported by a significant difference in the percent gain on the 2001 SAT 9 test results between the two groups of schools. The average percent gain in the seven intensive participating schools was

10.4% compared to 5.1% for the other eight district elementary schools. These are encouraging results.

Perhaps most significant, although each school did some test preparation for the SAT 9, the real focus has been on improving the depth and quality of student learning and work by teaching to the standards and collaboratively designing units that require higher-order thinking and the completion of complex tasks. The comprehensiveness of the initiative, the focused attention to creating alignment and coherence, and the work by leadership teams and classroom teachers at each grade level may mean taking the slow road to school improvement, but it is the one we believe will lead to true and lasting school effectiveness.

Draft – Not for citation without author's permission

¹ Ronald R. Edmonds, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," *Educational Leadership*, 1979, 37, pp. 15-27.

² Charles Teddlie and Sam Stringfield, *Schools Do Make a Difference: Lessons Learned from a 10 year Study of School Effects* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989).

³ Daniel U. Levine and Lawrence W. Lezotte, *Unusually Effective Schools* (Madison, WI: National Center for Effective Schools Research and Development, 1990).

⁶ Charles Teddlie and David Reynolds, *The International Handbook of School Effectiveness Research* (London: Falmer Press, 2000).

⁷ Janet H. Chrispeels and Sally Pollack, "Equity Schools and Equity Districts", in Bert.P. M. Creemers, T. Peters and David Reynolds eds. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1989), pp. 295-308.

⁸ Janet H. Chrispeels, *Purposeful Restructuring: Creating a Culture for Learning and Achievement in Elementary Schools* (London: Falmer Press, 1992).

⁹ The Effective Schools Surveys were developed by Ben Birdsell and Bob Sudlow and are distributed by the Association for Effective Schools, another member of the National Alliance for Effective Schools.

¹⁰ Judy March and Karen Peters, *Developing High-Performance Schools: Instructional Redesign for Learner Centered Classroom Reform* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa, 1999).

¹¹ Jaap Scheerens and Roel J. Bosker, *The Foundations of Educational Effectiveness* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1997).

¹² Janet H. Chrispeels, Salvador Castillo, Janet H. Brown, "School Leadership Teams: A Process Model" *School Effectiveness and Improvement*, 2000, 11, pp.20-56 Gene I. Maeroff, *Team Building for School Change: Equipping Teachers for New Roles* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993). Susan A. Mohrman and Priscilla Wohlstetter and Associates, *School-based Management: Organizing for High Performance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

¹³ Janet H. Chrispeels, Kate J. Martin, Itamar Harari, Cheryl Strait, and Marisol A. Rodarte, "Team Decision Making: Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity at a Middle ". *Journal of School Leadership*, 1999, 9, 422-453.

¹⁴ Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 95.

¹⁵ Effective Schools data management system, initially developed when the Effective Schools Center was housed at the University of Wisconsin, was substantially enhanced and made user friendly and web-based by Dr. Judy March, Dr. Karen Peters, and Jeff Beuck at the Kent State (Ohio) Effective Schools Center.