

CASE STUDY

Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District (TX): Continuous Improvement Drives Transformation

by Amy M. Sutherland

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Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District: *Continuous Improvement Drives Transformation*

In 2004, Dr. Gene Buinger, superintendent of Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District (HEB) outside of the Dallas/Fort Worth area, saw several emerging challenges as an opportunity for his school district to go from “good to great.” The combination of increasing state and federal accountability, changing student demographics, and limited district funding meant that HEB had to do even more for its students and staff with increasingly limited resources. To respond successfully, the district would need to modify much of how it functioned. Dr. Buinger decided to focus the district’s work around a select number of measurable goals guided by the philosophy of continuous improvement. The desire, and the result, was to rally the staff, students, and community around a common approach in a way that has profoundly impacted the development of the district.

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Today, HEB is a district that deems itself *Different by Design*. The motto describes how the district tailors systems to drive continuous improvement to achieve district goals. In recent years, the district has nearly closed its racial achievement gap, and ranks as one of the highest-performing districts in the state; HEB has received state and national commendations for its numerous achievements (Figure 1). Staff describe HEB as a place defined by high performance, high expectations, hard-working people, individual and group accountability, and agility and flexibility, and note that these characteristics are products of the collective decision to embrace continuous improvement.

HEB defines continuous improvement as a self-assessment process that aligns goals and values at the district, department, campus, teacher, and student levels. HEB has a deliberate culture where everyone is challenged to buy into the district’s goals of high expectations, transparency, and accountability. This ►

Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District (TX) Fast Facts

- Superintendent: Dr. Gene Buinger
(June 1999 – present)
- Number of Students (2009-2010): 20,762
- Demographics (2009-2010):
 - White: 48.7%
 - Hispanic: 24.3%
 - African American: 16.1%
 - Asian/Pacific Islander: 9.9%
 - Native American: 1.1%
 - Economically Disadvantaged: 50.7%
- Number of Teachers (2009-2010): 1,310
- Budget (2009-2010): \$154 million

Source: HEB ISD

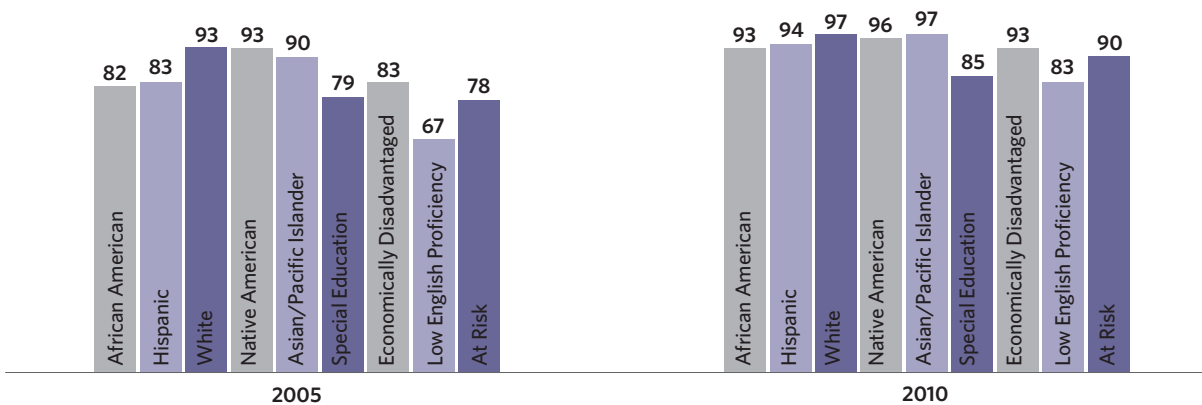


In HEB, students and staff use a variety of mediums to achieve learning objectives and monitor progress. Here, a student contributes to a science lesson, and the teacher uses the visual to assess student comprehension during the lesson.

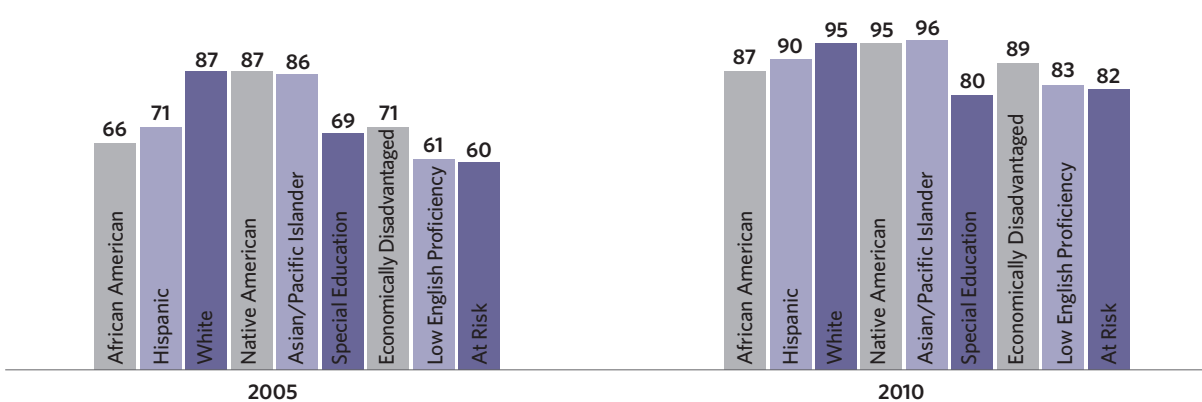
FIGURE 1

Gains in Student Achievement on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS): 2005 and 2010

Percent reading/ELA TAKS proficiency of different student populations (2005, 2010)



Percent math TAKS proficiency of different student populations (2005, 2010)



Source: Texas Education Agency

has created alignment, encouraged innovation, and produced positive results throughout the district. Some of the most visible examples of these themes in the district today include student empowerment and performance, staff responsibilities and development, and data and accountability.

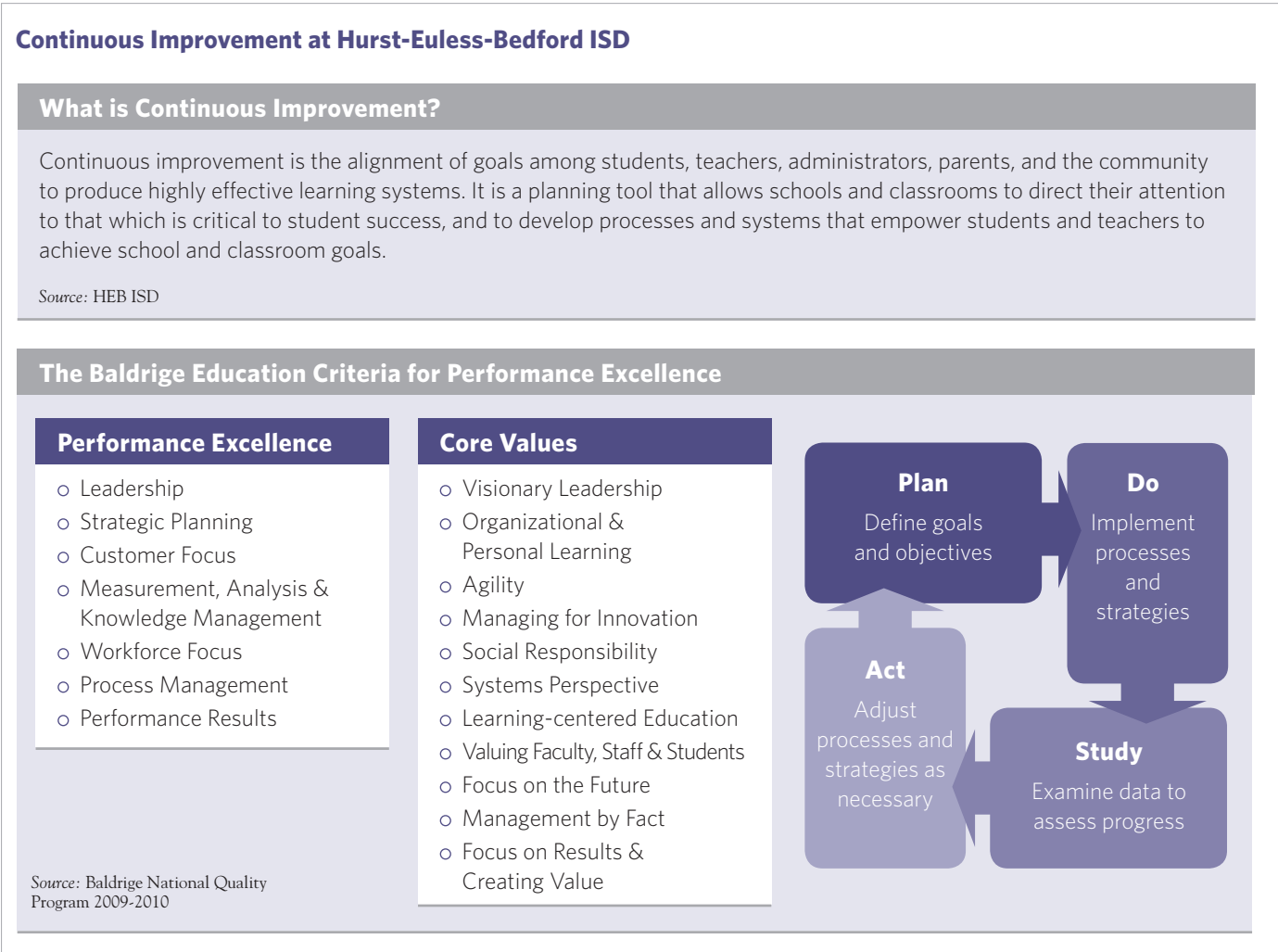
The district has developed a clear framework and common language around continuous improvement. For HEB, continuous improvement derives from the criteria and categories used to award the Baldrige National Quality Program Award. HEB bases much of its continuous improvement mindset on the eleven core values and best practices used by the Program to identify successful organizations (Figure 2). HEB also uses the

Plan-Do-Study-Act model (Figure 2) for both students and staff, with the goal of having individuals take responsibility for their own learning and performance.

HEB’s district communications clearly reflect the district’s priorities. For example, the district’s website explains the major tenets of HEB’s continuous improvement philosophy; similarly, HEB’s printed materials articulate the district’s philosophies and the alignment between philosophy and student outcomes. Terms that are often used by the central office to define the district’s direction—continuous improvement, *Different by Design*, EDGE, SMART goal, etc.—have become common language throughout the district.

Looking at HEB’s outcomes and results today only

FIGURE 2



tells a small part of the district's continuous improvement narrative. To fully appreciate the substantial progress HEB has made toward its goals, it is important to examine and understand the district's change process and its intentionality. The choice to be *Different by Design* explains how current systems have been constructed around the district agenda as well as the way that continuous improvement drives the district forward.

Changing the Mindset to one of Continuous Improvement

When HEB adopted the continuous improvement model in 2004, district culture shifted to reflect this new direction. As a part of continuous improvement, district leadership made the decision to rely heavily on research and best practices. The district gradually developed a systems focus, requiring more consistency across schools, personnel, and practices. Gradually, the district's culture became increasingly reflective, outward-looking, research-focused, and data-driven.

One of the ways in which continuous improvement has pushed HEB to become increasingly outward-looking and self-aware as a district was through increased comparison with like districts and benchmarking. At the start of the continuous improvement process, HEB identified five nearby districts with similar characteristics, and, for the purposes of keeping the focus on improvement, the three highest-performing districts in the state. While it was important for HEB leaders to know how the district was doing compared to similar districts, it was equally important to understand how the district performed alongside the best. Becoming familiar with the highest-performing districts in the state allowed the district to identify and implement successful practices gleaned from other districts.

HEB also identified other districts that had been successful using the continuous improvement model. District leaders made a concerted effort to identify ways in which the continuous improvement model had strengthened a particular district's practices. HEB leadership visited these districts and looked for effective practices that could work in their own district.

In fact, some of HEB's current successful staffing procedures were identified during visits to other districts and then adapted for HEB. In looking at others' successes, HEB was very intentional about adopting only those practices that would further the district's priorities and that would foster the greatest district alignment and focus around student achievement.

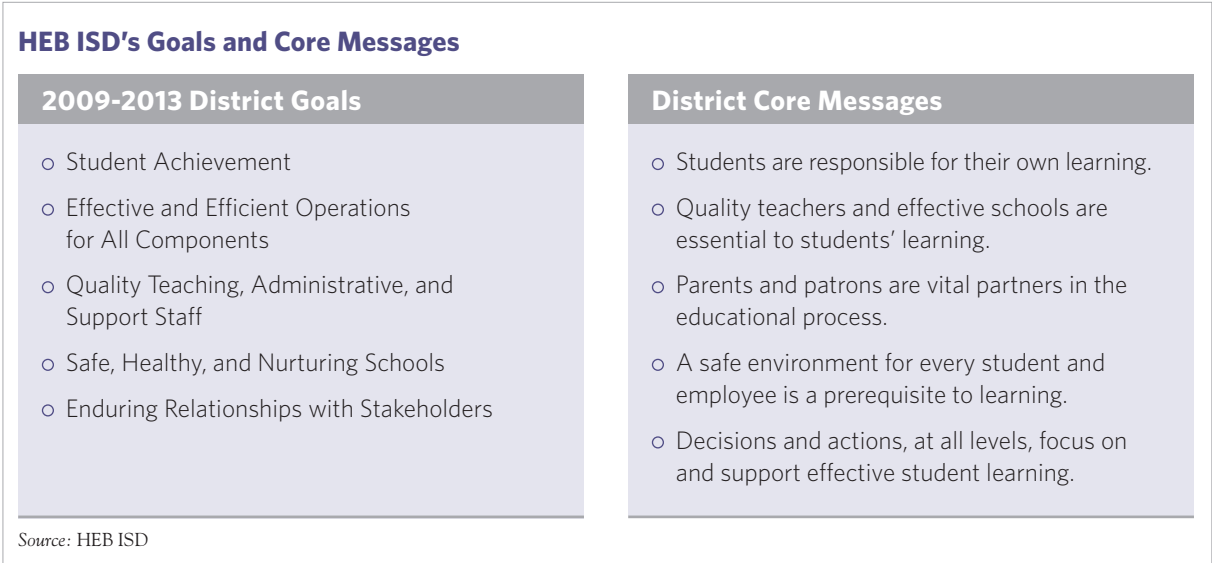
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HEB's successes today have been a result of this strategic focus on priorities and on the continuous improvement approach. Human capital and resources were aligned around these priorities, thus ensuring consistency across the district. Given the heavy focus on clear priorities, staff and students can articulate how their work or performance aligns with the district's continuous improvement initiative and corresponding goals. Several striking examples of the extent to which continuous improvement has driven district performance and systems thinking around a small set of high-impact priorities include HEB's student achievement results, data systems and assessments, and staff development.

Student Empowerment and Performance

Arguably the most powerful example of the cultural impact of HEB's continuous improvement is the way in which students are charged with taking responsibility for their own learning. Of the five district goals and five core messages, the first of each is focused on student achievement and responsibility. The first core message is: "Students are responsible for their >

FIGURE 3



own learning” (Figure 3). Student empowerment and responsibility is one of the most prominent aspects of HEB’s intentionally-designed culture.

The district has aligned student and staff directives around continuously improving and increasing student empowerment. The district’s *Toolkit Handbook* for its teaching staff instructs teachers how to best create an environment where students are self-directed learners, understand the expectations placed on them, and contribute to their own achievement. In HEB, classrooms are charged with setting Strategic Classroom Goals, also known as SMART goals. Under the guidance of their teacher, students establish specific and measurable goals for their class, chart their progress, and hold themselves accountable. Strategic goal-setting has been implemented across all grade and class levels in HEB, creating the expectation of student responsibility and accountability across the district, and allowing students and staff members alike to be responsive and data-driven.

Another component of student responsibility and accountability in HEB is the district-wide practice of creating and maintaining student data folders. Students are responsible for compiling their individual performance data and action plans. This practice increases awareness of an individual student’s performance and also promotes student empowerment by granting students agency and responsibility in their own

assessment. District staff speak of the widespread enthusiasm generated around data folders, providing anecdotes of first- and second-graders proudly displaying and explaining their performance data to their parents and teachers. The *Toolkit Handbook* provides a glimpse into this particular continuous improvement practice, displaying Plan-Do-Study-Act charts, goals, and performance data from all grade levels. The increasing complexity of the student-generated goals and data collected as students move through school reflect the way student empowerment goals have been made compatible with all levels of student learning.

In order to achieve its goals, particularly the goal of increased student achievement and empowerment, HEB needed to ensure that increased expectations were accompanied by a cultural shift in clarity and transparency. For a student to be responsible for his/her own learning, that student must have a clear understanding of the learning objective and the performance expectation. For a class to know if it is meeting a goal, it must have the tools and information that will enable it to examine its performance. For students to know if they are performing on track with their peers, they must have available data, and they must know how to examine data in a meaningful way. While the complexity of these tasks and the level of understanding varies across grade levels, HEB’s commitment to this practice

is clear. HEB has clarified learning objectives and expected outcomes, and has built a culture that drives excitement for, not fear of, the use of data to improve performance. HEB has, in essence, demanded and created an infrastructure and culture that supports its core aims.

HEB's practices around student empowerment are strategies that have effectively reduced common ethnic/racial disparities in student achievement. Students are expected to take responsibility for their learning regardless of background, circumstances, and previous academic successes or failures. HEB's success suggests the potential of student empowerment to eliminate some of the nation's all too common educational disparities.

Additionally, the district has shown its commitment to improving student achievement by allocating significant resources to rich academic programming, including what is known as EDGE programming. EDGE comprises advanced programming at elementary, middle, and high school levels, and includes core knowledge-based curriculum, Spanish immersion, Suzuki Strings, International Business Initiative, Secondary Orchestra, International Baccalaureate, Culinary Arts, and Auto-Tech. The district, through its commitment to student empowerment and achievement, has put a priority on providing students the necessary opportunities to advance learning in many different areas. HEB also cost-effectively manages this resource allocation. In 2010-11, the district will spend an average of only \$8,754 per student, with 63% of every dollar spent going directly to the classroom. This financial allocation demonstrates the way in which spending priorities have been strictly determined based on their alignment with district goals and continuous improvement.

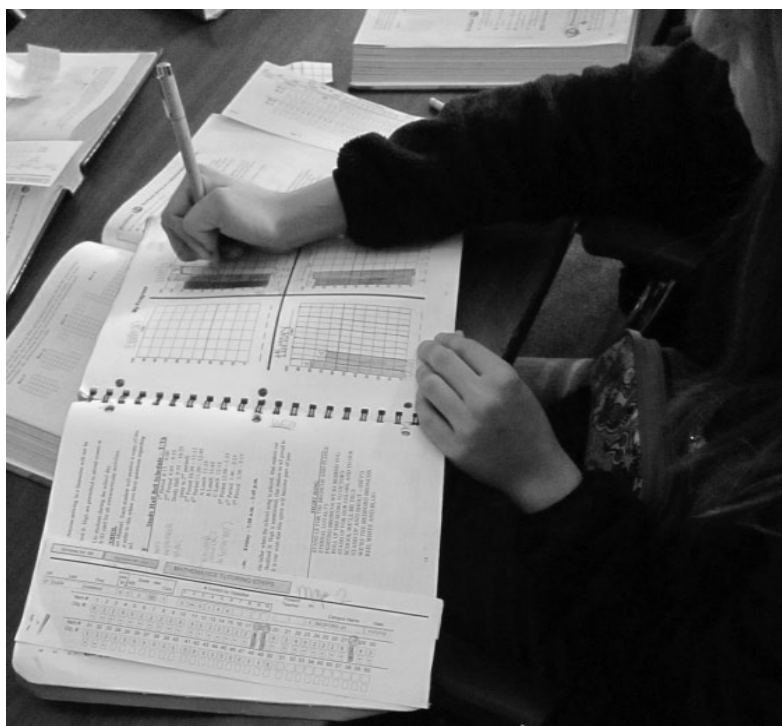
Measuring Progress and Results: Accountability and Assessments

HEB's assessment system is very closely linked to the district's goals around student achievement and student empowerment, and serves to enable successful practices around these goals. Such a strategy effectively forces the district to function as a system—setting, monitoring, and pushing system-wide expectations.

HEB's accountability department is led by Diana Hood, who originally developed and currently coordinates the intricate district assessment protocols. Ms. Hood is highly regarded by district staff as an innovator who has significantly advanced the district's ability to monitor and improve student achievement through her thoughtfulness and commitment to district priorities.

HEB's in-house assessments are intended to measure student, teacher, departmental, and campus progress as each school year progresses. These assessments are periodically reviewed and revised, and are both a product and a subject of the continuous improvement process. Over the years, as the assessments have been rolled out, items which fail to ask a question well or which do not connect well with the curriculum have been revised or deleted. Each core subject area has an assessment approximately every six weeks; the process surrounding the collection, analysis, and use of results demonstrates the continuous alignment of accountability, learning, and development in the district.

This process of collecting and analyzing data from each school is refined, highly functional, and specific. >



An HEB student updates her data folder by graphing her performance on a recent exam. She is able to immediately compare how she performed on this test relative to the other tests she has recently taken in this subject.

The district has high expectations of each school in the common formative assessment process, and these expectations are clearly communicated. After an assessment is given at a school, the school has 24 hours to bring the test results back to the district. All of the 26 schools' answer sheets are collected and time-stamped to reflect adherence to this policy. Ms. Hood is often asked by school administrators if their school is the last to turn in assessment answers because "no one wants to be the one to hold this process up." Schools' willingness to contribute to the process is another small example of the large scale buy-in that HEB leadership has fostered around its objectives. After all of the schools submit their answer sheets, the district scans test results and produces an itemized analysis by student, teacher, school, department, and district within another 24 hours. The information is color-coded to help identify trends and draw attention to areas of strength and weakness. Building administrators, teachers, and students are expected to internalize this data and use it to inform a number of subsequent decisions related to their responsibilities.

Under the guidance of their teacher, students establish strategic goals for their class, chart their progress, and hold themselves accountable.

When asked what happens if this time-reliant collection and reporting process breaks down, Ms. Hood simply said, "It doesn't. We don't let it break down." The district has placed a high value on formative assessments, given their connection to identifying student, staff, and district progress. As such, a highly functional, data-driven, and useful system has emerged as a valuable district practice. Staff work to support and improve the process because this is such a priority.

The assessment process has begun to dictate much about the district's design of instruction and accountability. Mr. Steve Chapman, HEB's deputy superintendent

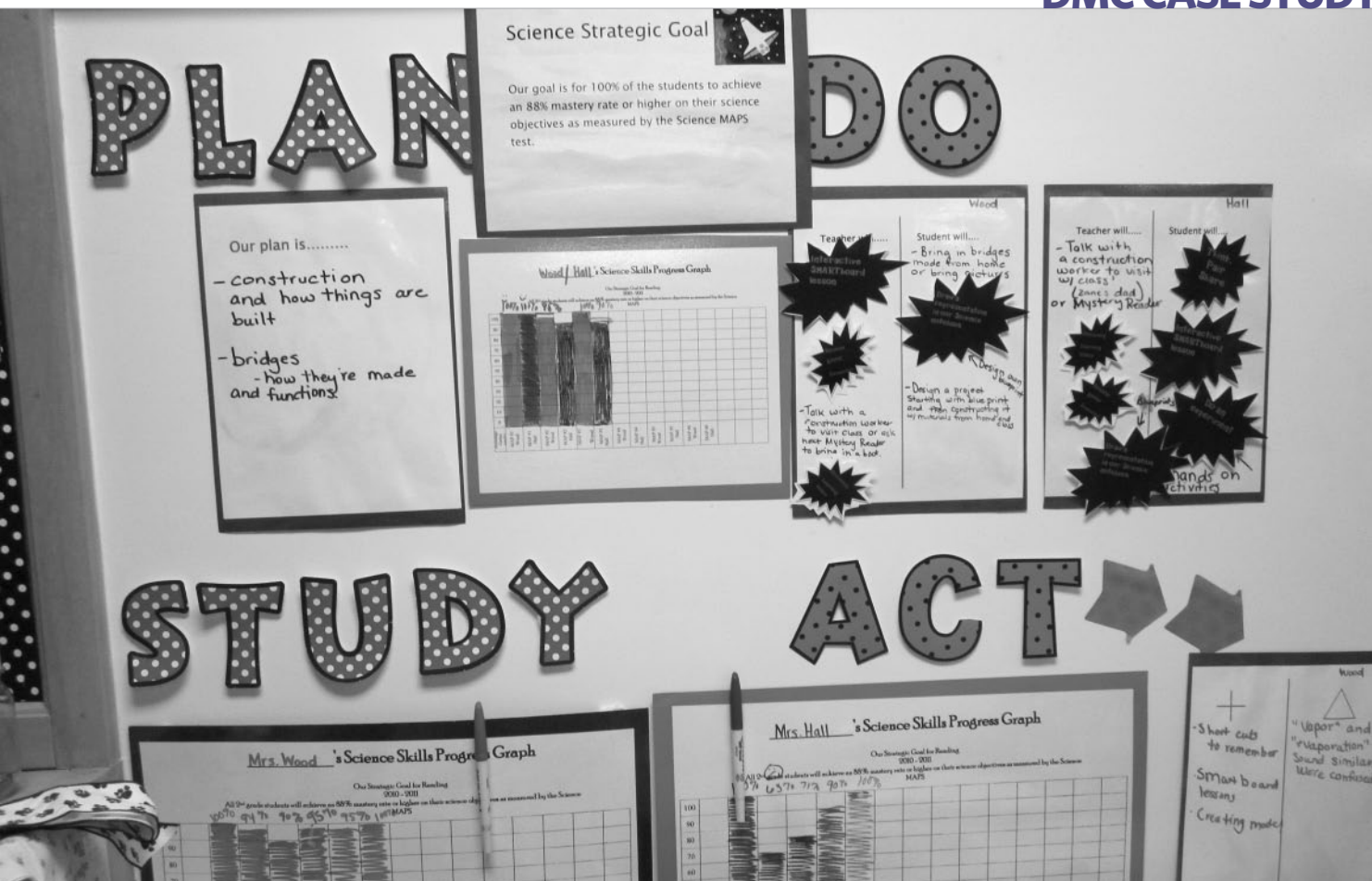
for instruction, discussed how the assessment process has added significant value to the way the district identifies areas for academic improvement. "If a single teacher or school is an outlier in the item analysis, it absolutely removes any excuses. If there is an issue across multiple schools or the district, we have to determine what about that question, be it the way the material was taught or the way the question was asked, caused an issue. We can also use this data to identify effective teachers and learn more about their instructional methods."

In addition to their alignment with the district's goals, these common formative assessments are a best practice for school districts. Their timeliness and frequency allow teachers, departments, and the district to respond in real-time to concerns about student achievement. The district uses these assessments to develop some of its leading and lagging indicators for student success. Students clearly benefit from the real-time information; they can continually monitor their own progress through the execution and continuous refinement of the common formative assessment process.

Staff Commitment, Development, and Quality

Another component of HEB's design around student empowerment and achievement is the recruitment and development of high-quality staff. The district's third goal is framed around "Quality Teaching, Administrative, and Support Staff" (Figure 3). HEB intentionally recruits and cultivates a mission-driven and aligned staff. All steps in the hiring and evaluation process are intentionally focused on developing a continuous improvement-focused district.

The HEB hiring process centers on recruiting individuals who both understand and wish to promote the district goals. Before a hiring decision is made, the prospective employee is walked through full descriptions of the HEB culture and expectations. One of the requirements of employment in HEB is signing a contract detailing a commitment to the district's various goals. The district prides itself on being explicit and honest about performance expectations in the hiring process. Because student empowerment and achievement is such a high priority, the district is only interested in recruiting staff who will embrace HEB's



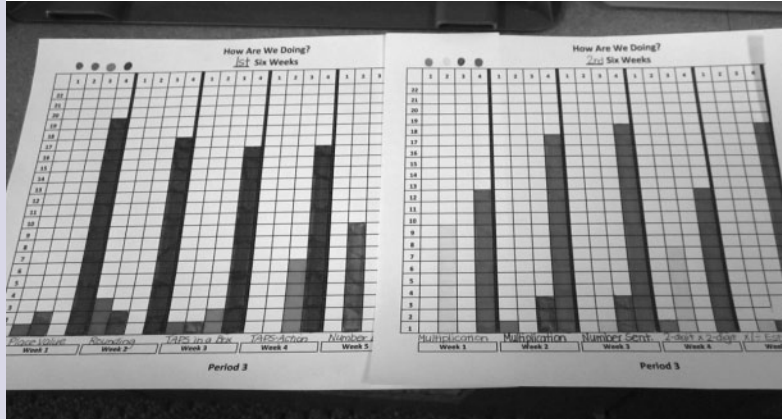
Classrooms in HEB use and display the Plan-Do-Study-Act framework, which guides learning and performance objectives. Students take primary responsibility for maintaining, updating, and acting in accordance with the content of these displays.

characteristics and the strategies it has adopted to ensure its students' success.

After reviewing other districts that had no qualms about removing staff if they could not or would not meet district and individual performance goals, the leadership team at HEB decided to take a clear stance on which attitudes and levels of performance would and would not be acceptable for ongoing employment with the district. The district is willing to "free up the future" of employees who are unable or unwilling to commit to continuous improvement and to demonstrate job performance that is aligned with the district goals. Despite this stance, the district does not have a negative culture. In fact, as a result of the high standards and clear performance criteria, district leadership is able to take enormous pride in its staff, their dedication, and their accomplishments. Because of the common language and shared set of expectations, HEB leadership is confident in the quality of staff throughout the district.

The district maintains specific, aggressive performance expectations of all staff and departments, similar to the way it does with students. Whether a teacher teaches an AP class, where outcomes can be easily framed around AP test scores, or teaches choir, which lacks the same assessment-driven data, the expectations are high. Even elective or extracurricular teaching staff is expected to produce high-quality and award-winning programs which, by nature of their success, afford students even greater opportunities to explore the world around them.

As a result of this focus on performance, professional development is an intentionally designed process at HEB. Every employee, from teachers to maintenance workers, has a professional development plan. The district prides itself on the commitment to continuously developing these individuals' professional abilities. Such a focus on professional development is closely tied to the district's commitment to student achievement, and is based on the belief that developing staff will ▷



Students and staff monitor classroom progress on specific learning objectives. This example shows a math class progressing and mastering a number of concepts over six-week periods.

continue to drive student achievement and empowerment. To this point, teachers receive tiered professional development programming centered on the curriculum, thus explicitly tying teacher development to student achievement.

At HEB, not only does each staff member have a professional development plan, but everyone has day-to-day performance expectations focused on maximizing student achievement and maximizing the allocation and use of resources. Mr. Chapman provided the following examples: “Many of the food service staff help with our Spanish immersion program by speaking to the students in Spanish. Maintenance workers are also aligned with student achievement. They know assessment schedules and don’t do disruptive maintenance work while students are taking assessments.”

Every employee, from teachers to maintenance workers, has a professional development plan.

The Change Process

While much of what is exemplary in HEB now is well developed and refined, it is important to keep in mind that the change process has taken time. The HEB

leadership team readily admits that the district has come a long way, and the district continues to work towards further improvement. For HEB, the continuous improvement model has given the district a positive trajectory. The district is able to appreciate where it is today while simultaneously identifying opportunities for where it would like to be tomorrow.

Coordinators for Quality Learning Ms. Dietra Tuttle and Ms. Karen Miller emphasize the gradual rollout and generation of buy-in that characterized the process of adopting the continuous improvement approach. The Coordinators described how the philosophy was initially implemented on a voluntary basis. After receiving training in continuous improvement in 2005, the district offered this model at the campus level from 2005-2007 to teachers who were interested. As it became clear to district leadership that continuous improvement would be the best guiding philosophy for HEB, the district moved from optional training to mandating that campus staff be trained in continuous improvement in the 2007-08 school year. The district also began to require that its new hires agree to be a part of the continuous improvement process.

At this point of transition, the instructional and curricular focus of the continuous improvement work was implemented with the aim of teaching instructors to look at learning differently. Following closely behind was the goal of ingraining the Plan-Do-Study-Act model into the district’s culture. During this transition, the district also fully developed a new curriculum to support these goals.

As these processes were adopted, teachers were able to see the impact of new instructional strategies. According to the Quality Learning Coordinators, a crucial aspect of these instructional changes was being able to see the impact on student performance. This changed the dynamic in the classrooms of HEB’s schools and generated the necessary momentum to keep the instructional and curricular parts of continuous improvement driving forward.

Today, as a result of the gradual reform, the 26 schools in HEB have complex instructional infrastructures that both keep the focus on student achievement and develop teachers around increased instructional and leadership ability in the classroom and school. In each building, teachers are organized into goal teams,

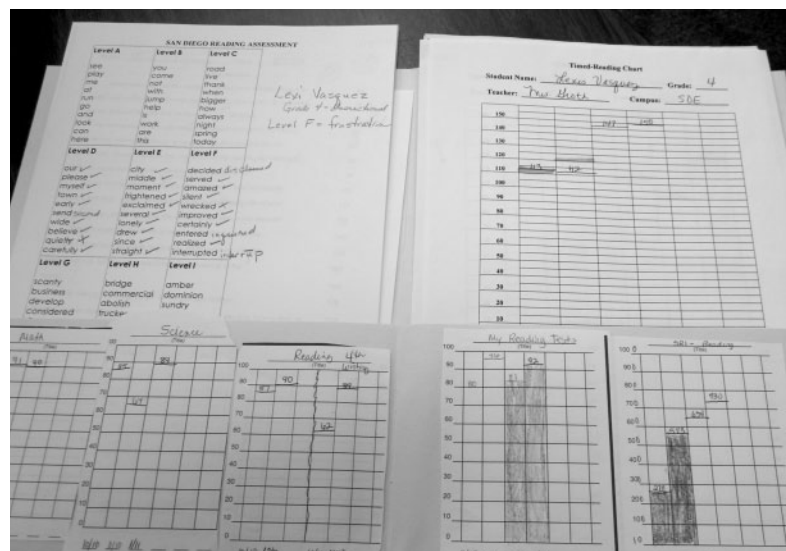
allowing them to work toward continuous improvement-focused goals. Teachers are required to take ownership over the groups, as facilitation and leadership responsibilities shift among group members every few weeks. While the current systems in HEB are far ahead of where they were five years ago, the Quality Learning Coordinators still discuss past successes and concurrently pinpoint opportunities for HEB's continuous improvement. For example, they identify the need for even more consistent understanding and implementation around the Plan-Do-Study-Act framework and expectations surrounding student data folders. They hope to focus more effort on consistency and excellence at the junior high and high school levels, given the increased organizational challenge that the secondary level has posed to the district's continuous improvement framework. The district is also looking to expand a mentorship program for teachers. While there are many different ongoing threads and initiatives within HEB as the leadership looks at school and classroom settings, they are all closely tied to continuously improving student achievement through sound implementation of the district's goals.

The way in which HEB has aligned itself around its goals and the process of continuous improvement has resulted in an increase in the central office's managerial capacity. Ms. Tuttle and Ms. Miller recalled that prior to the continuous improvement focus, the district's 26 schools used to feel like 26 independent school districts. Now, from a school staff and central office perspective, alignment around goals and continuous improvement has made so many processes easier.

Simple, Measurable Goals, and a Clear Trajectory

To only examine HEB's systems and accomplishments as they stand now would belie the process and journey that has helped define the district. Many of its systems and structures are highly complex and very specific, but the foundation of HEB's progress has been, and continues to be, quite simple. The district initially decided on a strategic focus and simple, prioritized goals, coupled with continuous improvement as the catalyst to drive the district forward. From this foundation, HEB, in

efforts led by Dr. Buinger, allowed decision-making at all levels to be driven by clear goals and high expectations of improvement. This has, over time, created an aligned culture known for its high expectations, high performance, and focus on accountability and empowerment of all.



A student's data folder acts as a dashboard to inform important decisions and insights in areas such as time management, study skills, and academic problem areas. Having students create and maintain data folders helps students develop the capacity to manage their own learning and achievement.

Strategic focus on goals and improvement has allowed the district to clearly understand what is important, and in turn, ensure that the focus of efforts and resources is only on prioritized goals that are tied to student achievement. What is *Different by Design* is an efficient and prioritized systems-base that has been generated from relatively simple and all-encompassing priorities. HEB is an example of how defining a focus, defining success, and understanding the trajectory required to get there can provide districts the freedom and opportunity to build a highly engaged and highly functional system.



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