



The 20 Non-Negotiable Characteristics of Higher Performing School Systems

Aligning District Practices to Support High-Quality Instruction

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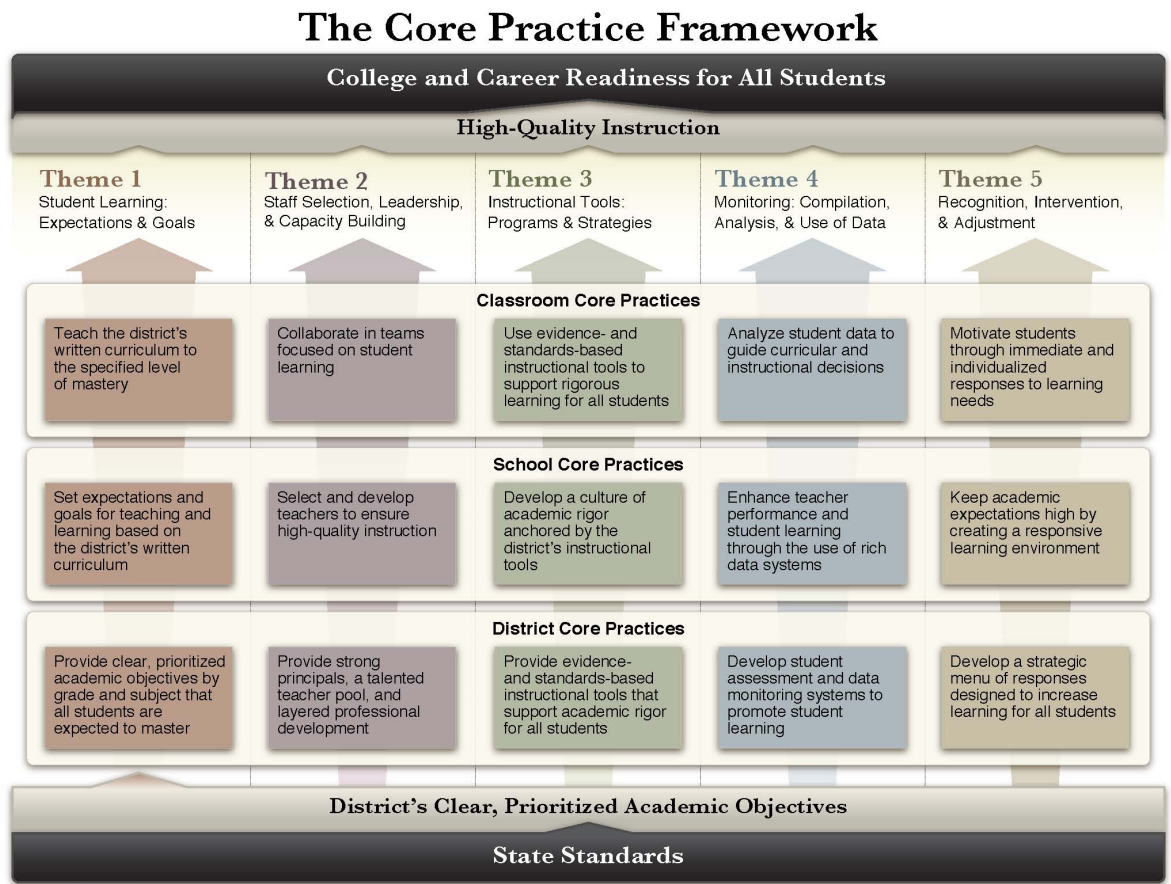
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Learning from Successful School Systems

What lessons can we learn from schools and school systems that prepare higher percentages of students for college and careers? ACT's National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) identifies higher performing schools—schools that have greater success at growing students towards college and career readiness than their comparable schools—and studies their practices. NCEA's research extends across 20 states, 300 districts, and over 550 school systems. The detailed results of this research are organized into NCEA's Core Practice Framework (see diagram below) and provides educators with guidelines for creating cohesive, aligned systems geared to all students mastering high standards. Rather than reinvent K-12 practices and processes, educators can turn to NCEA's Core Practice Framework to learn what makes a higher performing school work, and then apply those core teaching and learning practices to their own systems.



College and Career Readiness Requires a System-Wide Approach

Higher accountability measures are being implemented both at the national and state levels, and college and career readiness for students is no longer optional. As part of the Core Practice Framework, NCEA has identified 20 district-level actions strongly associated with students mastering higher standards. These actions support each “District Core Practice” within the framework (*see diagram, page 1*) and are categorized into five organizational themes. The actions express characteristics consistently found in over a decade of NCEA’s higher performing schools research. When implemented with fidelity, schools within the district are provided with a strong foundation for their own system-wide improvements. District leaders can use the characteristics provided below as a starting point to self-assess the fidelity of their practices. A careful internal review can reveal gaps in the district’s practices and help leaders readjust their efforts to support the end goal of preparing every student for life beyond high school.

The Non-Negotiable Characteristics

Theme 1: Student Learning : Expectations & Goals

What it is that we expect all students to know and be able to do in each course, grade, and subject?

Characteristic 1: A Clear, District Curriculum Aligned to College and Career Readiness Standards

Leaders in higher performing school systems establish a written, district-wide curriculum that clearly identifies academic objectives on what students are to know and be able to do by grade and subject. The objectives are set at a high standard and are designed to prepare students for success in postsecondary learning.

The state’s standards provide a foundation for the academic objectives of the

district's written curriculum; however, educators in higher performing school systems believe that, even when the state standards are strong, they often need more clarity in order to use the standards as working documents.

With state standards as the curricular base, the competencies measured on the state's assessment are not seen as a digression from the "real" curriculum, but as an important component of it. Therefore, the district's curriculum is tightly aligned with the expectations of the state's criterion-referenced assessment. Alignment with the state test, however, is a minimal expectation and curriculum is geared toward students receiving an education that prepares them to have success in postsecondary learning.

Characteristic 2: PreK-12 Alignment Is Determined by the Needs of Graduates

Leaders in higher performing school systems vertically align the district curriculum from PreK-12 through a backwards mapping process anchored to the needs of successful graduates.

The district organizes, clarifies, and vertically aligns the state standards—filling gaps and adding specificity when needed—to identify the specific knowledge and skills that students will acquire by grade and subject. This clarification also includes detailing the level to which each objective is to be taught and learned at each grade (i.e., introduced, developed, mastered, and assessed). Often, districts highlight fundamental, core learning skills as focus standards to prioritize their development.

Detailed curricular work requires careful consideration of prerequisite skill development from grade to grade in order to ensure a seamless learning experience for students. Curriculum documents in districts supporting higher performing schools communicate high expectations for all students—not just a talented, elite sub-population. Grounding the curriculum by grade to rigorous high school exit outcomes ensures that students' preparation for advanced high school work begins in early grades.

Characteristic 3: Detailed, Curriculum Resources are Provided

Leaders in higher performing school systems provide detailed resources that clarify the district's written curriculum.

Teacher involvement in district-level curricular development is maximized to ensure teacher input but minimized when tasks are administrative or clerical. Under district leadership, teacher teams often develop documents that support the delivery of the curriculum—course outlines, vocabulary lists, curriculum maps/pacing guides, performance rubrics, model lessons,

benchmark assessments, and standards-based report cards. These documents provide much greater clarity and help build teachers' understanding of the academic objectives and the level at which they are to be assessed.

Characteristic 4: The District Curriculum is Non-Negotiable

Leaders in higher performing school systems require that the district's written curriculum is the taught curriculum in every classroom.

The carefully aligned, written curriculum defines what teachers will teach and the content and skills that students must master. Principals and teachers understand these learning goals, that they are non-negotiable, and that they apply to all students. District leaders clearly establish this expectation.

Theme 2: Staff Selection, Leadership, & Capacity Building

How do we select and develop the leaders and teachers needed to ensure that every learner in the system achieves the learning goals?

Characteristic 5: Principals Are Selected Based on Proven Performance

Leaders in higher performing school systems recruit and select principal candidates that have proven student performance outcomes.

Knowledge of the powerful effect of instructional leadership on student performance drives the recruitment and selection of the principal at each school. Increasingly, principal selection processes incorporate performance-based components, such as data-analysis scenarios and writing exercises, to examine a candidate's ability to perform as an instructional leader. Carefully selected principals are given both the authority and the responsibility to ensure all students reach the district's academic goals. Rigorous and ongoing professional development opportunities support and develop the instructional leadership of the principal.

Characteristic 6: Internal Leaders Are Developed

Leaders in higher performing school systems identify and develop internal candidates for leadership positions.

The districts supporting higher performing schools establish strong leadership development opportunities to develop internal candidates for leadership positions within the district. These districts' efforts to grow their own leaders help to establish program continuity that is easily lost with changes in

leadership. In addition to topical development sessions for aspiring leaders focused on leadership and managerial skills, some higher performing school systems have established more extensive programs, such as a year-long residency with a district high-performing principal.

Characteristic 7: Recruiting a Talented Teacher Pool is Prioritized

Leaders in higher performing school systems aggressively recruit a talented teacher pool from which principals are given the authority to select teachers.

The district aggressively builds a pool of talented teachers based on historic knowledge of the needs of schools in the district. A very structured system of recruiting and screening potential candidates has been developed. In addition, the district may partner with universities and/or businesses to develop teacher training programs. District policies and procedures enable schools to move early and quickly when identifying needs and selecting staff. Principals are given the authority to select teachers for their schools.

Characteristic 8: 360° Support for New Teachers Focused on the District's Teaching and Learning Systems

Leaders in higher performing school systems design focused professional development for new teachers centered on the district's curriculum, instruction, and assessment system.

Although new teacher induction programs are usually present in all districts, those programs in districts supporting higher performing schools are significantly different in content and quality. The content of induction sessions, mentoring activities, and early, intense professional development opportunities is focused on the district's curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment system. In average-performing schools, the content of induction programs centers more on policies and procedures.

Characteristic 9: Collaboration is Structured at All Levels

Leaders in higher performing school systems create the infrastructure for collaboration as a primary professional development strategy at the district, school, and classroom levels.

Beyond formal staff development days, the district encourages job-embedded professional development by providing the resources for collaborative planning time in all schools. This investment demonstrates the district's belief that teachers are knowledgeable resources with valuable strengths, and that collaboration, not work shops, is the primary vehicle for extending learning

opportunities. This emphasis on collaboration extends to administrators as well because district leaders establish collaborative learning communities among principals and district administrators.

Characteristic 10: Instructional Coaches Thoroughly Support Teachers

Leaders in higher performing school systems allocate resources to ensure that proven instructional coaches are available to all schools.

District leaders in higher performing school systems often state that teachers are the best teachers for other teachers. As a result, additional district investments in instructional support include carefully identified master teachers or instructional coaches. These coaches—trusted teacher leaders—are able to accelerate knowledge sharing, particularly in the area of instructional improvement based on data. The selection, training, and service of instructional coaches are all designed to increase the flow of deep and fresh knowledge about curriculum and instruction—both across the schools and at the district office. In some districts, individuals return to the classroom after serving as instructional coaches for a time—a practice that further contributes to a regular flow of knowledge and experience across the district.

Characteristic 11: Professional Development Focuses on Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Leaders in higher performing school systems focus professional development on understanding, teaching, and assessing the district's written curriculum.

For higher performing schools, the district professional development plan has been tightly aligned to teaching and learning needs in the district—identified primarily through the study of student achievement data. In higher performing settings, the district-planned professional development focuses on two important components of teacher capacity building: deepening teacher knowledge of the curriculum and developing teachers' instructional skills. The professional development opportunities are clearly connected, and structured follow-up activities ensure that the new materials and strategies are successfully transferred to the classroom. New initiatives, competitive grants, and external partnerships support the aligned development plan rather than distract from it.

Theme 3: Instructional Tools: Programs & Strategies

What programs, strategies, materials, and time allocation do we use to teach the necessary content and skills to students?

Characteristic 12: Instructional Programs are Research-Based and Carefully Aligned

Leaders in higher performing school systems review the effectiveness and confirm the alignment of each instructional program prior to implementation.

Evidence-based (and when possible, scientifically-based) instructional programs and resources that are tightly aligned with the stated academic objectives are provided for all schools. These instructional tools are chosen through highly developed processes that examine how effective the given programs have been with similar student populations.

Since the district specifies WHAT will be learned in the form of the written curriculum (and measures to ensure that curriculum is mastered by all students), they may offer some flexibility to higher performing schools in terms of HOW the district-selected instructional resources are used. It is clearly understood, however, that when student achievement does not reach determined goal levels, the associated schools will lose that autonomy and will use the district-selected materials.

Characteristic 13: Proven Instructional Programs Are Implemented with Fidelity

Leaders in higher performing school systems provide the necessary support and resources to implement each adopted instructional program.

Districts ensure that the selected instructional programs are implemented with fidelity. The appropriate training and support are provided, and implementation is closely monitored.

Theme 4: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, & Use of Data

How do we know if students have learned what we said they would learn?

Characteristic 14: A Data Management System is in Place

Leaders in higher performing school systems provide an integrated data

management system.

Higher performing schools report being supported by extensive online student data monitoring systems. These systems include current and longitudinal student achievement trends for all national-, state-, and district-required assessments. Data reports at the district, school, classroom, and individual student level are provided in many disaggregated formats. Assessment data are broken down by school, teacher, gender, ethnicity, or any other grouping significant to the student population of the district. These data provide timely information to trigger and direct any needed instructional interventions.

District leaders typically organize state-level data by learning issue and also arrange and distribute that data to teachers by the students in their current classes. In addition to general reports, teachers receive student academic profiles for assigned students prior to the beginning of the school year. These student profiles include individual data such as longitudinal histories of attendance, state and district assessment results, ELL status, course schedule, and intervention participation.

District administrators, school leaders, and teachers constantly review student data reports. Ongoing monitoring of student performance data informs professional development selection, instructional differentiation, and student and teacher intervention activities.

Characteristic 15: A Coherent Data Assessment System Provides Regular Data About Student Learning

Leaders in higher performing school systems provide diagnostic and formative assessments that are aligned with the district's written curriculum.

District benchmark assessments of academic objectives are developed as strong supplements to state and standardized tests. These assessments provide formative, diagnostic, and progress-monitoring information. Measuring student performance at a deep level of understanding and across a broader spectrum of skills than the state assessment, the assessments are still closely aligned with state assessments so that success on district assessments ensures success on state assessments.

Characteristic 16: Regular Analysis is Part of the District Culture

Leaders in higher performing school systems analyze student performance data regularly with principals.

Institutionalizing data reflection represents a significant shift in the way business has been done, according to leaders in higher performing schools.

District staff members are active participants in open and honest discussions about student performance. Discussions about data emphasize both overall performance as well as growth or improvement measures. Learning walks, walk-throughs, and other forms of organized classroom visitation ensure alignment and consistency across schools and allow district staff members to observe the quality of instruction relative to the level of performance data.

Theme 5: Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

If students are not learning what they should, what are we going to do about it?

Characteristic 17: Best Practices Are Studied and Shared

Leaders in higher performing school systems study and share the most effective instructional practices in the district.

Recognition of principals and teachers for student learning successes leads to the study of the practices of those same individuals. Since district benchmark assessments are one of the sources of data that are studied, teachers at grades or subjects not tested by the state are just as likely to be identified and studied as those in state-tested grades and subjects. Some districts conduct more formal case studies of successful schools or classrooms, while others simply gather self-reported practices. In either case, the information gained is used to increase knowledge of all teachers in the district and to fuel collaborative discussions around data and practice.

Characteristic 18: Struggling Schools Are Supported

Leaders in higher performing school systems quickly identify and assist schools that are not reaching their academic targets.

Schools needing extra assistance in reaching academic goals are identified quickly. Because districts often have access to more sensitive metrics of school success, the most effective districts can intervene before struggling schools are identified by the state accountability system.

District leaders strategically apply various supports for the identified schools. These take a variety of forms, from increasing financial support so schools can purchase additional staff/supplemental programs to assigning external support to work with school leaders and staff. Increased principal mentoring and additional instructional coaching for teachers are also common supports for struggling schools in higher performing school systems.

Characteristic 19: District Interventions Supplement School and Classroom-Level Efforts with Students

Leaders in higher performing school systems supplement school and classroom-level interventions with targeted support for students who are below grade level.

District leaders establish well-developed pyramids of proven, practical intervention programs and practices to support school- and classroom-level student interventions.

These district-led efforts are strategic and carefully planned to strengthen students' pathways to rigorous coursework. Rather than considering summer school as the primary intervention strategy for students who have failed a particular course, districts supporting higher performing schools fund Saturday opportunities to supplement school efforts more quickly. They also use summer opportunities very differently. For instance, a district may study the instructional differences between regular algebra and honors algebra in order to build a summer experience that bridges the gap so students of either course can be successful in advanced honors algebra the next year.

Characteristic 20: Data Drives Curricular and Instructional Improvements

Leaders in higher performing school systems adjust curriculum and instructional resources based on student performance.

Student achievement results lead to a thorough review of the district's written curriculum and any district-selected instructional resources. Adjustments in the curriculum or resources are made when trends across schools indicate a district-wide need.

Taking the First Step

As our work at NCEA suggests, no single program or isolated reform can substitute for a long-term, system-wide approach to improving teaching and learning. The aforementioned characteristics can exist in any school system, but it is often the depth of implementation, along with excellence at the school and classroom-levels, that ensures the success of every student. Aligning district practices to college and career readiness first takes knowledge of the system practices currently in place. By thoroughly assessing one's level of implementation of each practice, one can glean valuable insights about where to focus limited resources and energy.

This report can serve as a starting point for educators to self-assess practices within their school system, but it alone cannot provide them with the deep knowledge and understanding necessary to prioritize strategies for immediate, sustainable results. By also relying on a third party to review district practices, educators can take action with confidence and clarity—knowing their efforts will lead to all students mastering high standards.

To assess how well your district efforts are aligned to college and career readiness, please contact us.

Contact

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