

## **Continuous Improvement in Community District #2, New York City**

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### The Problem of Continuous Improvement in Public School Systems

Community School District #2, in New York City, has been engaged in a long-term process of system-wide instructional improvement, now in its eleventh year. This process involves, among other things, heavy investments in professional development for teachers and principals that are focused on introducing and supporting specific instructional practices in literacy and mathematics, coupled with system-level and school-level accountability processes designed to assure high quality instruction in all schools and classrooms. As this process has evolved, it has grown more extensive and complex, while at the same time maintaining its central focus on high quality instruction. In this respect, District #2 is an atypical public school system in the U.S.

Typically, local school systems do not engage in long-term improvement processes, much less processes that involve the depth, consistency, and instructional focus of District #2. In most local school systems, continuity stems from structures and routines for meeting the operating demands of keeping schools running-- staffing schools with teachers and principals, assuring that students have classrooms to go to, allocating budgets to schools, assuring that textbooks and instructional materials arrive in schools, transporting students to and from schools, and the like. Instructional improvement activities, if they occur at all, do not contribute to continuity. They typically take the form of special

'projects' designed to introduce teachers to new ways of teaching, new curriculum materials, and new ways of organizing classrooms and managing instruction. Completion of the "project" signals the end of that particular episode of improvement-- the "adoption" of a new curriculum or textbook series, for example. The next project is typically disconnected in purpose and time from the previous ones. These improvement projects typically involve groups of teachers and school district personnel performing routine functions such as screening and adopting new curriculum materials, organizing staff development workshops for teachers to introduce them to new materials and instructional practices, and, sometimes, monitoring whether the new materials and practices actually reach classrooms. Improvement projects typically have a short life-span, usually one academic year, and their focus tends to shift with changing district priorities, external pressures from the community and other levels of government, and instability in leadership. For most school systems, then, routine administrative functions provide continuity in the interactions between school staffs and central administration, and instructional improvement activities are layered into these routine functions through project-based activities that shift focus periodically to reflect external pressures.

District #2 presents a different model of the relationship between routine administrative functions and instructional improvement activities. The key feature of District #2 is that it reverses the usual relationship between routine functions and instructional improvement activities. The district's overall instructional improvement strategy drives and shapes the district's routine administrative functions, rather than vice versa. In our previous two papers, we have identified the key features of District #2's instructional improvement strategy and analyzed how this overall strategy adapts to the considerable variation among schools within the district in the type of students they serve and the particular problems they face in introducing new instructional practices. (Elmore and Burney 1996, 1998) These papers, however, presented the District #2 strategy in more or less static terms. That is, we tried to capture, describe, and analyze the range of

activities that the district uses to engage teachers, principals, and schools in influencing classroom practice. We tried to do so in a form that is amenable to use by other school districts, but we paid relatively little attention to how these processes have changed over time. In this paper, we attempt to portray a more dynamic view, focusing on how the district's strategy adapts and changes in response to new demands that emerge during the process of instructional improvement.

Hence, the subject of this paper is continuous improvement, by which we mean the adaptation, extension, and deepening of the district's instructional improvement strategy over time. Embedded in the term "continuous improvement" are several assumptions. The first, and most important, of these assumptions is that continuous improvement requires a district to have a well-worked out system-wide strategy for influencing classroom instruction. The key elements of the District #2 strategy, described in our earlier work, are (1) a focus on specific content areas, mainly literacy and mathematics, sustained over a long period of time; (2) heavy investments in multiple forms of professional development for teachers and principals, designed to provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in new forms of instructional practice in the content areas; (3) creation of strong professional networks among teachers and principals across schools, designed to reduce isolation among practitioners and to create a strong normative environment that supports and encourages deeper knowledge of what the district endorses as good instructional practice; (4) creation of an accountability process whereby principals are directly accountable for the quality of instruction in all the classrooms in their schools and teachers are accountable for learning and using good practice; and (5) creation of a process for negotiating and adapting district-level demands for accountability to differences among schools in the types of students they serve and the unique demands of individual schools and their communities. So the first assumption behind the idea of continuous improvement is that school districts actually have an overall strategy for influencing and shaping

instruction in schools-- an assumption that many, if not most, public school systems cannot currently meet.

A second key assumption behind continuous improvement is that the district has goals-- implicit or explicit-- against which to judge whether it is improving or not. These goals may change in important ways, as knowledge deepens and expands, but at any given time, the process of improvement is goal-driven. In recent decades, most schools and school systems have focused largely on “change,” not improvement. Change entails adopting some new practice or structure, which is presumptively “better” than some existing practice or structure-- a new curriculum, a new type of schedule, a new governance structure, usually designed to solve a short-term problem that the district or the school identifies as needing attention. As noted above, these changes often occur on a project basis-- committees of teachers, administrators, and community members working together to put a new structure or process in place. But the changes are usually not designed or evaluated in terms of their contribution to the improvement of instruction in classrooms and schools or to their impact on measured student performance. So the usual result of “change” is the accumulation of new practices and structures that are unrelated to existing practices and structures and that have no clear relationship to the overall performance of schools or the systems in which they operate. The structure of schools and school systems, then, becomes the accumulated residue of past attempts at change (few changes are even revoked), each a response to some previous problem, often long-forgotten and buried in the history of the organization. By contrast, improvement implies progress toward a goal, rather than change in response to a perceived problem. In District #2, improvement has meant progress toward the enactment of good instructional practice, and increasingly in the past few years, progress toward specific changes in student performance in core academic content areas.

A third key assumption behind continuous improvement is that the district has an institutional structure for monitoring performance and adjusting its overall strategy to new

information and deepening knowledge about progress toward its goals. Only in the past few years, with a shift toward more explicit state accountability systems based on student performance, have school districts begun to struggle with the problem of how to interpret and act on school-level data about student learning. In many instances, districts have begun to focus on mechanisms for assuring school-level accountability for performance, but these mechanisms, as yet anyway, seem to have little to do with instructional improvement, and more to do with meting out rewards and sanctions designed to incite some unspecified process of improvement in schools. By contrast, as we have noted earlier, the institutional structure in District #2 equates management with professional development and instructional improvement. Management in District #2 is instructional improvement, and vice versa. Line administrative relationships between district-level and school-level administrators, between principals and teachers, and between professional developers and schools embody an agreement that the purpose of the work is the improvement of instruction. More recently, as we shall see, this structure has begun to take more explicit account of student performance, and the use of information about student performance to shape the district's strategy of improvement.

Continuous improvement has a broader meaning in the literature on private sector management. The core idea is that private firms, working in a competitive environment with quickly changing environmental conditions, must develop internal processes for monitoring their performance relative to competitors, for seeking out and implementing state-of-the-art service and industrial processes, and for implementing these processes through improvement cycles. The faster the changes in the competitive environment, the faster and more efficient these internal improvement processes must become. (See, e.g., Deming 1986) In the private sector, then, continuous improvement takes its meaning mainly from a focus on improving the quality of services and products (hence, its close relationship to Total Quality Management) in response to external competitive pressures.

In public education, continuous improvement has a related, but somewhat different, meaning. Continuous improvement in public schools takes its point of departure less from a response to competitive pressures (although these pressures will probably become increasingly evident as states provide greater variety and choice among schools) and more from external pressures for accountability. Schools and school systems will begin to discover the demands of continuous improvement as they move into a period where state policy increasingly focuses on accountability for measurable student performance. These external pressures are analogous to, but not identical with, the competitive pressures operating on private firms. In the past, schools have not had to pay explicit attention to continuous improvement, because they have operated in environments in which they receive mixed and complex feedback about their performance from multiple sources. Pluralist political forces have often canceled each other out, leaving schools to do more or less what they choose to do. With mounting pressure for accountability for student performance, schools and school systems are receiving clearer signals about expectations from at least one key part of their environment. The schools and systems that are most likely to be successful in responding to external pressure for student performance are those that connect this external pressure to internal improvement processes. This paper provides a working model of what continuous improvement looks like in one high performance urban school system and, hence, some guidance about what it might look like in settings that are faced with deciding how they will respond to increasing pressure for student performance.

#### District #2's Theory of Action: From Instructional Quality to Student Performance

An important part of the District #2 story is that, while the district's instructional improvement strategy has lately begun to focus more explicitly on student performance, it did not begin that way. This is an important, if somewhat subtle, issue in understanding the context for continuous improvement in the district. In emerging standards-based accountability systems, one often hears the proposition that student performance standards,

and assessments aligned with those standards, will “drive” the improvement of instruction in schools. That is, making schools aware of student performance and setting clear expectations for what that performance should be, will result in schools doing whatever they have to do to move student learning in the direction of the standards. Whatever one might think about the merits of this theory of improvement, this is not the theory that captures what District #2 has actually done.

Initially, District #2’s strategy, or theory of action, was to focus primarily on improving the quality of instruction in classrooms and schools, not primarily on improving measured student performance. In the late 1980s, Anthony Alvarado-- until June of 1998 the district’s superintendent-- started the district’s improvement process with study groups, seminars, and professional development around the teaching of literacy-- reading and writing-- in district schools. Part of this early process was the search for exemplary models of instructional practice, among experts working in the field, professional developers, university faculty, and other schools. In the language of continuous improvement, this search would be called “benchmarking”; that is, identifying the leading edge of existing practice and bringing it into the organization. As the curriculum and pedagogy began to gel around the district’s literacy focus, professional developers, largely from outside the system, began to work directly with teachers in workshop settings and in classrooms and school-based discussions around classroom practice. Gradually, this staff development work became connected to a broader set of networking relationships among teachers and principals in the district and it became connected to the emerging accountability structure in which principals were expected by district administrators to be knowledgeable about good literacy practice, to participate with teachers in professional development activities designed to enact that practice, to model that practice themselves, to make judgments about the extent to which it was actually occurring in classrooms, to frame professional development strategies to extend the practice within their schools, and to take

responsibility for the enactment, or lack thereof, of good literacy practice in specific teachers' classrooms.

The entire process of extending and deepening literacy practice, as well as connecting it to an emerging accountability structure, was based on what one might call "implicit standards of practice." There were (increasingly clear) expectations about what good teaching and learning in literacy was supposed to look like. But these expectations were embedded in the professional development that teachers and principals received, in the school and classroom visits that district administrators made to schools, and in the growing professional community of teachers and principals across schools within the district. The district never had a "checklist" of practices to use in evaluating classrooms, although a strong normative structure of expectations for high quality practice emerged from the improvement process. The norms or implicit standards that emerged from this process did not deal explicitly with student performance, although a major feature of the norms was scrutiny of what kind of learning students were engaged in in the classroom and what specific work students were producing as evidence of their learning. Nor did the district attach explicit emphasis in its accountability structure to student performance on standardized achievement tests, although test scores in reading began to rise almost immediately and continued to do so with continued investments in professional development. Student performance standards, in others, were embedded in implicit standards of practice, if they existed at all. And quality of instructional practice had clear priority in teachers', principals', and district administrators' assessments of how well a given classroom or school was working.

About three years ago, the district's instructional improvement process began to shift discernibly toward a more explicit emphasis on student performance, and toward a more explicit discussion of standards-- both standards of practice and student performance standards. This shift was not away from the district's prior emphasis on implicit standards of practice, but an addition to it. Much of the discourse among district administrators,



principals, teachers, and professional developers still involves judgments about the quality of literacy, and since about 1995, mathematics, practice. But this discourse about the quality of practice is now joined to a more explicit discussion of standards.

Superintendent Alvarado was direct in stating his rationale for this shift. “I felt like we had just about reached the limit of where we could go with are previous focus. We were approaching a point where people were beginning to feel satisfied with the level of effort they had put into changing instruction and I felt we weren’t pushing hard enough on what students were actually learning and whether we were reaching the hardest-to-teach students.” So the shift from implicit standards of practice toward explicit standards, of both student performance and practice, was an intentional change, calculated to move schools in the district to what Alvarado saw as the next level of improvement.

We will return more explicitly to the way standards have been enacted in District #2. For now, the important point is that District #2’s theory of action-- its strategy for instructional improvement-- embodies a rather specific theory about the relationship between standards and improvement. To use a favorite phrase of Alvarado’s, explicit standards and standards about student performance, “grow out of the work.” For Alvarado, “the work” of the organization is fundamentally instructional practice in classrooms. Agreement about “the work”-- what it is, what good work looks like, who is responsible for making sure that it happens-- precedes and shapes explicit standards about good work and what constitutes acceptable student performance. Contrary to the prevailing theory of some practitioners of standards-based reform, in District #2’s theory of action, standards do not precede and shape the work in schools. If anything, at least in the initial stages of improvement, standards follow from the work, or at least the normative structure that grows out of the work guides teachers and principals toward an understanding of standards and how they might be used to influence the work.

The process of moving, over several years, from an instructional improvement strategy based on implicit standards of practice to one based more on explicit standards of

practice and student performance is, in itself, a case study of the district's approach to continuous improvement. The district formed an explicit strategy based on incorporating leading-edge literacy practice into classrooms using high levels of professional development, coupled with clear accountability for instructional quality. The goal, at least initially, was to improve instructional practice, on the expectation that if practice improved, so too would student learning, since good student work was embedded in implicit standards of practice. The strategy and the goal were integrated into an institutional structure that created a strong normative environment around literacy practice-- and later, mathematics practice-- a complex array of activities that connected professional development and accountability. When Alvarado observed that the strategy, goals, and structure were leaving certain central issues untreated-- most notably, instructional practice with the hardest-to-reach students-- he began to shift the strategy toward more explicit standards and toward greater emphasis on student performance.

Another important feature of District #2's approach to continuous improvement that has emerged in the past two or three years is changing expectations about the timing of improvement processes. Here again, Alvarado was explicit about his goals. "A major problem with public schools," he noted, "is that their work is driven by the school calendar. If we have a good idea, we usually spend a full school year developing it and planning how to get it going. Then we spend another year trying to get it into the schools. By the time we see any evidence of it in classrooms, two whole school years have passed, and students have advanced two grade levels. This is unacceptable. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing now, or at least as soon as we can do it reasonably well." So another of Alvarado's goals was to shorten the improvement cycle. Specifically, he sought to break the traditional connection between improvement cycles and the school calendar, bringing new ideas into practice within a given school year, rather than waiting for a new year to begin the next cycle. As the capacity of schools and school systems to improve

instructional practice increases, Alvarado believes, the time between the introduction of a new idea and its enactment in practice short become shorter.

The remainder of this paper will focus on how continuous improvement works in District #2, organized around three main areas: (1) the introduction of standards; (2) focus on low-performing students; and (3) the development of leadership. These three areas represent important modifications of the district's initial instructional improvement strategy, all undertaken in the last three or four years, all additions to the array of activities analyzed in our initial paper on district, and all illustrative of how the district engages in continuous improvement. The paper will also treat some lingering issues that might be the focus of future improvement efforts and summarizes some lessons that other districts might take away from District #2's experience.

#### The Advent of "Standards" in District #2

The introduction of standards to District #2 began, during the 1994-95 school year, in a manner consistent with other instructional improvement activities in the district. As noted above, work on standards stemmed from Alvarado's conviction that the district's improvement activities up to that point were reaching a plateau and needed additional focus on more concrete expectations for students, especially those who were not being reached effectively with current practice. Denise Levine, who was hired to lead the district's standards work, described the initial situation she confronted as less-than-receptive to the idea of standards. "For many of our principals and teachers, standards meant standardization" and "carried the idea holding kids accountable" in ways that they found inconsistent with their beliefs about good practice. An important event, in the 94-95 school year, according to Levine, was participation by a group of principals and teachers from the district in a San Diego workshop on standards, sponsored by the Alliance for Restructuring Schools, where Heidi Hayes-Jacobs discussed the importance of standards as a means for teachers' self-assessment of their work. At this point, Levine recalls, resistance to standards began to soften as participating teachers and principals began to see "standards as

being more about creating a professional conversation than about holding kids accountable.”

At about the same time, Alvarado brought the district into a working relationship with Lauren Resnick, who was beginning to construct the Institute for Learning-- a network of school district's engaged in large-scale improvement processes-- at the Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC), University of Pittsburgh. The district's relationship with LRDC had grown out of its participation in the Pew Network, another collection of districts engaged in large-scale improvement, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and connected with the New Standards Project, also funded in part by Pew, which was developing a system of performance standards with connected assessments, later to be called the New Standards Reference Examination. The Institute for Learning was founded on a set of Principles of Learning, developed by Resnick, which served as a basis for common work in the Institute around instructional improvement and guidance to schools and districts participating in the Institute. Hence, LRDC and the Institute brought to District #2 both a set of fully-developed performance standards coupled with an ambitious performance assessment (far more challenging than any test previously used to measure student learning in the district) and a set of Principles of Learning, consistent with the standards, that could be used as organizing ideas for further instructional improvement in the district. According to Levine, the Principles of Learning played an important tactical role in the early stages of standards work in the district. “The Principles of Learning were broad and ambitious, while some people saw the standards as potentially too constraining. People could buy into the Principles of Learning who would not, at least initially, buy into the standards.”

The tensions surrounding the introduction of standards into the district had their origins in earlier instructional improvement efforts. The early emphasis on implicit standards of practice, and on the development of norms of practice around professional development coupled with principal-centered accountability, had enabled schools to

approach instructional improvement in ways that were closely-tailored to their situations. While this approach led to an overall improvement in instructional quality and student performance, it left some issues, like the effectiveness of instructional practice for hard-to-reach students, in the background. When the idea of standards entered the picture, many teachers and principals, who thought they had done well under the earlier approach, were suspicious of the idea that their work would be constrained by more explicit standards of practice and performance. The challenge to Levine and others in the district was how to make the idea of standards compatible with earlier practice, but also to introduce a more explicit discussion about expectations for practice and performance.

Hence, the process of introducing standards has developed slowly and deliberately. In the 1995-96 school year, Alvarado asked principals and teachers to focus on one of the New Standards English/Language Arts standards-- the one setting the expectation that all students should read 25 books a year. Principals were held accountable for this standard and for stimulating discussion within their schools about what the standard might mean, both for the way they approached literacy instruction and for what level of performance they expected from their students. One principal told us that she was among the strongest resisters of standards, but that discussing the 25-book standard in her school (one of the district's highest performing schools) led her to an appreciation of how standards could create a more explicit set of professional norms in her school. She dates her own change in views on standards to this process. In the 1996-97 school year, standards work focused on the creation and assessment of portfolios, using the New Standards and Principles of Learning, and according to Levine, "produced a lot of frustration about how to apply the Principles of Learning to concrete work." Also, in that year, principals were required for the first time to submit budgets organized explicitly around work on standards in their schools.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Levine was joined in her role as the district's standards coordinator in 1996-97 by Frank diStefano, a District #2 elementary school principal on leave for the year, and now Superintendent of Community District #15 in New York City.

Levine characterizes the district's approach to standards as "relying as much as possible on existing structures and activities, rather than creating new ones that created confusion about priorities" and "always building on strengths by looking at what's working in schools and classrooms, not at what's not working." So most of the work around standards follows the form of other professional development activities in the district-- teacher study groups, in which teachers examine student work and ask "is it good enough?" and "what does it tell us about the way we are teaching?"; intervisitations, in which teachers and principals visit each others' schools and classrooms, to observe the enactment of standards in practice; and mentoring and coaching activities in which teachers and principals are paired with each other to work on specific issues related to the introduction of standards. All of these activities are deeply-rooted in the district's professional development strategy, so their extension to standards work adds to the volume of professional development, but it does not create an entirely separate stream of activity or a "project" on standards. The only exception to this rule, Levine observes, has been the creation of a separate teachers' standards network. The measure of whether the standards work is effective, according to Levine, is not whether schools are conducting separate and distinct activities related to standards, but the extent to which standards work is embedded in the schools' existing instructional improvement and professional development processes.

For Levine, work on standards in the district, even after four and one-half years, is still in its formative stages. She estimates that, of the district's 44 schools, about 15 are either not yet engaged in standards work or are in the early stages of engagement, and the remaining 29 are either well into the process of embedding standards in their existing instructional improvement work or are "heavily embedded."

In the spring of 1997, and again in the spring of 1998, the district administered the New Standards Reference Examination in English/Language Arts and Mathematics to all

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fourth, eighth, and tenth<sup>2</sup> grades. The exam is aligned with the New Standards. Results on the exam are reported school-by-school and are beginning to be discussed as part of the district's accountability process. The introduction of the New Standards Reference Exam has raised a whole new collection of problems for teachers and principals. The examination itself is very different from anything the district has used before; it is a good deal more challenging in its content, it requires students to explain and demonstrate their understanding in ways previous tests have not, it requires a good deal more time to administer, and it comes on top of the full battery of other state and local tests administered in the district. Its major advantage is its alignment with the New Standards and its consistency with the general philosophy represented in the district's professional development activities.

In the context of continuous improvement, the district's standards work shows how the district attempts to embed new activities in the structures and processes of existing instructional improvement processes, to avoid the discontinuities of launching new "projects" that are perceived by teachers and principals as being unrelated to previous activities. For Alvarado, the standards work represented an attempt to nudge schools into a more explicit examination of their classroom practice, particularly for hard-to-reach students, to bring the district into an new institutional alliance with the Institute for Learning that would give it a new external reference point for its work, and to introduce a more ambitious and demanding set of expectations and student assessments by which to judge the success of its instructional improvement. To some extent, these new activities pushed against established norms and practices in the district. The process for resolving these conflicts was to conduct work on standards in a way that was compatible with prior instructional improvement work-- using established professional development mechanisms that teachers and principals were already familiar with and folding standards into the

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<sup>2</sup> While the district is formally charged only to operate in grades kindergarten through eighth, it has, with cooperation of the New York City Board of Education, began to develop a small number of high schools for students who wish to remain in the district after they leave the eighth grade.

existing accountability structure between principals and system-level administrators. As with other aspects of its instructional improvement process, standards are a work-in-progress in District #2.

#### Focus on Low-Performing Students.

As District #2's instructional improvement strategy matured, it became increasingly evident, starting in about 1994-95, that, while the district has been relatively successful at improving aggregate student performance, school-by-school, on state- and city-wide standardized achievement tests, the district had not been as successful at reaching low-performing students, mostly students of color from high-poverty homes, concentrated in certain schools in the district. By the standards of most urban districts, District #2 had been quite successful with these students; the lowest-performing schools in District #2, with the highest proportion of low-income, minority students, by the mid-1990s, had begun to look, in their student performance profiles, like the highest performing schools in other urban districts, and also compared very favorably with schools in communities with low proportions of disadvantaged students. What struck the leadership of District #2, Alvarado and his Deputy (now Acting Superintendent) Elaine Fink, however, was not how good District #2 schools looked relatively to other schools, but the persistent gap in achievement between low-performing and high-performing students, regardless of the aggregate level of student performance.

For Deputy Superintendent Fink, who has been primarily responsible for day-to-day monitoring and accountability in the system, and who has invested her career largely in the problem of low-performing students, the problem of differential performance was rooted in the district's previous approach to literacy. With her accustomed bluntness, she said, "our basic approach to literacy works very well with students who come from families where there is a relatively rich and supportive home environment. It doesn't work as well when that environment doesn't exist. Our lowest-performing students need more; more direct instruction from the teacher, more intensity and pace, and more time." As with



the district's approach to standards, Fink's view of literacy instruction for low-performing students has not been greeted with unanimous support from teachers and principals. One consequence of the district's heavy and continuous investment in professional development around literacy has been that many teachers and principals have well-developed expertise on literacy practice and well-developed views of their own about what constitutes good practice. Fink's suggestion that the lowest-performing students might need a different type of instruction-- more prescriptive, more focused on fundamental reading skills, and more teacher-centered activities-- has provoked considerable debate and discussion within the district. Debate, however, is not a substitute for action in District #2.

Focused Literacy Schools. The district's basic approach to the problem of low-performing students has been to target schools with the highest proportion of low-performing students for more intensive professional development and instructional oversight. This group of "Focused Literacy Schools" was composed of seven schools in 1996-97, eleven in 1997-98, and thirteen in 1998-99. The term "focused literacy" refers to a relatively tightly-prescribed program of literacy activities that the schools are expected to implement, involving at least two-and-one-half hours of literacy instruction, organized around shared reading (teachers leading reading and discussion of a single text), guided reading (students reading to others from a text they choose themselves), reading aloud (teachers demonstrating reading strategies to groups of students), writing (teacher-led writing activities), and word study (vocabulary, word and letter sounds, etc.). The purpose of the focused literacy process is to introduce more structure and intensity to literacy instruction during the regular school day, coupled with significantly more direct instruction from teachers, in order to provide more structure and support for low-performing students. The actual activities that students pursue in focused literacy schools are not fundamentally different from the "balanced literacy" approach that characterizes the district's overall literacy program. In other words, Focused Literacy Schools do not have a different reading and writing program than the other schools in the district. Focused

Literacy is meant to be a more intensive, more structured, and more teacher-centered version of the district's broader literacy program.

The goal of Focused Literacy is explicitly to raise the measured student performance of the lowest performing students in the lowest performing schools. Teachers receive more intensive professional development around the balanced literacy approach, schools and classrooms receive more intensive monitoring and more frequent visits from district-level personnel, and principals are expected to plan professional development within the school to correspond to expectations for increased intensity of instruction.

Extended Day and Extended Year. In addition to more intensive instruction during the regular school day, Focused Literacy Schools provide additional literacy instruction at the end of the regular school day and summer instruction for low-performing students. The extended day program began during the 1996-97 school year, and the extended year program began in the summer of 1997. The extended day program provides an additional hour of literacy instruction at the end of the day, focused on the "direct teaching" activities of the balanced literacy approach-- shared reading and guided reading-- with groups of fifteen children and one teacher (roughly half the normal class size in District #2). The extended year program involves one-half-day (roughly three hours) of focused literacy instruction three days per week (expanded from two days in the summer of 1997) for four weeks in the summer. Instruction includes the full range of reading and writing activities in focused literacy, in a brisk, intensive format. Like the extended day program, class sizes are fifteen, with cross grade groupings. Both the extended day and extended year programs are accompanied by professional development for teachers, designed to bring relatively inexperienced teachers into the balanced literacy framework and more experienced teachers into the increased demands for intensity and pacing required by the focused literacy approach. Teachers in the extended day program receive regular observation and supervision in addition to regular group work with other teachers on a regular basis. Teachers in the extended year program receive three days of professional development

before the summer session starts and two half-days of professional development each of the four weeks of the program. Students are selected for the extended day and extended year program by teachers, based on their standardized test scores and teachers' assessments of their reading and writing levels. The overall goal of the program is to target students in the lowest quartile on standardized reading and writing tests and move them steadily upward.

The implementation of the extended day and extended year programs was extremely demanding and stressful for the district. The first round of the extended day and extended year program was implemented mid-year in the 1996-97 school year, which meant that it had to be planned and organized, teachers had to be recruited, and the initial professional development delivered to participating teachers in "real time," during the regular school year, while the district's regular professional development activities were proceeding in parallel at their usual pace in Focused Literacy Schools as well as in the rest of the district's schools. This approach was consistent with Alvarado's belief that the improvement cycle should correspond to real problems in the district, not to the academic calendar. Because both programs depend on volunteer teachers, who agree to do the extra work as an extension of their existing duties, they attract teachers with highly variable prior experience with the district's literacy model. Participating teachers range from experienced veterans to relative newcomers to, in the case of last summer's extended year program, newly-hired teachers fresh out of college for whom summer work was their first introduction to the district's literacy program. Hence, professional development has to be tailored and targeted to teachers at different levels of experience, both by offering different levels of group activities and by engaging in different levels of consulting and monitoring of teachers' practices while they are teaching.

In the first summer of the extended year program, fewer than 1000 of the district's 24,000 students participated, an enrollment level well below what the district had hoped, that district personnel explained as a result of the late development of the program during

the school year and limits in getting information to parents. In the summer of 1998, the district took a more assertive approach, identifying students in the lowest quartile in Focused Literacy Schools, notifying their parents, strongly suggesting that the students attend, and tying summer participation to grade promotion for students who were in danger of not being promoted. As a result, about 4000 students enrolled, a figure that roughly corresponds to the lowest-performing one-quarter of students. Our observations of the summer sessions revealed high levels of engagement by students and teachers under conditions that were extremely difficult-- heat and no air conditioning-- and high levels of engagement by teachers and professional developers in learning outside of the instructional day. Most outside observers would have had difficulty identifying participants as the lowest-performing students in their schools based on their engagement in the work.

The development of the Focused Literacy Schools and the extended day and extended year programs has not been without its problems in the district. It has put enormous demands on the district's professional development capacities, requiring both considerably more money and more expertise focused disproportionately on less than one-third of the district's schools. Personnel in other schools have mixed attitudes toward this situation. They recognize the district's heavy investment as an indication of its commitment to low-performing students. At the same time, some see the heavy investment as creating a parallel group of schools in which, not only are there more resources, but the type of literacy instruction is shifting toward a more prescriptive and teacher-centered model. Some teachers and principals in higher-performing schools are uncomfortable with this distinction, feeling that the district's basic literacy model should be available to all students, regardless of their family background. In addition, they see Fink's influence on the Focused Literacy Schools as representing a discernible shift in emphasis in the district's literacy strategy, away from the less teacher-centered and prescriptive parts of the balanced literacy approach and toward more teacher-centered and prescriptive parts.

In the fall of 1998, for example, Fink brought the issue of word study (a component of balanced literacy that focuses on sounds, word mechanics, grammar, vocabulary, among other things) to a district-wide discussion at the principals' conference and by convening a district-wide study group. Word study provokes a range of responses among district teachers and principals, but most see it as a signal that it will soon become part of the monitoring and accountability structure in an explicit way. Fink's view is that students are not well served in any school by teaching that ignores or underemphasizes basic language skills. "I'm trying to heighten awareness. I'm saying we have a need to give this aspect of literacy some attention. Principals have to figure out what to do about it. The bottom line is that when we go into a school word study should not be an issue. They should be doing something about it every day."

The Focused Literacy, extended day and extended year programs represent the district's basic approach to continuous improvement. It does not involve a change in focus or approach. Focused Literacy Schools are expected to enact the same balanced literacy instruction as other school in the district, but they are expected to enact it in a more intensified and structured form. Nor are Focused Literacy Schools working on a different set of purposes; they are still expected to work on improvement of instruction and student performance across all students and grade levels. Focused Literacy, instead, constitutes an extension of the district's overall strategy into a previously unfocused problem-- the problem of the lowest-performing students. Hence, it constitutes an intensification of the district's strategy for a specific group of students and schools. Also important is the fact that, despite the initiation of a new form of delivery-- after school and summer programs-- the district uses the same basic approach to professional development in preparing teachers for the new work. So there is continuity between the district's overall approach to literacy and math instruction, and the professional development that goes with it, and the new work required in Focused Literacy Schools.

Leadership Development.

As noted in our previous papers, school-level leadership is a pivotal element, if not the pivotal element, of District #2's instructional improvement strategy. Principals are expected to perform all the functions required to integrate the district's overall strategy in their schools, including continuously monitoring instruction and providing teachers with feedback and guidance, planning and organizing professional development targeted on specific instructional issues in their building, negotiating with district administrators around the resources required to deliver professional development, removing teachers who are unable to meet the district's instructional expectations, and recruiting and hiring new teachers. Being a public school principal is generally complex and stressful work; being a principal in District #2 is orders of magnitude more complex and stressful than the norm.

During the 1996-97 school year, Alvarado and Fink began to recognize a looming problem of leadership in the district. This problem had several dimensions: One was the aging of existing principals in the district. Some current principals were recruited out of teaching because of their knowledge of instruction and professional development in mid-career, and after eight or ten years in the job, are beginning to contemplate retirement. Another dimension is mobility. Two principals have left the district in the past two years for system-level administrative jobs in other districts; others are being heavily recruited because of their success in District #2. Some amount of mobility is to be expected under any circumstances; District #2, however, has become an attractive target for recruiters from other districts for both principals and teachers. A third, related, dimension is depth. District #2 has an extraordinarily "flat" organizational structure for an urban school system. That is, because the district has financed a good deal of its professional development by eliminating middle-level positions in schools and district offices, there are not the opportunities for upward professional mobility within the district that exist in many school systems. As the dimensions of this problem became clearer, Alvarado became concerned. "We're potentially facing a major leadership problem in a few years. We just hire anybody. Our principals have to be highly qualified in ways that most current principals

are not. If we lose current principals, we have no easy way to replace them with people we can have confidence in.” So Alvarado and Fink began a multi-faceted leadership improvement strategy inside the district.

The Aspiring Leadership Program. One part of the leadership strategy was to form a cooperative arrangement with a local university to certify highly qualified District #2 teachers and professional developers for the principalship. In Alvarado’s mind, the idea was relatively straightforward. The district would pay the university to certify educators recruited out of the district and jointly selected by the district and the university. The university and the district would jointly design a certification program that combined general coursework in administration with internships and seminars organized around the district’s model of instructional leadership. District #2 principals would co-teach courses with university faculty, providing continuity and consistency between the university coursework and the district’s expectations for the principalship.

The first attempt to implement this model was with New York University. The program was quickly designed and negotiated in the spring and summer of 1997-- again in “real time”-- and started in the fall of 1997. From the beginning, the NYU program was plagued by problems of design and execution. The university found it difficult to adapt its existing course structure and schedule to the demands of the district. Courses were poorly-designed and taught, from the point of District #2 participants, who were accustomed to state-of-the-art professional development. District #2 principals were not integrated into the instructional program. After one year the district abandoned the NYU relationship and negotiated another one with Baruch University, also in New York City.

The current Aspiring Leadership Program is a 24-credit program that is co- taught by Baruch University faculty and current District #2 principals. Of the 22 participants this year, 17 are from District 2 and five are from District 19, a neighboring district with ties to District 2 (their Director of School Improvement is a former District 2 principal who was recently recruited to join the district). Tanya Kaufman, a former District 2 principal

oversees this initiative, which is coordinated through Baruch's School of Public Affairs. The program is time-intensive for participants, and includes seven classes, a year-long internship, and regular site visits to District 2 schools. Courses are often delivered through the case-study method, and are designed to help participants develop a thorough knowledge base and problem-solving strategies that they will need in the principalship. Courses include Administration of the Urban School, Curriculum Development and the Improvement of Instruction, School/Community Relations, Managing Organizations in the Public and Not-for-Profit Sector, Law for the Educational Administrator, and Introduction to School Finance.

Kaufman sees her responsibility, as the district's representative in the program, go beyond helping participants understand the role of the principal in instruction. "This group is very touchy-feely and did not focus on changing culture [as it relates to] changing instruction," she remarked. She frames her contribution to the program around questions she considers central to developing good principals: "How do you hold teachers accountable for what they are doing... what kind of systems do you put in place to hold kids accountable... how do you build staff... how do you say this is not good enough?"

In addition to the coursework, participants conduct a minimum of four full-day school visits. These visits begin with an orientation by the principal; participants spend the remainder of the school day in classes, focusing on issues related to teaching and learning. From 4 to 6 PM, the group debriefs with the principal. Discussions range from expectations about student work to the principal's role in improving instruction. As they were told by the principal of PS116, "You can't just give people ownership and expect to have a great school."

The year-long internship with a District #2 principal is also designed to give participants a thorough understanding of the tools they will need to be an effective principal. According to Kaufman, the internship is very prescriptive, and requires participants to sign a contract agreeing to a minimum of 200 hours at their site. It includes



four core components: leadership, administration, supervision, and curriculum. As part of this experience, participants write a series of critical papers and structure projects that pertain to the core components.

The Aspiring Leaders Program addresses an emerging need in the district's overall instructional improvement strategy. It builds up the pool of people potentially available for principalships in the district, and it does so in a way that is consistent with the district's views on the nature of the principalship and its core instructional goals. Rather than trusting that certified candidates will have generic leadership skills, the district has created a route into the principalship that assures some level of familiarity with the expectations they have for principals and the skills that go with those expectations. As the district's other instructional improvement and professional development activities become more extensive and complex, they also create new opportunities for emerging leaders to learn their roles in a closely supervised and supportive environment. In the extended-year program, for example, some participants in the principal credentialing program assumed administrative roles in the summer that they would not have had access to during the regular school year.

Principal Mentorships. As noted in our earlier papers, network-building has always been an important part of District #2's professional development and instructional improvement strategy, stemming from the assumption that isolation of teachers and principals is the enemy of improvement. From the beginning of Alvarado's and Fink's tenure, they constructed pairs of more- and less-experienced principals, who would work with each other over a period of years to ease the less-experienced principals' transition into the district's demanding leadership role. At about the same time as the district started the Aspiring Leaders Program to credential and train candidates for the principalship, they also started to formalize their previously informal arrangement into a principal mentorship program. In this program, senior principals in the district-- currently seven-- are paired with two-to-three less-experienced principals. The mentors are paid an additional \$10,000 and are expected to meet regularly with their mentees and model the work of a successful

District #2 principal-- visiting classrooms, observing instruction, developing goals and budgets, and the like. Mentors and mentees also construct study groups-- another District #2 professional development technique-- around such issues as the bilingual curriculum and standards. In addition to running its own mentoring initiative, District #2 is also coordinating a mentoring program with Community School Districts #10, #15, and #19. In all cases, the goal is identical-- to develop principals' skills as leaders of instructional improvement in their schools.

The district has developed a working definition of instructional leadership that stems primarily from descriptions of what successful principals spend their time doing and not doing. In District 2, instructional leadership equates to building internal responsibility for improvement among teachers within the school. District administrators see a principal's primary task as helping teachers develop skills to work well together around common goals. This process is one that principals are expected to devote significant time to, by exposing teachers to research and best practices; by providing opportunities for teams of teachers to meet together and study student work; and by leading teachers on walk-throughs in the building. The district's definition of instructional leadership also stresses focus within the school, and avoiding and controlling the distractions that take the principal's attention away from instruction.

Central to the district's principal mentor model is the notion that mentoring builds on strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses of the mentee, and that mentoring is considered a natural part of a principal's development. At a meeting with District 10 principals and administrators, Elaine Fink stressed that mentoring does not imply a deficit model of improvement. "I've been mentored all my life...this is not touchy-feely. People being mentored should know why and what they are expected to work on. A firm hand is needed by the mentor." Like most of the improvement efforts in the district, this model relies heavily on collegial relationships among professionals working toward a common goal.

Mentoring in the district begins with a deliberate process of matching mentors with mentees. Because the success of the mentoring rests on an open and trusting relationship, "the match is critical," according to Carmen Farina, a senior principal and mentor. Matches are made on the basis of expertise that may be needed and on personal chemistry. Once a match is made, mentors begin their work by building trust with the principal. The first step in this process is to understand the school through the principal's eyes, and to learn the principal's leadership style. This kind of understanding is best achieved through a process of asking questions, rather than immediately making judgments about what is and is not working. Marguerite Strauss, another mentor, said, "It is not about trying to get people to be clones...It is about trying to get schools to engage in steady improvement. If you are brand new, you don't always know what questions to ask."

Now in its second year, this model is evolving to more formally define what the mentoring relationship looks like. Both formal and informal mechanisms are becoming more explicit, and District #2 mentors are developing a set of shared strategies. As with most of District #2's professional development, choosing an area of concentration sets the stage for improvement. "People who can't move instruction don't focus," said Elaine Fink. "Lack of focus is what keeps principals from going as far as they can." Mentors work with their principals across a focused set of issues, all directly connected to the district's instructional improvement strategy in literacy and math.

At several sites, the work has to do with building a sense of professional community among teachers. Mentors share strategies for leading professional development, providing feedback to teachers through conferences and evaluations and organizing staff to support a few instructional goals. Other mentors are helping mentees to improve communications to parents, and to focus these communications more explicitly on instruction. Although the specific areas of work may vary, everyone involved is clear that the focus is to develop principals' capacity to improve the quality of instruction in their buildings. In addition to helping mentees develop specific skills over time, mentees see

their mentors as advocates who will negotiate system bureaucracy for them. As with other professional development activities in the district, the practice of mentorship in the district is developing a set of norms out the practice of mentors and mentees. "The more routinized [we can be], the better. It's important to set a certain day, have specific expectations for communications, and to get dates on the calendar. We have to push them to make time for this," said Tanya Kaufman

In addition to the school-based work, mentors note that part of their relationship building with mentees includes meeting with them off-site. "I have dinner once a month with my principals and have them share their most horrible experience. I share with my mentees that it took us forever to learn all of this...every time I let them know what I can learn from them...I listen but am not judgmental. I end dinner by having them share their best experience," said one principal. Mentors also make themselves readily available by phone, and in certain circumstances provide just-in-time support to mentees, arriving at the mentee's building to help with a crisis situation. Although a shared set of strategies is developing, mentors are quick to point out that the specifics of the role lie in the particular needs of the mentees. Mentoring, in the District #2 model, is a balance of relationship-building and asking hard questions; of developing a trusting and open dialogue and of pushing new principals to focus sharply and build skills relentlessly. Mentors describe their role as an active partnership, but emphasize that "this is not about making people feel good."

The principal mentor program addresses a number of leadership issues the district is facing. It creates a more senior role for successful principals in the district, and provides extra compensation for that role; hence, it creates new career opportunities for senior principals without forcing them to leave their principalships for positions in the central administration and without increasing administrative overhead in the district. It also creates a transitional support system for less-experienced principals, so that entry into a new role doesn't occur as a baptism of fire. It assures that the early socialization of new principals

into district leadership roles occurs under the guidance of principals who have internalized District #2's expectations for the principalship and are exemplars of those expectations. Since the work of mentors and mentees focuses on the district's instructional improvement strategy in literacy and math, rather than on generic skills of the principalship, it serves as yet another building block in the district's overall instructional improvement and professional development strategy. In the words of Acting Superintendent Elaine Fink, "Districts have to find a way to work on the leadership issue without necessarily relying all the time on direct supervision from the district office. We should be trying to put all the resources for both improvement and professional development in schools, and build capacity there for developing leadership."

Distinguished Teachers. Alvarado's and Fink's favorite new leadership effort is the Distinguished Teachers Program. The program is in its fledgling stage-- it involved two teachers in the 1997-98 school year, and expanded to four teachers in the 1998-99 school year. Returning to the theme of schools with high proportions of low-performing teachers, Fink reflects, "We felt like we have to do a hell of a lot more than we've traditionally done in those schools. In addition to the other things we're doing, we need to find a way to get really great teachers into those schools. Often low-performing don't have 'greats.' In our system, these schools have teachers with considerable potential, they are more than adequate, but our truly great teachers have gravitated toward other schools. So the idea behind the Distinguished Teachers Program is to put a truly great teacher in a classroom with a teacher who has potential, in one of our Focused Literacy Schools, for a year, and concentrate on modeling and creating great instruction both in a single classroom and for the school as a whole." In 1997-98, two Distinguished Teachers were selected and assigned to PS 198, a school with high proportions of low-performing students that has shown marked improvement in recent years. In 1998-99, the program was doubled to four teachers working in two schools-- PS 198 again, and PS 126, a school with high

proportions of low-performing students that also has had substantial turnover in its teaching staff and, hence, has a high proportion of inexperienced teachers.

The selection process for Distinguished Teachers reflects the district's core values and its overall improvement strategy. Teachers apply or are nominated for the role, based on the following criteria:

- successful implementation of standards-based education in classroom settings;
- comprehensive knowledge of and demonstrated skill in focused literacy practices;
- demonstrated ability to develop high quality instructional practices targeted on student achievement;
- demonstrated ability to lead staff development efforts and to develop a community of learners; and
- demonstrated ability to work with colleagues.

In addition, applicants are required to submit a written essay summarizing their experience with standards-based education and stating why they should be selected for the role. A letter of recommendation from a teacher with whom the applicant has worked and a letter of recommendations from the applicant's head of school are also required. A selection committee, composed of representatives from the district, the New York City Board of Education, universities, and the United Federation of Teachers, reviews the applications and recommends recipients. Teachers who are selected receive additional compensation of \$10,000 in recognition of their role and the additional responsibilities the role requires. They are assigned to a Focused Literacy School. Their responsibilities include:

- working in a low-performing school as a classroom teacher, mentor, coach and staff developer;

- assisting a single classroom teacher in developing standards-based instruction around focused literacy activities;
- conducting professional development workshops before and after school for other teachers in the school;
- documenting the process of standards-based improvement in the classroom and school;
- conducting demonstration lessons in other classrooms in the school.
- modeling, planning and developing instructional activities consistent with the district's instructional goals;
- modeling effective strategies in classroom organization and management;
- acting as a laboratory site for student teachers in the district;
- presenting work at grade conferences and study groups within the school; and
- preparing an annual report to the district documenting, analyzing and evaluating their experience.

In Fink's estimation, the extra compensation that accompanies the role does not match the additional responsibility, but the fact that Distinguished Teachers receive the same extra compensation as mentor principals sends an important symbolic message about the district's priorities. Fink judges the first year of the program to have been a success in that the Distinguished Teachers played an influential role in increasing professional development, instructional intensity, and student performance in PS 198. One of the two Distinguished Teachers in the first year moved immediately, in the summer of 1998, into another Focused Literacy School as an assistant principal, with primary responsibility for professional development and instructional improvement in that school.

As in the Principal Mentor program, the Distinguished Teacher program picks up an earlier theme in the district's improvement strategy-- the district has long used networks of

successful teachers to model practice in other classroom-- and gives it a more formalized and visible presence. Also like the Principal Mentor program, the Distinguished Teacher program fills a space in the district's leadership recruitment process. It provides a more visible leadership role for highly successful teachers without forcing them out of the classroom into administrative or professional development roles. It provides extra compensation and recognition within the existing organizational structure without increasing administrative overhead. And it augments the district's Focused Literacy strategy by bringing highly effective teachers into schools with high proportions of low-performing students and providing them with opportunities to develop and model effective practices both in a single classroom and in the school at large. Fink's and Alvarado's enthusiasm for the Distinguished Teacher Program, despite its small size, is probably traceable to its symbolic significance in the district-- it elevates successful teaching practice to a higher, more visible level and connects it explicitly to the problem of low-performing students.

#### Principles of Continuous Improvement in District #2

We have focused on three areas in the development of District #2's overall strategy for instructional improvement and professional development-- the introduction of standards, attention to schools with high proportions of low-performing students, and recruitment to new leadership roles-- because they demonstrate a coherent approach to continuous improvement in the district. The initiatives are significant in their own right as guidance to districts struggling with the new requirements for performance-based accountability. But they also demonstrate more fundamental principles of continuous improvement. Among the principles we deduce from these examples are the following:

- Evaluate New Initiatives on the Basis of Their Consistency with Previously- Stated Core Values and Existing Institutional Structures. School districts normally operate by pursuing new initiatives as a series of sequential responses to "new" problems; hence each new initiative sends a signal to principals and



teachers that district priorities have shifted in some significant sense, and that each new initiative represents a discontinuous response, requiring either the abandonment of previous initiatives or a layering of new initiatives and new goals on top of old ones. The distinctive feature of the District #2's continuous improvement strategy is that it stresses continuity and extension of core values and existing institutional structure-- professional development focused on improvement of instruction-- into new problems. Hence, system-level administrators articulate the purpose of new initiatives in terms of their coherence with an overall strategy, rather than in terms of changes in the signals they send to school personnel.

- Deepen and Extend Scrutiny of Student Performance as the Criterion Against Which All New Initiatives Are Judged. The district's early improvement processes focused primarily on implicit standards of practice, using heavy investments in professional development for principals and teachers to create a common culture of what good classroom practice looks like in literacy and mathematics. As the strategy has developed, system-level administrators have increasingly focused their own attention and their discourse with principals and teachers on evidence of student performance, represented by norm-referenced tests, new and more challenging performance-based measures of student learning, and direct observation and analysis of student work inside and outside of classroom settings. Hence, the introduction of standards and principles of learning has been accompanied by an explicit and binding new accountability system in which decisions about instructional practice, at the school and district levels, are connected to increased and deepened scrutiny of student performance measures.
- Raise the Bar. A corollary of this increased emphasis on student performance has been a more or less explicit principle that all levels of performance can be

improved continuously, for all schools and for all groups of students within schools. That is, there is no “acceptable” or “adequate” level of expected performance for any school or group of students, only temporary measures of improvement. Low-performing schools and students should be expected to increase their performance, regardless of prior evidence of what constitutes “good” performance. High-performing schools and students should be expected to improve also. If existing measures show disproportionately high levels of student performance, then new measures should be introduced that created new challenges. If existing measures show disproportionately low performance for certain groups of students, then resources should be focused on those students to create performance above previously expected levels. Everyone is expected to improve, regardless of their point of departure. Low-performing schools should be expected to improve at disproportionately greater rates.

- Shorten the Improvement Cycle. School systems typically operate, implicitly or explicitly, on annual improvement cycles. New initiatives are typically planned in school year, or the summer, before they are implemented. Hence, improvement cycles are driven by the existing school calendar and by structures and standard operating procedures of school systems, rather than by the problems they are trying to solve. The hallmark of District #2’s recent work has been to shorten the improvement cycles and to break the tyranny of the school year as the unit of time for improvement, focusing instead on making the logic of improvement follow the logic of the problems that are to be solved. The extended day and extended year initiatives, for example, were planned, piloted, and launched within one school year, rather than being planned in one year for the succeeding year. The shortened improvement cycle was made

possible by the infrastructure of professional development that was in place as a result of previous improvement efforts.

- Make the Resources Follow the Problems. A corollary of the shortened improvement cycle is the idea that real resources-- staff time, professional development talent, and increased staffing-- have to follow the logic of the improvement process, rather than the logic of existing staff and budget allocations within a given school year. The extended day and year initiatives, as well as the leadership development initiative, required reallocations of resources within a school year and reassignment of key staff to follow the task.
- Open and Public Debate About New Initiatives. District #2's recent initiatives have not been uniformly greeted with support by all staff in the district. As noted in previous papers, one consequence of increased participation in planning and increased internal discussion of the district's strategy has often been increased disagreement about the nature, timing, and workloads entailed in new initiatives. A key issue in managing continuous improvement is learning how to orchestrate this increased engagement and participation, with its attendant disagreement and dissent, with the overall imperative for immediate action and a shortened improvement cycle. There is evidence of both immediate action and continuous debate and disagreement in the district's strategy, but little evidence of paralysis or stalemate as a result of disagreement.

### New Problems Requiring New Solutions

An important element of continuous improvement is that each set of new solutions or initiatives, no matter how well articulated with core values, creates new problems for the organization, and new problems necessitate new solutions. Most school systems are unaccustomed to the idea of continuous problem-solving, since most educational "reforms" are sold as more or less "final" solutions to all the major problems plaguing public schools. District #2's philosophy of problem-solving is succinctly represented in Tony Alvarado's

statement that “problems are our friends.” That is, each new line of action surfaces deeper, more interesting, and more challenging problems that force the organization to make better use of its resources and to focus more attention on its fundamental, core processes. District #2’s current strategy surfaces a new and daunting collection of problems that will require a new, more creative range of solutions. Among these problems, are the following:

- Stress and Overwork. As a consequence of District #2’s previous focus on staff development and recruitment, they have assembled a highly-competent and energetic staff who are willing to work extremely hard. One consequence of the increased instructional intensity and shortened improvement cycles, however, has been that most of the organizational slack that normally occurs in school districts-- “downtime” in the summer and at the end of the school day, for example-- has been wrung out of District #2’s personnel and staffing arrangements. Most principals and many teachers now find themselves in a situation where they are working at extremely high levels of intensity for long periods of time, continuously, with less and less time for recuperation and reflection. While “burn-out” in the traditional sense of principals and teachers leaving their jobs because of high stress seems not to be a major problem in District #2, high stress and overwork do seem to be surfacing as major problems in the existing structure. How to make high-intensity work manageable and fulfilling is a key issue for the future.
- The Lighthouse Problem. As District #2’s success has become more public, the attendant burden of making the district’s schools and classrooms accessible to outsiders has become increasingly problematical. While the district has begun to negotiate arrangements with other districts that provide it with increased resources to do its own work and to defray some of the costs of outside scrutiny, it is still the case that most outsiders regard the district’s schools and

classrooms as a more or less “free good,” to be observed and analyzed at their own convenience with little or no attention to the costs they impose on the district.

- Leadership Succession. While District #2’s improvement processes have become deeply institutionalized, and hence increasingly immune to turnover in key leadership positions at the district and school level, the district’s increased reputation and visibility have made it an attractive recruiting ground for other systems. The problems of recruiting and grooming leadership within the district will only become more intense as the district continues to improve. The district’s new leadership initiatives speak to this issue, but the question that remains is whether even these initiatives can groom new leadership at a fast enough rate to compensate for the inevitable turnover in leadership within the district.
- Political Stability. By the standards of most urban school districts, District #2 has led a charmed life for the past decade or so. It has been blessed by a stable and supportive local school board. It has been allowed to pursue its improvement strategy more or less undisturbed, and often supported, by the New York City Board of Education and the Chancellor, as well as by the state. A key element in the future of District #2’s strategy will be the preservation of some degree of political stability in its external environment, but there is no guarantee that this stability will continue. What can be done to protect the district’s relative autonomy in a political environment that is potentially divisive, turbulent, and disruptive?
- Resources. Closely-related to the issue of political stability is the issue of future resources to support the district’s strategy. District #2 has thusfar managed to finance an increasingly ambitious instructional improvement strategy either from reallocations within its base budget or from garnering outside support that is

compatible with its strategy. The district now confronts a situation in which it appears to be at the limit of its capacity to generate additional resources internally and additional outside support is problematical. How the district responds to this issue will determine both the mix and level of new and existing activities.

- Continuity in the Superintendency. As noted earlier, Anthony Alvarado formally resigned the superintendency of District #2 in June 1998, retiring from the New York City public school system and moving to a new position as Chancellor for Instruction in the San Diego Public Schools. Elaine Fink, Alvarado's long-time deputy and colleague in crafting the district's improvement strategy, was named Acting Superintendent in the fall of 1998. The community board will decide during the 1998-99 school year whether to appoint her to the superintendency. The conventional view in the U.S. is that district-level innovations are largely a function of the charisma and skill of a superintendent, and they disappear when the superintendent leaves. District #2 seems to defy this conventional view for two reasons: The district's improvement strategy is deeply institutionalized in its structure and operating routines, and Fink's succession to the superintendency, if it occurs, will not constitute a fundamental change in overall strategy. But the current period of transition in the district nonetheless is a test of whether it is possible to maintain a long-term improvement strategy in the presence of inevitable turnover in leadership.

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