



The 2010 Broad Prize

Celebrating Excellence in America's Public Schools



The \$2 million Broad Prize, the nation's largest K-12 public education award, is given annually by The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation to five school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing income and ethnic achievement gaps.

One hundred of the largest urban American school districts—serving nearly 9 million students—are eligible for The Broad Prize each year. Graduating high school seniors in the winning district receive \$1 million in college scholarships; students in each of the four finalist districts receive \$250,000 in scholarships.

THE 2010 BROAD PRIZE FINALISTS:

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Charlotte- Mecklenburg Schools | Gwinnett County Public Schools | Montgomery County Public Schools | Socorro Independent School District | Ysleta Independent School District |
| North Carolina | Georgia | Maryland | Texas | Texas |

Even as our country continues to reel from staggering economic, environmental and other global challenges that will plague our children's lives for years to come, we see beacons of hope and change in our nation's public schools. This year's five finalists—despite high-minority, high-poverty populations—have demonstrated that success is possible.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, 60 percent of the district's 133,664 students are either Hispanic or African-American; and in Gwinnett, nearly half of the district's 159,298 students are. In both districts, half of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Near our nation's capitol, 44 percent of Montgomery County's 141,777 students are either Hispanic or African-American.

In the neighboring districts of Socorro and Ysleta, more than 91 percent of the students are Hispanic, and at least three out of four students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

Despite these historically disadvantaged student populations, each of these districts is making great strides in helping all students—no matter their background or income level—prepare for college and a productive life. All five finalist districts performed better than expected, given their poverty levels, and all narrowed achievement gaps between Hispanic and white students.

At a time when opportunity is often limited only to the best-prepared students, these districts serve as hope for other American school systems that search for ways to improve achievement levels for their own children.



Rank Among U.S.
School Districts:

19

Annual Budget:

\$1.14 billion

Students Eligible for
Free and Reduced-Price
School Lunch:

51%

Charlotte- Mecklenburg Schools

NORTH CAROLINA

Number of Schools:

176

Number of Teachers:

8,965

Number of Students:

133,664

Students Designated
as English Language
Learners:

12%

(2009/10 data)

WHEN DENISE WATTS TOOK OVER AS PRINCIPAL

at Bishop Spaugh Community Academy, which in 2007 had the unwelcome label of being the lowest-performing middle school in North Carolina, one of the first problems she had to tackle was low attendance—and not just among students.

“Teachers missed more days than the kids,” she says.

The fact that teachers didn’t want to come to work, however, was merely a symptom of deeper trouble. It was one of the reasons why Watts, who previously led a higher performing campus in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, was asked to accept this more challenging position.



As one of 20 effective principals recruited for Superintendent Peter C. Gorman's "Strategic Staffing" initiative, Watts was allowed to bring along like-minded staff and teachers and was given additional pay to incentivize her to deliver rapid academic growth. Backed by a school board that was anxious to see Gorman and his team take the necessary actions to narrow achievement gaps, principals like Watts were also allowed to remove up to seven of each underperforming school's staff members if they were not contributing to student achievement.

Watts also worked to create a more positive school culture, in part by simply making the building a less dreary place. Light bulbs were replaced, carpets were cleaned, and with the help of the school's business partner, Target, a suite in which new parents gathered to enroll their children was turned into a welcoming reception area.

"I had to get some quick wins when I got here," Watt says.

To help improve morale among students, the school became one of five to adopt a gang prevention and leadership development program called "No Easy Walk," which included weekly team-building field trips and projects to engage students in making positive life decisions.

These and other school-level changes introduced by the transferred principals have led to test score gains ranging from 5 to 23 percentage points over the 2008-2009 academic year. Among the first cohort of seven schools participating in the Strategic

Staffing Initiative, all saw an increase in reading scores, and six posted increases in science and math.

Second-time Broad Prize finalist Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has experienced similar test score growth across the district and has narrowed achievement gaps, especially between low-income and non-low-income students. In reading, for example, the gap for high school students decreased from 29 percentage points in 2007 to 20 points in 2009.

"When a judge accuses you of 'academic genocide,' it gives you a laser-like focus," says Gorman, referring to the state Superior Court judge's 2005 description in a six-district school finance lawsuit of what was taking place in Charlotte-Mecklenburg's low-performing high schools.

In reading, for example, the gap for high school students decreased from 29 percentage points in 2007 to 20 points in 2009.

FROM MANAGED INSTRUCTION TO MANAGED PERFORMANCE EMPOWERMENT

Many of the achievement gains attained since 2005 are evident in what Gorman and the school board identified as the "Achievement Zone"—a "learning community" and one of seven feeder zones, including the district's

Specific attention to improving math performance district-wide has also led to reductions in achievement gaps. Between 2007 and 2009, the gap between African-American and white high school students decreased from 34 to 24 percentage points in math.

11 lowest-performing schools. After receiving additional staff and resources, all "Zone" schools have shown growth in reading and math scores. And Zone middle schools met 91 percent of their Adequate Yearly Progress goals in 2008-09, compared to 61 percent the previous year.

Specific attention to improving math performance district-wide has also led to reductions in achievement gaps. Between 2007 and 2009, the gap between African-American and white high school students decreased from 34 to 24 percentage points in math.

These improvements come on the heels of the district's effort to carry out one of its 2010 strategic plan goals—to put more decisions about instructional techniques into the hands of local administrators and teachers, while centrally holding firm to what skills and knowledge must be taught at each grade level over the course of the year. Previously, under a governance structure known as "managed instruction," teaching

and curriculum decisions were tightly controlled by the district central office. This approach was meant to unify schools that too often were not aligned when it came to curriculum and instruction.

"Pacing guides ruled the roost," says Spagh Assistant Principal Jan McIver, referring to the span of time during which teachers were expected to deliver material. "If it said four days, and the kids didn't get it in four days, you had to move on."

Now, under a theory of "managed performance empowerment," the aim has shifted toward entrusting school administrators and teachers to do what is necessary to improve achievement and providing more professional development to give teachers the skills to accomplish that goal.

"The environment we were in before was so rigid," says the district's Chief Academic Officer Ann Clark. "Now there is broad latitude in how, but no latitude in what."

For example, when she became the principal of Devonshire Elementary, Suzanne Gimenez—who was also "strategically staffed"—chose not to immediately remove teachers or other personnel who she perceived to be resistant to change. Instead, she gave teachers a chance to improve student performance by actually hiring additional staff and lowering class sizes to an average of 16.



Along with the smaller classes, Gimenez established a more structured environment that included requiring teachers to post their daily objectives in their classrooms and write detailed lesson plans for the week. Of course, not everyone appreciated Gimenez’s approach. Some teachers eventually left.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg leaders attribute student gains to their unwavering commitment to use curriculum facilitators and coaches at both the feeder pattern and local school levels.

This variation in school leadership styles across Charlotte-Mecklenburg is fostered through a philosophy Gorman calls “freedom and flexibility with accountability.” Principals with strong student achievement results are given more latitude to implement programs that they feel are the right fit for their schools.

That’s why Cheryl Little, a literacy facilitator at Collinswood Language Academy, a high-achieving K-5 Spanish and English dual language school, asked all her school’s teachers to be trained in the use of “thinking maps” to increase students’ ability to solve problems and think more critically. It was her initiative, not the district’s. These “maps,” with blank lines and bubbles for jotting down key words, help students organize their thoughts based on the problem they are working through.

A strong district-wide emphasis on teacher collaboration during joint teacher planning time—among grade-level and subject-area colleagues at each campus—has also been integral to making sure teachers review student data and make decisions based on evolving student needs. Those planning periods are considered so critical to student success that an administrator, such as an assistant principal or a curriculum facilitator, is also expected to be part of each session.

Gimenez adjusted the Devonshire Elementary schedule to allow joint teacher planning time to grow from 90 minutes once a week to 45 minutes every day.

“Now we meet as a team, and we can bounce ideas off each other,” says Beverly Parker, a third-grade teacher, as she sat around a table in a workroom surrounded by the rest of Devonshire Elementary’s third-grade team.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg leaders also attribute student gains to their unwavering commitment to use curriculum facilitators and coaches at both the feeder pattern or “learning community” and local school levels. Even in the midst of recent budget cutbacks, those positions—which ensure teachers are receiving appropriate training and are using data to improve instruction—have been preserved.

“I coach. I do demonstration lessons. I’ll do staff development for one person,” says Little from Collinswood Language Academy. “[Administrators] expect to see the work I’ve done happening in the classrooms.”



IT TAKES A COMMUNITY

Gorman’s leadership and his results-oriented approach have attracted financial support from Charlotte’s business community and national foundations for programs designed to improve schools and student achievement. One of them is Parent University, which provides a variety of parenting education workshops across the metro area.

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On a recent Friday afternoon, several Parent University staff members and volunteers fan out across the grounds of Pressley Ridge apartments, just off the 77 freeway. They are following the lead of Parent University’s Jerri Haigler, looking for residents with children in third grade or higher. Outfitted in bright red t-shirts and toting plastic bags full of granola bars, juice and wristbands saying “Show what you know,” their mission in 90-degree heat is to encourage children to do well on upcoming end-of-grade and end-of-course tests.

“Call one of your grandchildren and tell them to do great things on the test,” Ruby Houston, a family and community specialist for the district, urges one

of the residents. Three African-American boys—one missing his two front teeth—nearby ask for extra bags.

After only two years, Parent University has served more than 27,000 parents, including more than 15,000 who have enrolled in classes like “Becoming Your Child’s Best Advocate” and “21st Century Learning Skills: What They Are and Why They Are Important.”

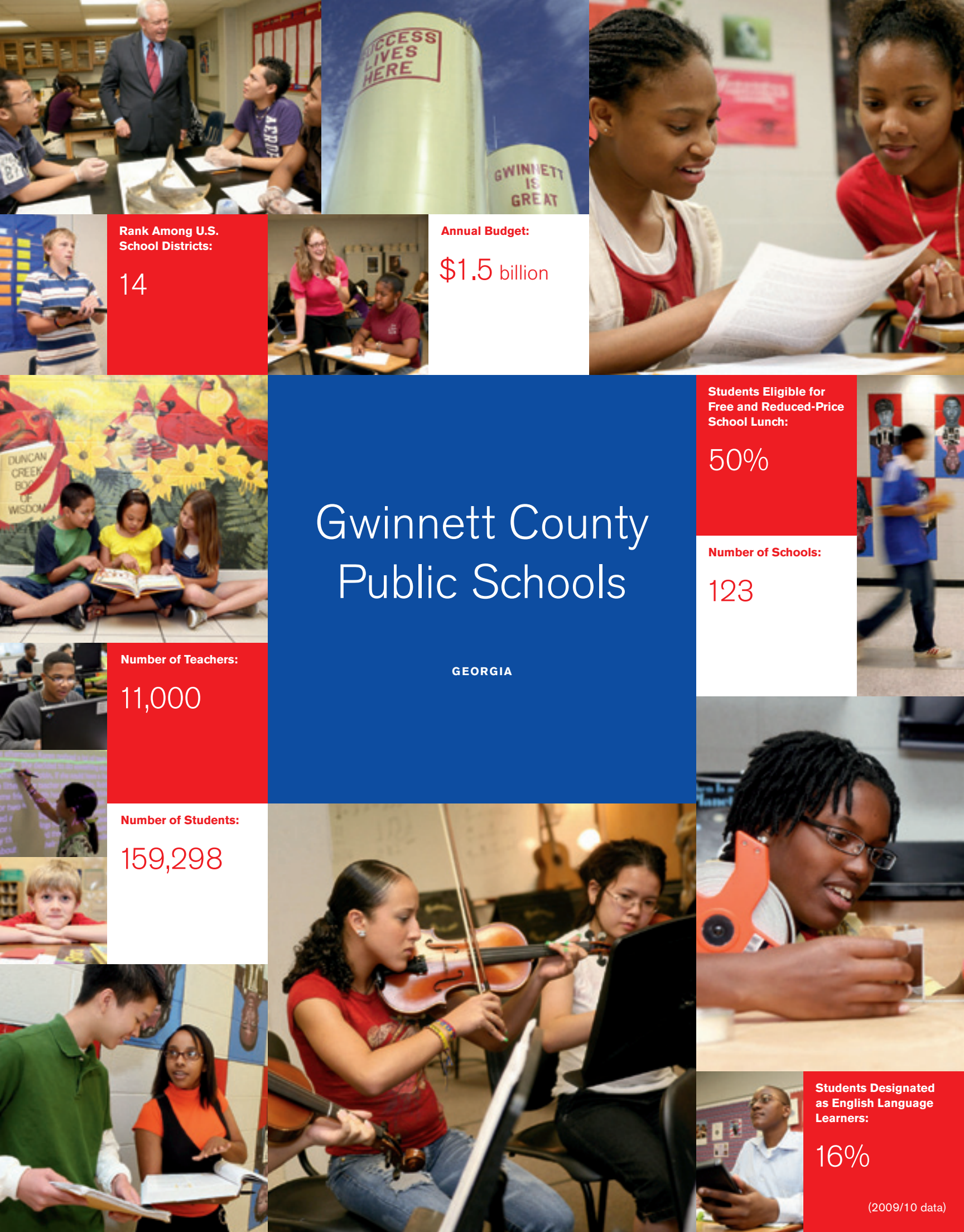
Early indicators suggest that participation in parent-teacher conferences, as well as gains in student achievement, have increased in schools where more parents are participating in the program.

In his drive to improve Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Gorman has formed a connection with both school

staff and members of the community, while at the same time not hesitating to move strong leaders where they can be most effective—and removing administrators when they’re not. Student growth in the Achievement Zone and in the Strategic Staffing schools demonstrates that his approach is working.

“We don’t want our adults to be completely uncomfortable,” he says. “But we want what’s best for kids.”





Gwinnett County Public Schools

GEORGIA

Rank Among U.S. School Districts:

14

Annual Budget:

\$1.5 billion

Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch:

50%

Number of Schools:

123

Number of Teachers:

11,000

Number of Students:

159,298

Students Designated as English Language Learners:

16%

(2009/10 data)

2010
BROAD PRIZE
WINNER

GATHERED ON THE RUG

in front of Tonee Cunningham’s white rocking chair, about 30 second-graders examine two books she holds up. Comparing and contrasting each book, one fiction and the other non-fiction, the mostly Hispanic class here at Meadowcreek Elementary School almost concludes that only non-fiction books have tables of contents.

But Cunningham knows that the eager-looking girl in the blue and purple outfit isn’t satisfied with that answer.

“Do you concur?” the teacher asks, leaning forward and looking her pupil straight in the eye.

“I do not concur because some fiction books have a table of contents because they are chapter books,” the girl answers.



Expecting all students, including second-graders, to engage in such high levels of thinking and conversation is what has helped improve performance in recent years in Georgia’s Meadowcreek Elementary, where more than 90 percent of the students are poor, 69 percent are Hispanic, and 19 percent are African-American.

This school’s academic growth is representative of Gwinnett County Public Schools’ strong levels

Higher standards and higher formal academic expectations than those of the Georgia Department of Education, has enabled Gwinnett County, a back-to-back finalist for the 2009 and 2010 Broad Prize, to narrow achievement gaps.

of district-wide improvement. Twenty-five miles outside Atlanta, with 123 schools, and 159,000 students (and still growing), the Gwinnett County school system is the largest in Georgia, and a beacon of academic improvement.

Long performing better than state averages, Gwinnett County has maintained high levels of academic achievement, even though a greater proportion of the district’s students come from poor families.

Since 2005, the percentage of students in the district who are Hispanic has grown from 17 to 25 percent in 2010, and African-American students now represent 27 percent of the population, up from 23 percent in 2005. Yet also over that time, the achievement gap in reading

between Hispanic and white elementary school students dropped from 19 percentage points in 2006 to 9 in 2009. In middle school, the gap between low-income and non-low-income students in math similarly fell from 21 to 13 percentage points between 2007 and 2009.

“For us to really make the changes, we needed instruction to become the number-one priority,” says Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks, who has led the system since 1996—

making him the longest serving current superintendent of a large urban district in the country—and is credited with guiding the district from being good to even better.

Wilbanks is supported by a five-member school board whose newest

member has already been in place for five years. Staff at all levels of the district—from top central office personnel to support staff—credit the stability of the school board and the superintendent’s leadership as among the reasons schools here are successful.

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“We are taking that foundation from the state and building our house above that,” says Dale Robbins, the district’s associate superintendent for teaching and learning support.



Implementing more rigorous standards in the classroom means that even the verbs Gwinnett County uses in its own curriculum are stronger than those used by the state, says Director of Science Mary Elizabeth Davis. For example, if the state expects sixth-graders to “explore integers,” then Gwinnett County expects them to go further to “apply integers to solve problems.”

Similarly, Gwinnett County’s district-wide requirement that eighth-graders take algebra was phased in well before the state’s deadline, while the “technical” courses, which relegated lower-performing students to less rigorous expectations, were phased out ahead of the state’s schedule of discontinuing the “technical” diploma track.

“Kids can’t achieve at grade level if they’re not taught at grade level,” says Jonathan Patterson, the principal at Norcross High School. With a 60 percent minority student population and more than half its students qualifying for subsidized meals, Norcross High was one of the first schools in the district to grow more diverse. Today, it not only exemplifies the demographic shifts that have occurred across the county but also serves as an example of leaders’ belief that students will meet and exceed the district’s standards, regardless of their family background.

“We’re a Title I school and an IB school. I love that,” says Assistant Principal Christine Dailey, referring to the school’s International Baccalaureate program. Since 2004, the number of Norcross High students taking an Advanced Placement exam—a major emphasis for the entire district—has climbed from 10 percent to more than 24 percent. And the percent

of 11th- and 12th-graders taking IB exams has doubled from 6 percent to 13 percent.

The district has taken an aggressive approach to enrolling more students—especially low-income students—in AP courses, which are widely available at every high school in the district. District-wide, the percentage of students taking AP courses has climbed from 21 percent in 2006 to 28 percent in 2009, with the growth driven by additional enrollment of Hispanic and African-American students. School administrators evaluate students’ test scores as they complete eighth grade to identify those who have a chance of succeeding, even if they don’t fit the traditional profile of an AP student.

Carlos, a 10th-grader at Berkmar High School, says he never expected to take AP courses in high school. Now in an AP history class, he has plans to take more, and even tries to explain the benefits of AP classes to his friends.

“They told me that I know stuff,” he says about his teachers. “Every day, it’s something new.”

Parents in Gwinnett also acknowledge that their children are encouraged to perform above the minimum level.

“I think they capture a lot of students who wouldn’t think about going after the stronger rigor,” says Julia Hall, who has one child at Chattahoochee Elementary School and another at Duluth Middle.



Even if students are not in advanced classes, evidence exists that they are exposed to rigorous, engaging material. Daily learning expectations or “essential questions” are typically posted on classroom walls, and students are made aware of the district standards that they are working to master.

Schools in the district also use a daily 45-minute time period called “Continuous Quality Improvement” to give students struggling with certain district standards additional, targeted instruction. At the same time, students who are exceeding expectations are given enrichment opportunities to go even further.

At Duluth Middle, for example, reading teacher Val Mickish spends the period working with the entire class, then with small groups and one-on-one with students who are lacking some specific reading skills that could improve their scores on state tests.

“I truly believe that this portion of the day is extremely useful for differentiation,” she says, adding that she thinks the introduction of the daily 45-minute targeted period in 2003 has helped to narrow achievement gaps between English language learners and those proficient in English and between poor and advantaged students.

DEVELOPING STRONG LEADERS

The need to continue developing school leaders who can carry out these and other components of the district’s ambitious mission led to the creation in 2007 of the “Quality-Plus Leader Academy,” a course for aspiring principals and assistant principals that runs

over a period of 12 months. In Gwinnett, the task of preparing future administrators is compounded by the fact that enrollment has continued to grow by a few thousand students each year, and officials don’t expect to stop building new schools anytime soon.

Often taught by Superintendent Wilbanks himself and other senior district administrators, the program covers curriculum and instruction issues, budgeting and finance, and community and public relations.

Donna Bishop, the principal at Cooper Elementary School, came to Gwinnett County Public Schools from another Georgia district. Although she already had experience as a principal, she still participated in the academy.

“You never get to a point when you stop needing to grow,” she says, adding that she still has a mentor she meets with monthly.

REWARDING RESULTS

The “Results-Based Evaluation System,” the district’s own accountability system, measures school performance, while each school’s local school improvement plan—a detailed five-year plan developed with teacher, parent and community input—focuses on areas, usually related to student achievement, that need improvement. Finally, the “Weighted School Assessment” is a 100-point school-wide evaluation that tracks student performance indicators, but also gives value to local school improvement plan goals, school management issues, and “customer” (parent) satisfaction.



Based on enrollment, each Gwinnett school is allotted a certain number of points to hire teachers and administrators. In 2006, the district established an incentive system in which schools with high Weighted School Assessment scores can earn an additional “point,” which can be used to hire another teacher.

whether they have the materials they need to do their jobs and meet individual student needs.

Gwinnett County has consistently carried a AAA bond rating from both Moody’s Investors Service and Standard & Poor’s. For 22 years in a row, the district has received the “Certificate of Excellence in Financial Reporting” from the national Association of School Business Officials.

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As the use of data to improve instruction has become ingrained across Gwinnett schools, principals say teachers have grown more comfortable with “facing the brutal facts” that their own students might not be meeting expectations.

Whether it’s financial reports or student test scores, Gwinnett consistently strives to exceed expectations. And their results show that they ask the same of their students.

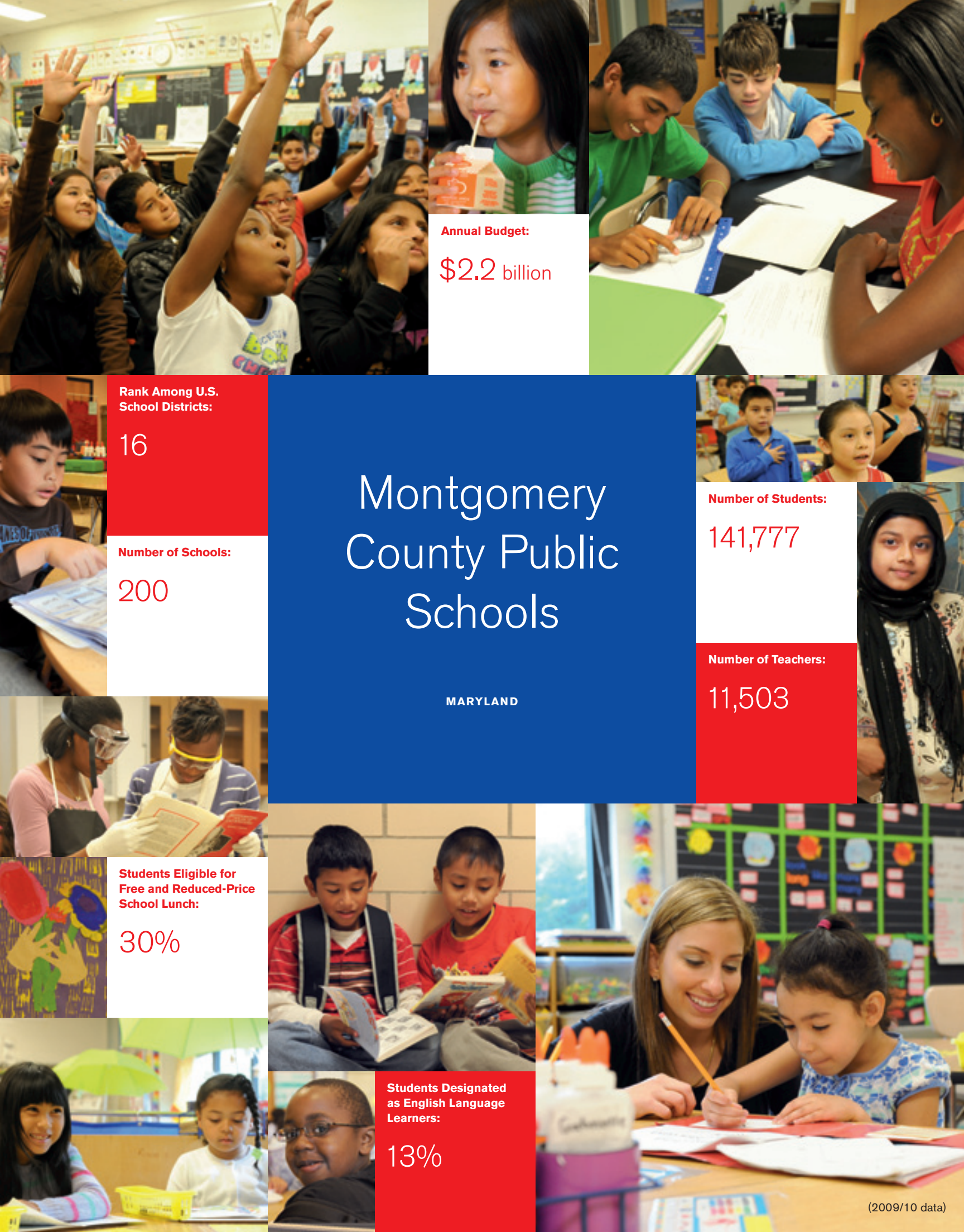
“Teachers are more comfortable talking about the data, and whose scores are whose,” says Simpson Elementary Principal Bron Gayna Schmit, who attributed this shift to Superintendent Wilbanks’ honesty with the public about student performance district-wide.

“For me, the bar just keeps moving higher,” says Bishop, the Cooper Elementary principal. “You use the data and you try to keep increasing the learning.”



CAREFUL FINANCIAL PLANNING

Gwinnett County Public Schools manages its financial resources with the same careful and systematic attention that it gives to improving instruction. And central office staff play a customer service role to keep school principals and teachers from worrying about



RYAN REARDON, A FOURTH-GRADE TEACHER
at Broad Acres Elementary School in Silver Spring, Md., is winding down an 80-minute block of math instruction. The students, most of them Hispanic, gather up their books and backpacks and get ready for the next class. Among them are two third-grade boys who, teachers decided, were ready for fourth-grade work.

Several miles northwest, in the Germantown area of Montgomery County, eighth-graders at Martin Luther King Middle School who pass an advanced English class will start high school this fall with at least one credit toward graduation.

And at Highland Elementary School, which six years ago was in “corrective action” for consistently low performance under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, a class of fifth-graders is working on perimeter word problems—part of the district’s sixth-grade math curriculum.



These aren't isolated examples of special arrangements that have been made by Montgomery County Public Schools to accommodate a handful of super smart children. Across the district, students at all academic levels are given a variety of advanced learning opportunities, encouraged to pursue them, and supported throughout the process.

"If students are ready to access higher level curriculum, why are we going to deny them the best?" asks Marc Cohen, the principal at Martin Luther King Middle School.

This philosophy is having a trickle-up effect in the higher grades and is an indicator of why this 142,000-student district adjacent to Washington, D.C.—with 30 percent of its students from poor families and more than 60 percent of its students non-white—is a first-time finalist for The Broad Prize.

One Montgomery County high school doesn't even offer basic ninth-grade English classes anymore because all incoming freshman are taking either honors or Advanced Placement English. Carole Goodman, the principal of James Hubert Blake High School, also in Silver Spring, said she similarly has decreased the number of algebra classes offered at her school from 11 to six, because so many students are completing algebra in middle school and going right into geometry in the ninth grade.

"The feeder schools are doing a better job of preparing kids," says Goodman.

Montgomery County's attention to raising performance, particularly among minorities, has resulted in significant drops in achievement gaps since 2006. For example, among elementary school students, the gap in reading between Hispanic and white students dropped from 21 percentage points in 2006 to 12 percentage points in 2009—2 points smaller than the gap statewide. At the middle school level, the gap between African-American and white students has almost been cut in half over that time period, from 29 to 15 percentage points—3 points smaller than the gap statewide. Gaps in mathematics are also shrinking.

BACK-MAPPING AND A BUSINESSMAN'S APPROACH TO SUCCESS

As superintendent of the district since 1999, Jerry D. Weast's vision doesn't stop with preparing students for college. He wants to make sure they earn a college degree.

To put that ambitious goal into action, district leaders tapped one of the best sources available to prepare students for college-level work—Advanced Placement courses—and then "back-mapped" those higher level learning expectations into the lower grades. So now, for example, if AP U.S. history students in high school face a document-based essay question in which they analyze a variety of documents and weigh evidence to write about a period of history, then fifth-graders might expect a similar task.

"We've heard teachers say, 'I didn't know my kids could do that,'" says Erick Lang, the district's associate superintendent for curriculum and instructional programs.

Students in the district also outperform the rest of the state, the data show. In 2009, a higher percentage of Montgomery County students—at all levels—scored proficient or above on state reading tests than in the state as a whole. The same pattern holds for performance in math, with African-American and Hispanic students also scoring higher than those subgroups state-wide.

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EVERY STUDENT CAN ACHIEVE AT HIGH LEVELS

The district's journey toward identifying ways to help more students perform at high levels has resulted in a clear, easy-to-communicate district-wide guidepost called the "Seven Keys to College Readiness"—specific academic targets for all students to meet from K-12. Extending beyond what Maryland requires, these higher expectations were put in place during a period in which the numbers of poor and minority students in the district were dramatically growing.

"We were a suburban community that has become very urban," Weast says.

And in no place was that demographic shift more obvious than in what the district has labeled its "red zone," a cluster of schools that are concentrated along the district's eastern border with Prince George's County and extends north into the central part of the district. In "red zone" schools, 80 percent of the students are poor, and 80 percent are minorities. In the late '90s, student performance in these schools was dismal.

When Jody Leleck became principal of Broad Acres Elementary, a school she calls "the reddest of the red," she found a staff that didn't believe students could achieve at high levels.

"There was an expectation that we were doing the best we could with the students we had," she says, but adds that part of the problem was that so little attention was being focused on quality instruction. "When I looked at the time spent on reading and math, it was pretty appalling."

Like treating a very ill patient, district leaders prescribed specific remedies for zone schools that included lowering class sizes by re-opening nearby shuttered schools and providing intense, data-driven professional development for principals and teachers. Schools across the rest of the county—the "green zone"—didn't lose anything when surplus resources were provided to the needier schools—and Weast and his team worked to get buy-in from the community for their effort to raise the performance of red schools.

District leaders initially concentrated their efforts on improving college readiness at the high school level and expanding pre-K and full-day kindergarten



in elementary schools, which led to better reading skills in the early grades. Then in 2005, they shifted reforms to the middle school level. Middle school teachers received training in how to deliver more rigorous instruction, how to work with kids of this age, how to make the curriculum provocative and engaging, and how to employ “equitable calling practices” to make sure every student is being asked to participate in class.

In 2009, a higher percentage of Montgomery County students—at all levels—scored proficient or above on state reading tests than in the state as a whole.

Once district leaders made it clear that improving performance among poor students was a primary goal, they also moved in 2005 to address whether students of color had equal access to new district-wide higher-level learning opportunities that had been created across the county.

Deputy Superintendent Frieda K. Lacey’s concerns began when she saw low PSAT participation rates among Hispanic and African-American students. That spread to what Superintendent Weast and others call “courageous conversations” about whether students of color were being sufficiently encouraged to take higher-level courses, and to efforts to improve teachers’ comfort level with diversity.

Sohee Cho, who teaches algebra to seventh- and eighth-graders at Martin Luther King Middle School, spends a lot of time on her knees in the classroom, in front of students’ desks, looking them in the eye and making sure they understand the concepts she’s teaching. Working in small groups, students use graphing calculators to solve equations with exponential functions.

“It’s my favorite class,” says an eighth-grade girl with glasses, long wavy hair and a wide smile. “I thought it was going to be a lot harder than it is.”

Four years ago at Martin Luther King Middle, 32 percent of students were taking algebra or a higher-level math class. That figure has grown to 80 percent, says Principal Cohen.

AN UNEXPECTED PARTNERSHIP

Many academic improvements seen across the district, however, would likely have stalled if it had not been for a key—yet unexpected—partner: the unions.

As strong forces behind wanting to improve teacher quality and student performance in the district, the Montgomery County Education Association and the Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals made a bold decision to abandon traditional collective bargaining—and oppositional relationships. The shift occurred after Weast arrived in 1999, and today, the unions are involved at the outset of every major reform initiative, including crafting the budget each year.



Supporting Services Professionals, an affiliate of Service Employees International Union, is also at the table with the unions representing teachers and administrators.

“It’s important for [non-certified staff] to understand their link to student achievement,” says Merle Cuttitta, the president of SEIU, Local 500.

and the unions were instrumental in getting teachers to commit to working there for at least three years.

“We saw growth in just four years. And it has been sustained, and growing,” says Jennifer Lowndes, who worked at the school until 2005 and is now an instructional specialist at the central office.

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As the Montgomery County district continues to outperform other Maryland districts in many categories, the district’s success points to the effectiveness of targeting additional resources to struggling schools and building support for those reforms among staff members and the community.












As Lowndes says, “It was all about getting the right people on the bus.”



Together, Weast’s administration and union representatives designed a teacher evaluation and professional growth system in 2000. And they brought in “Peer Assistance and Review” which originated in Ohio and functions as a support structure to help struggling employees improve.

When teachers or other employees are referred to Peer Assistance and Review, they are assigned consulting teachers who coach them toward improvement, and many district employees say it is viewed as effective and positive.

Above all, the union partners say their goal has been to improve low-performing schools. For example, at Broad Acres Elementary, teachers receive additional pay for staying late on Wednesday nights for common planning,



Number of Schools

41

Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch:

75%

Rank Among U.S. School Districts:

144

Annual Budget:

\$275 million

Number of Teachers:

2,493

Number of Students:

41,357

Students Designated as English Language Learners:

23%

Socorro Independent School District

TEXAS

(2009/10 data)

GRABBING POSTER BOARD AND MARKERS, groups of students in Betty Henderson’s 10th-grade classroom at Socorro High School begin illustrating what they imagine might happen at the conclusion of a tale of a man seeking a love potion for his wife.

After reviewing an open-ended passage, one group comes up with a happily-ever-after ending. Another has the man driving his car off a cliff. In both cases, the assignment gives students practice in making inferences and predictions based on text—a skill that school administrators here determined was rather weak among students.

Socorro Independent School District

21



But Henderson is not an English teacher. She teaches biology. And this is not an English class. This brief, 30-minute period, sandwiched between students’ other classes, is called the “Academic Reinforcement Mentoring Initiative.”

Launched in 2008, this initiative is in place today at all middle and high schools in the Socorro Independent School District, part of the El Paso, Texas metro area. It creates time in the regular school day for students to work with a teacher they don’t already have to master parts of the state standards in which they need help.

With teachers reinforcing core content they don’t normally teach, it is clear to students that everyone supports the curriculum and that student success is the goal. And with a smaller group of students, these teacher-mentors are also responsible for monitoring data on whether students might be slipping below grade level or are not earning credits they need for graduation.

“If you don’t really understand something, and they go over it in class, then you’re like, ‘Oh, I get it,’ says 10th-grader Miguel about the extra time with his teacher-mentor.

This initiative is part of Socorro’s emphasis on managing data and using it to improve instruction and learning, giving at-risk students additional opportunities to catch up. Socorro tracks at-risk students through the at-risk student management system or “ARMS,” an online database created

in 2005 that follows students struggling academically and measures the effectiveness of various interventions used to address their needs.

The redesign of the school into eight career-focused “academies,” she says, helped instill a “student-centered” focus and gave teachers a better way of tracking the progress and targeting the needs of 2,700 students.

The initiative illustrates district leaders’ resolve toward raising achievement levels, and exemplifies why Socorro has been chosen as a finalist for The Broad Prize two years in a row. The 93 percent Hispanic district posted higher scores on both state reading and math tests among its Hispanic students than the state’s Hispanic students in 2009. For example, 90 percent of Hispanic middle-schoolers tested proficient in reading compared to 87 percent of their peers state-wide. And schools have seen a steady climb in the percentages of students who are reaching the “commended” level on Texas state math tests, which is a step above meeting the standard. Between 2005 and 2009, the percentage of middle-school students reaching the highest achievement level increased 4 percentage points each year, on average.

In the 2005-06 school year, five schools did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind law, and four schools were in various stages of school improvement under NCLB. However, three years later, by 2008-09, all district schools met AYP.

These accomplishments are especially meaningful at Socorro High School, which had never made AYP. That finally changed in 2007-08. Angelica Ramsey, who served as an assistant principal at Socorro High and is now a principal at a neighboring high school, was there throughout the changes.

“There was no sense of community,” says Ramsey. The redesign of the school into eight career-focused “academies,” she says, helped instill a “student-centered” focus and gave teachers a better way of tracking the progress and targeting the needs of 2,700 students.

While all high schools in the district offer academies, which are similar to magnet programs, Socorro is the only high school where all students are part of an academy.

The academies, which include preparation for careers in education and health professions, align with higher education requirements, and serve to open students’ eyes to their options after high school.

Working carefully to roll up their fire hoses into perfectly straight coils, boys from multiple grade levels in a fire science technology class, for example, can go straight from high school into a community college with prerequisite credits for a firefighter certification.

Of course many of these students may not decide to become firefighters, but regardless, the district expects them to have a plan for next steps upon graduation and to research post-secondary institutions that would be a good match for their future goals. While the Academic Reinforcement Mentoring Initiative’s primary purpose is to help all students master state standards, the ultimate goal, Ramsey says, is much larger.

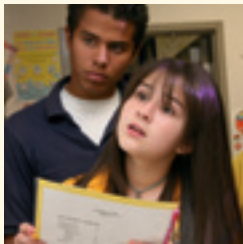
“We don’t just want them to pass a test,” she says. “We want them to go to college.”

IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT K-12 EDUCATION

In addition to pushing for commended-level test scores, the district has also raised expectations for students by offering advanced learning opportunities. In 2006, pre-Advanced Placement courses were pushed down to the middle schools, giving students a taste of more rigorous material through “pre-AP” coursework.

Shoving their desks against the walls in Alfredo Magallanes’ eighth-grade classroom at John Drugan School, the students in his pre-AP math class get ready to rehearse a rap and skit they have prepared to express what they have learned this year. Their message: describing how trigonometry can be used to determine the altitude of a rocket.

“It really surprises me that I’m [working] at a high school level,” says Ilse, an eighth-grader who plans to attend Socorro’s Mission Early College High School, where students can simultaneously finish high school and earn an associate’s degree.



Socorro students take benchmark tests every three weeks, which means teachers get frequent predictive signals of how their students will do on state assessments and what areas need strengthening. “Bell ringer” questions are often used to kick off classes as a way to review or re-teach specific material without actually interrupting the flow of instruction for the day.

“Schools saw the phenomenal gains,” says Lopez. “Success breeds success.”

Now, officials say, school staff are more skilled at developing solutions for students based on data—like through the at-risk student management system—even if they call for strategies that run counter to education norms.

For example, despite Socorro High’s dedication to its career academy structure, administrators opted to keep all 10th-grade math classes grouped in a single hallway so teachers can better collaborate with each other.

“Our test scores were beyond low,” says Angelica Ramsey, Socorro High’s former assistant principal, adding that the arrangement is not temporary. “We won’t change because it’s working.”

And at Campestre Elementary, on the border of Juarez, Mexico, Principal Isabel Andresen asked third-grade teacher Elias Rangel shortly before the start of the 2008-09 school year if he would stay with his class as they progressed to fourth grade. His students had an 84 percent passing rate on state tests and she wanted to “provide continuity to that group of bilingual students.” After that first year of looping, Rangel’s students achieved a 92 percent passing rate.

“Accountability talks,” initiated under former Superintendent Sylvia P. Atkinson, became a routine practice for teachers and administrators in every school to drive home the need to analyze and use data daily to make better instructional decisions.

BOOSTING ACHIEVEMENT WITH DATA-DRIVEN INSTRUCTION

Five years ago, only pockets of teachers in Socorro used data to guide their instruction, pointing to a district-wide need to raise awareness about the value of data, says Lopez, the assistant superintendent. “Accountability talks,” initiated under former Superintendent Sylvia P. Atkinson, became a routine practice for teachers and administrators in every school to drive home the need to analyze and use data daily to make better instructional decisions.

This past school year, he looped again to fifth grade, continuing Andresen’s frequent practice of keeping teachers and students together if the match leads to academic success.

This practice, Ramsey adds, has also contributed to a higher level of trust between teachers and administrators. And having an administrator in the classroom is so routine that students don’t even look up when the door opens.

This level of collaboration and support is also meant not only to make sure students and teachers are on track, but also to sharpen administrators’ skills in observing classrooms.

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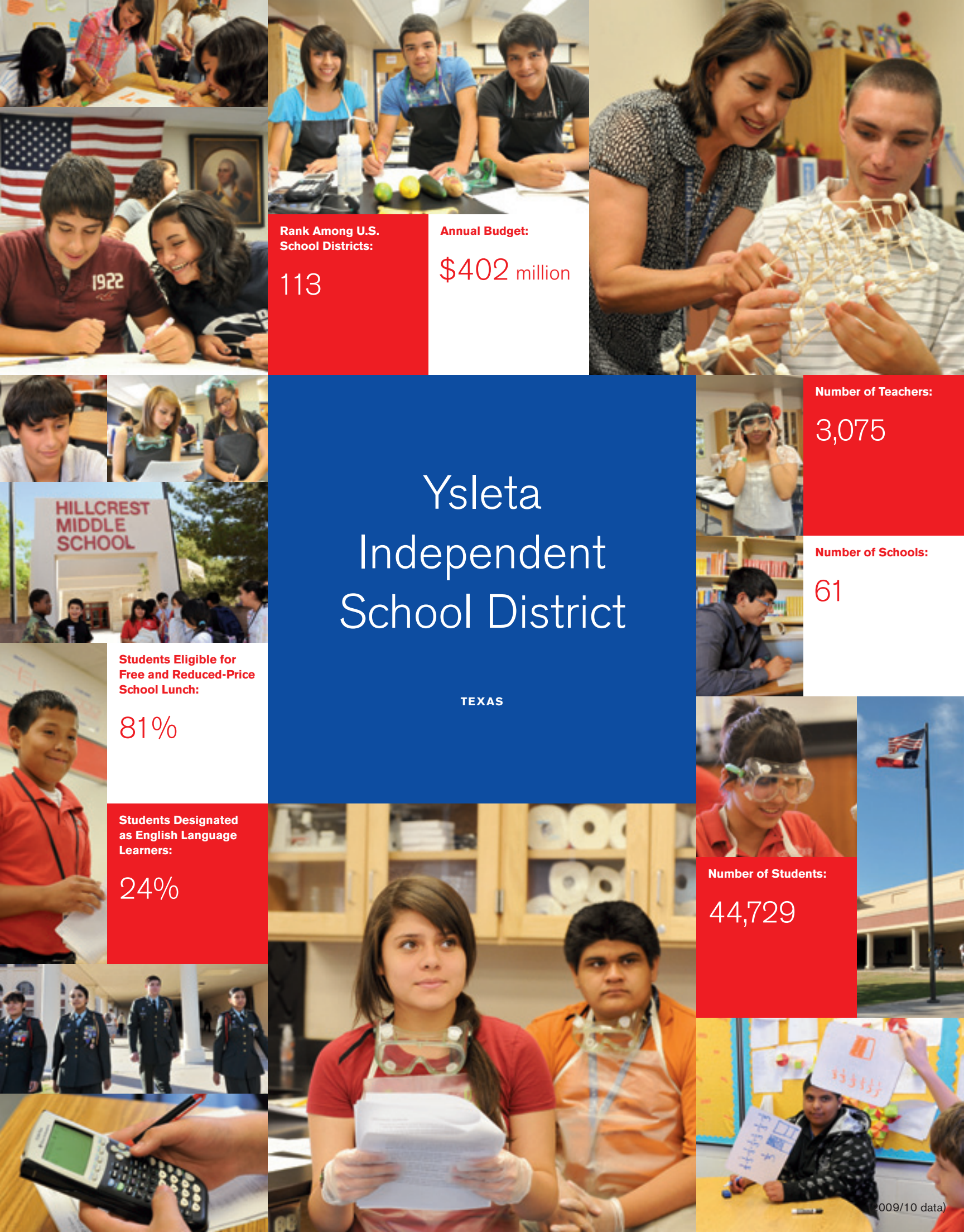
Says Ramsey, “It’s made a tremendous difference.”



EVERYONE WORKS IN THE CLASSROOM

The Socorro district’s emphasis on more effective instruction has also been reinforced by its expectation that administrators and specialists spend more time in the classroom—both to model lessons and provide teachers with feedback.

During her first three years as a teacher, Ramsey says she only saw an administrator in her classroom during her evaluation. Now, she says, the district has created “a culture of walkthroughs.” As an assistant principal at Socorro High, she spent half her time in classrooms.



Rank Among U.S.
School Districts:

113

Annual Budget:

\$402 million

Ysleta Independent School District

TEXAS

Students Eligible for
Free and Reduced-Price
School Lunch:

81%

Students Designated
as English Language
Learners:

24%

Number of Teachers:

3,075

Number of Schools:

61

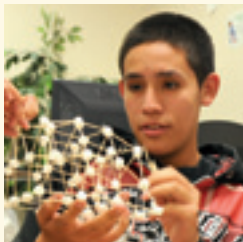
Number of Students:

44,729

AFTER HIS FIRST TWO YEARS

of high school, Robert Carbajal still didn't have much confidence in where his education was taking him.

"My freshman and sophomore year, I was nobody," says the tall young man with thick black hair, being rather hard on himself. But that was before he became part of the Advancement Via Individual Determination—or AVID—program at Del Valle High School, in the Ysleta Independent School District on the Texas-Mexico border.



In the course, students carry out community service projects, conduct research, make presentations, and develop skills that translate to academic growth. When Robert graduated in June, he had taken a challenging science class taught in Spanish, earned dual credit from a community college, and won a third-place award in a state competition for web design.

Between 2008 and 2009, the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher on state math tests increased from 79 to 83 in the middle grades, and from 60 to 67 in high school. Scores have also edged up in reading.

AVID, he says, “has taught me how to get into a university, how to take better notes, and what it’s going to be like in the future.”

But putting AVID in every high school and middle school in 2004 was only one of several steps the Ysleta district—a first-time finalist for The Broad Prize—has taken to motivate students like Robert, keep them engaged and increase student performance in the district where 91 percent of its students are Hispanic and 81 percent receive subsidized lunches.

As a result, the district’s attention to raising achievement is especially notable in the higher grades. Between 2008 and 2009, the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher on state math tests increased from 79 to 83 in the middle grades, and from 60 to 67 in high school. Scores have also edged up in reading.

The gap in reading and math achievement between low-income and non-low-income students is also narrowing, particularly at the high school level. Between 2008 and 2009, the gap in reading scores between Ysleta high school students from low-income families and their advantaged peers statewide dropped from 12 to 9 percentage points, and from 9 to 6 percentage points in middle school math.

To put the goal of college in front of students early on, starting in the eighth grade, all students must take the PSAT, which is provided at the district’s expense. Students are also required to have a personal graduation plan and fill out a college application, regardless of their future intentions.

“When kids find things relevant, they just take off,” Ricardo Lopez, former principal at Del Valle High School and now an area associate superintendent, says about the district’s multiple strategies to keep students focused on academic goals after graduation. “All of a sudden, high school becomes purposeful.”

Internships, job shadowing and career-focused academies are other opportunities Ysleta students have to connect their class work to the real world.

To catch students still struggling to graduate, the district moved in 2007 to create the cleverly named “No Senior Left Behind” promise, through which 12th-graders’ progress is monitored on a weekly basis. If red flags—such as a failing grade, increased absences or a loss of interest in class—show up,



senior counselors and assistant principals are quick to respond with a range of interventions like involving the student’s parents and providing tutoring to ensure that students are passing state exams and earning the credits they need.

The model has been successful, says Eileen Wade, the executive director of secondary education. The number of students not graduating, she says, has plummeted from 559 in 2007 to 173 in 2009, making Ysleta’s 73-percent graduation rate one of the top in The Broad Prize-eligible districts.

PHILOSOPHIES FOR SUCCESS

Sitting in the dry, arid El Paso region, the Ysleta district set out on this new academic course about six years ago, borrowing a philosophy from an unlikely source: in the far away, lush Pacific Northwest, from enthusiastic, fish-tossing salesmen at the famous Seattle Pike Place Farmer’s Market.

Originally intended for the workplace, the “fish!” philosophy—play, make their day, be there and choose your attitude—is easily applied in the education field because of its simple and straightforward message for both teachers and students. Under the leadership of former Superintendent Hector Montenegro, the theory caught on quickly and continues to drive improvement efforts across the district.

Montenegro also introduced district staff to author Alan M. Blankstein’s theory of “Failure is Not An

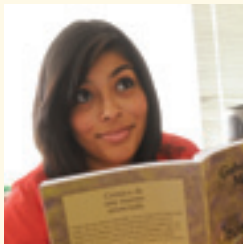
Option.” Feeling a greater sense of urgency to get their students ready for careers in this global economy, teachers and principals in Ysleta schools began to speak a common language about raising student performance and bought into the concept of “professional learning communities”—a formal structure for teacher and administrators to learn from each other.

The development of a new “scope and sequence” document, a process that involved hundreds of teachers, also provided teachers with more structure and a recommended timeline for teaching the curriculum.

“All of a sudden, we got teachers talking about what they were teaching,” says Richard E. Bentley, a former area associate superintendent with the district, now superintendent of Norfolk Public Schools in Virginia.

Internships, job shadowing and career-focused academies are other opportunities Ysleta students have to connect their class work to the real world.

At R.E.L. Washington Elementary, Principal Pauline Muela says her teachers are now more cognizant of “where we are as a campus and where we need to go.” Student work is displayed prominently throughout the school—not just for visual effect—but also to inform teachers’ common planning sessions.



In the classroom, students have notebooks designed with folding pages to make it easier to review critical material, and Muela says her goal is to replace all worksheets with hands-on learning activities. A large display along one hallway at R.E.L Washington poses questions about the Gulf Coast oil spill, while students in Cathy Collins’ fourth-grade class are working in pairs to craft multimedia public service announcements on topics such as conservation and recycling.

To encourage parents to become engaged as well, the district designed PowerParent, an interface on DataMart that gives parents the ability to monitor how their children are doing in each class.

“I want them to love school, to love learning,” Collins says.

The drive to make learning more project-oriented and engaging has also resulted in higher scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills at R.E.L Washington, a school that was already high achieving. Between 2006 and 2010, the percentage of third-graders at the school passing the state reading test has increased from 94 to 98 percent. In math, the percentage of third-graders passing climbed from 84 to more than 93 percent.

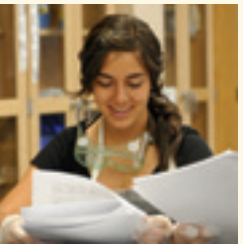
USING DATA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Teachers across the Ysleta district were also given the tools and training with which to better analyze student progress in meeting standards. DataMart, introduced five years ago, is an extensive, yet easy-to-navigate database developed by in-house technology experts. It allows Ysleta teachers, administrators and other district staff to view achievement, demographics, course-taking and attendance information across the district and down to the individual student level and use it to drive daily decisions that best serve students.

“We really study our data,” says Superintendent Michael Zolkoski, who was hired in 2009. “And our principals know how to use the data.”

The database provides teachers and administrators with immediate feedback on students’ progress, Muela says. “That has made a tremendous difference.”

Underscoring the district’s commitment to use the data in everyday decisions, each teacher received a laptop. To encourage parents to become engaged as well, the district designed PowerParent, an interface on DataMart that gives parents the ability to monitor how their children are doing in each class.



Becoming trilingual gives graduates an additional edge as they pursue college and careers beyond high school.

GIVING STUDENTS AN EDGE: BILINGUAL AND TRILINGUAL INSTRUCTION

With all of Ysleta’s efforts to better prepare their predominantly low-income, Hispanic students for the future, one notable program is the district’s dual-language course of study, in which students become fluent in both English and Spanish.

In a dual-language approach, students spend a portion of their day taught entirely in Spanish, and a portion entirely in English. Teachers don’t repeat lessons in the second language. This keeps students from tuning out until they hear their native language, says Pauline Dow, associate superintendent of academics.

“What we want is mental gymnastics,” she says.

The district maintains those same expectations through high school. In a 10th-grade science class at Del Valle High, Yvette Garcia and her students speak entirely in Spanish as they search for and examine the vital organs inside the fetal pigs they are dissecting. Extending dual language instruction into core courses through high school builds students’ fluency in academic language as well, not just conversational speech, says Lopez.

Ysleta students also have the opportunity to learn a third language—a commitment that is even included as part of the district’s vision statement.

“Ni Hao. Ni hao ma,” the eighth-graders at Alicia R. Chacon

International School say in Chinese, greeting visitors to their portable classroom with “Hello” and “How are you?” With international flags hanging from the ceiling in a sunny, open corridor, the school’s United Nations atmosphere is carried throughout the building. In addition to their Spanish and English classes, students at this magnet school can study Chinese, Japanese, German or Russian.

Becoming trilingual, leaders here say, gives graduates an additional edge as they pursue college and careers beyond high school.

It’s an advantage that even students like Vanessa — who is taking Japanese as her third language at Chacon International—have come to recognize.

“We have more opportunities when we leave here,” she says.



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The Broad Prize selection jury is comprised of nationally prominent individuals from business and industry, government and public service. The jury reviews the statistical data and site visit reports for each finalist district and chooses the winner of The Broad Prize.

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Former U.S. Secretary of Housing
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- James Hunt, Jr.**
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- Linda Jacobson, Project Journalist**
Linda Jacobson is a freelance education writer specializing in writing about early-childhood education policy. She has covered early-childhood education, state policy, teaching, parent involvement and after-school programs for Education Week, and was an education reporter for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Jacobson has also served as assistant director of the Education Writers Association.

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