



STAYING THE COURSE



*Sustaining Improvement
in Urban Schools*

*2015 Best Practice Research
from 10 years of the School on the Move Prize*



RESEARCH

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About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

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About EdVestors

EdVestors' mission is to increase the number of schools in Boston delivering dramatically improved educational outcomes for all students. To accomplish this, we provide seed funding for a wide range of school improvement ideas through the School Solutions Seed Fund; we develop demonstration projects and disseminate best practices through the Improving Schools Initiative and the \$100,000 School on the Move Prize; and we drive citywide, systemic change at scale aimed at increasing school quality through the BPS Arts Expansion and Zeroing in on Math initiatives. Since our founding in 2002, we have shown that systemic change that benefits all students is possible when we employ three key levers: strategic philanthropy, education expertise, and tactical support to help good ideas and innovative solutions move to effective implementation in our schools.

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Letter to Colleagues

Dear Colleagues:

Ten years of school improvement! We had little idea when we inaugurated the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize in 2006 that it would not only highlight the hard work of school improvement, but would also be a rich source of learning for others. In this, our 10th anniversary year, in partnership with the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, EdVestors is pleased to release this report: *Staying the Course: Sustaining Improvement in Urban Schools*.

EdVestors annually awards the School on the Move Prize to one of the most improving Boston Public Schools. This \$100,000 Prize shines a spotlight on schools that have experienced significant improvement over multiple years, delivering better outcomes for their students. The Prize is paired with best practice research to provide an opportunity for other schools to learn from the experiences of improving schools. The winning schools have represented all grade levels (elementary, K to 8, middle and high schools) and all types of schools (regular district schools, autonomous schools and, recently, turnaround schools). In spite of this variety, the findings in our 2010 report, *Charting the Course: Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize*, identified four key practices that all rapidly improving schools demonstrate. These early findings continue to hold true. This year's report takes a closer look at what happened to these rapidly improving schools over time – what factors contributed to sustained or continued improvement, and perhaps, more importantly, what impeded their progress.

Much has been written about how schools initially improve, but less about sustaining that improvement. Schools are dynamic institutions existing in an ever-changing ecosystem. How do schools navigate this landscape while forging ahead with their mission to deliver a high-quality education for every student? We hope this report will contribute to the body of knowledge on education reform by providing a road map for schools and districts to create the conditions for continued and sustained improvement, which ultimately leads to higher levels of student success and achievement in all schools.

We salute all the School on the Move winners and finalists and thank them for their continued efforts on behalf of all students and for their willingness to open up their school communities for this study.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura Perille".

Laura Perille
President & CEO



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janet Anderson".

Janet Anderson
Executive Vice President



Introduction

How do schools improve? An extensive body of research suggests that school success comes from establishing a common vision for improvement focused on high expectations for student learning. School leaders play a critical role, guiding teachers on how to help students meet increased expectations and investing parents and families in their vision for the school.¹ While these strategies sound straightforward, implementing them in a way that leads to lasting success is incredibly difficult. In urban environments, sustaining progress is even more daunting. All school communities are complex, but high-poverty urban schools face significant challenges in serving students whose needs extend far beyond academic learning.² And, because so few urban schools have made improvements that are sustained over time, the knowledge base for school- and district-level staff about how to achieve consistent success is notably sparse.³

So how do schools sustain long-term improvement? The answer is not straightforward; in fact, some of the practices that catalyze initial performance gains may not lead to lasting success. Sustainable progress requires educators to ask progressively more complex questions about student learning. A central challenge for schools may, in fact, be the lack of opportunity to learn from what has been previously tried.⁴ In response to external accountability systems, or in an effort to close existing achievement gaps, new policies and interventions are often introduced in rapid succession.⁵ Schools are frequently called on to implement the next round of reforms before putting into practice any lessons learned from previous efforts.⁶ Schools are unlikely to sustain progress when they “implement fast,” but “learn slow.”⁷ Instead, schools that “learn fast to implement well” may be better suited to build upon past practice and find new solutions to persistent problems. The ability to reflect and synthesize lessons learned into school decision-making leads school communities to ask more probing questions about student learning,⁸ and, in turn, to sustain improvement over time.

In this research report, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy examines the difficult process of sustaining improvement in urban schools. Of key interest is examining the tension between strategies that drive initial school improvements and those strategies necessary to sustain long-term progress. The research study focuses on School on the Move (SOM) Prize winners and finalists, a group of urban schools in Boston recognized for exemplary progress in advancing the academic achievement of all students. Since its inception in 2006 by EdVestors, a dynamic school change organization focused on accelerating substantive improvement in urban schools, the SOM Prize has highlighted the work of schools with multi-year improvements in performance. This report discusses the different school improvement approaches that have been tried by these schools—functioning in a large, ever-changing urban school system. Examining how SOM Prize winner and finalist schools have worked to sustain their rapid improvements presents an opportunity to learn key lessons about how to better position all schools for continued success.

Study Approach

Since 2006, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy has conducted several studies documenting effective, research-based practices in SOM Prize-winning schools. The research presented here adds to this body of knowledge by highlighting existing practices that may be sustaining, or driving, continued improvement. To do so, the Rennie Center team analyzed school performance data, focusing on the extent to which SOM Prize winners and finalists have maintained or continued to increase student proficiency. Then, researchers collected data from school leaders and teachers on changes these schools have made to respond to local context—school-level needs or district policies—in an effort to drive continued improvement. The Rennie Center also reviewed school improvement literature on what it takes to sustain changes in urban schools, and sought out examples of existing practices in SOM Prize winners and finalists that align with research-based strategies. Finally, policy considerations synthesize these practices, highlighting suggestions for district and school leaders grappling with how to plot a course for sustained progress. The study focused on three research questions:

1. *What changes have taken place in SOM winner and finalist schools?*
2. *What strategies and practices have these schools implemented in an effort to improve? Which have been sustained over time?*
3. *To what extent are the strategies and practices being implemented by winner and finalist schools aligned with research on sustaining improvement in urban schools?*

The Rennie Center team worked collaboratively with EdVestors to identify the research sample. Researchers invited 18 SOM winner or finalist schools—each with at least two years of post-Prize performance data—to participate in the study. Findings discussed throughout this report are based on evidence from 12 of these 18 schools that opted into the study (see Appendix A for the complete list of study schools), and as such are descriptive in nature. The choices made by schools to bolster improvement may be associated with performance trends, but do not speak to causal relationships between school improvement approach and achievement.

To address the study's research questions, the Rennie Center team conducted the following activities:

- **Analysis of performance data.** Researchers worked with EdVestors to develop a quantitative data profile—largely based on school performance data—of each school in the study. This analysis highlighted trends in school performance (i.e., has school performance continued to improve, plateaued, or declined) in the years since being recognized by the SOM Prize.
- **School survey.** The Rennie Center team developed and administered a survey to capture school-level changes in the years since each school's recognition for the SOM Prize. The school leader, one or more teachers, and at least one member of the school's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) completed the survey at each school.
- **Literature review.** The Rennie Center team reviewed research publications and empirical studies on school-level factors that contribute to the sustainability of school improvement, focusing on studies conducted in urban schools.
- **School visits.** To maximize learning from this study, researchers used school performance and survey data to select a sub-set of four winner/finalist schools to visit. The Rennie Center team purposefully selected at least one school each where strong performance has been improved upon, remained largely the same, or declined. Researchers visited the selected schools to conduct interviews with school leaders, teachers and members of the school leadership team.
- **Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.** Using data gathered from the different study activities, the Rennie Center team conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses to determine common themes among participating schools in regard to performance trends, school changes, and sustainability strategies.



KEY QUESTION:

How do rapidly improving schools perform over time?

Before examining how schools attempt to sustain improvement over time, school performance data was analyzed to determine the extent to which each school demonstrated progress since being recognized by the SOM Prize. The study team analyzed Composite Performance Index (CPI) data derived from Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) performance scores^A and conducted interviews with school leaders and educators to better understand school performance trends. A school's CPI score documents how many students, as a proportion of the school's enrollment, are proficient on annual state assessments.

The majority of schools demonstrate continued improvement in English Language Arts (ELA). Trends in ELA performance for the 12 schools that opted into the study are shown below in Figure 1; CPI data are used to chart school performance from their SOM Prize-recognition year through 2014. Nine of the schools either held steady or saw an increase in CPI since being recognized for the Prize (indicated by a blue or green line, respectively); three schools had a net decrease in CPI (indicated by a red line). Nearly all 12 study schools have consistently outperformed the Boston Public School average performance in ELA during this period.

Figure 1. School on the Move winner and finalist schools' performance in ELA

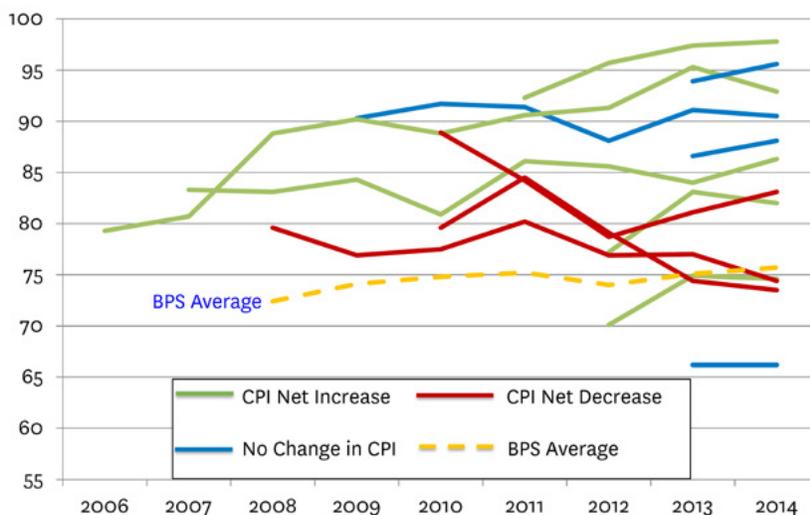


Figure 1 shows CPI points in ELA for each SOM winner and finalist in the study sample since being recognized for the Prize. Schools coded in the "No Change in CPI" category experienced a change of +/- 2 CPI points since their Prize-recognition year.

^A The Composite Performance Index (CPI) measures school-level proficiency. The greater the proportion of students scoring in high-performing MCAS categories (i.e., Advanced, Proficient), the higher will be a school's CPI. If all students in a school are performing at proficiency or higher on the MCAS, a school's CPI will equal 100. If an equal proportion of students are scoring in high-performing and low-performing categories (i.e., Needs Improvement, Warning/Failing), the school's CPI will be closer to 50.

Performance among schools in math is more varied. Trend data charting performance for the 12 study schools in math from their SOM Prize-recognition year through 2014 are shown in Figure 2. Overall, CPI performance data in math demonstrates more variation than in ELA performance. Six schools maintained or improved performance in math since being recognized by the SOM Prize (indicated by blue and green lines, respectively, in Figure 2). On the other hand, six schools had a net decrease in math performance over this time period (indicated by red lines in Figure 2). As is the case with SOM schools' performance in ELA, most SOM study schools continued to outperform the BPS average in math.

Figure 2. School on the Move winner and finalist schools' performance in math

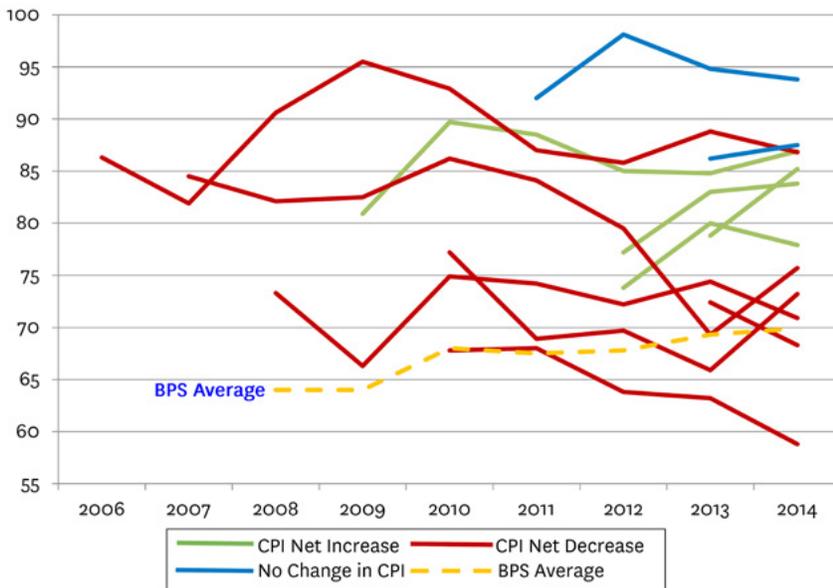


Figure 2 shows CPI points in math for each SOM winner and finalist in the study sample since being recognized for the Prize. Schools coded in the “No Change in CPI category” experienced a change of +/- 2 CPI points since their Prize-recognition year.

Taken together, the data demonstrate diverse performance trends among SOM Prize winners and finalists. Since first being recognized by the SOM Prize, half of the study schools either increased or maintained performance in both ELA and math based on CPI data; two schools declined in both math and ELA. The remaining four schools saw a mix of increases and decreases across the two subjects. More detail on school performance in math and ELA is presented in Table B.1 in Appendix B.

In light of these performance trends, it is helpful to understand how school communities initiate and respond to both school- and district-level challenges. Specifically, what are some of the changes SOM Prize winners and finalists have made since being recognized by the Prize? How have these school changes been initiated? And are there any connections with performance trends? The next phase of the study took up these interesting questions about sustaining school improvement.

KEY QUESTION:

What changes influence a school's ability to sustain improvement?

SOM Prize winners and finalists are not immune to challenges often associated with large urban school systems; schools need to be responsive to changing conditions among students and staff in their buildings, as well as shifting policies articulated by the district. Using survey data from study school leaders and teachers, the research team focused on identifying and analyzing the types of changes schools experienced. Of key interest was whether the schools themselves initiated the change or whether they were responding to changes set in motion by the district.

School on the Move winner and finalist schools are dynamic education institutions. Since being recognized for the SOM Prize, all schools have made changes to core aspects of their instructional program, such as curriculum and professional development. Many schools have also made operational changes, such as adjusting school schedules,

modifying grade configurations, and addressing shifting student enrollment patterns. Schools have also experienced changes in resources and staffing, such as a move to new facilities, integration of new technology, or leader or teacher turnover. Table 1 below details survey responses from school leaders and teachers about the type and source of the change.

Schools initiate most instructional changes. As reported by all survey respondents, core instructional changes—decisions on curriculum and instructional resources, the use of data in supporting classroom practice, and professional supports for teachers—were primarily a result of school-level decision-making. For example, in interviews with educators in selected study schools, leaders reported on changes in professional development offerings over time, establishing annual professional development priorities to align with school improvement goals. However, in contrast to the school-initiated instructional changes, a majority of educators reported that decisions on new academic programs—typically new academic strands implemented across grades to support special populations (e.g., English language learners, special education students)—were made in response to district policy changes.



“We first combined with a K-5 pilot school, then expanded K-8. We are now a full K-8 school with nearly doubled enrollment.”

TEACHER, JOSEPH LEE K-8 SCHOOL
2010 School on the Move Prize Winner

Table 1. School changes and their origins

For an explanation of school change categories, please see additional information in Table B.2, Appendix B.

Category of Change	Type of Change	% School-Driven	% District-Driven	# of Schools
Core Instruction	Behavioral standards	School		11
	Classroom management guidelines	School		11
	Curriculum change	School	D	12
	New curriculum/Instructional materials	School	District	12
	New academic programs	School	District	7
	Performance targets	School	D	12
	Regular reviews of student data	School	D	12
	School-wide professional development priorities	School		12
	Professional development content/plan	School		12
	Teacher collaboration	School	D	12
Operations	Schedule reorganized: timing of instructional blocks	School		6
	Schedule change: time of school day start/end	School	District	2
	New governance structure	School	District	2
	Enrollment change (# students, demographics)	District		8
	Grade level change	District		2
Resources (including staffing)	Technology integration/use	School		11
	Facilities	District		3
	Partnership change	School	District	7
	25%+ teacher turnover	School	District	3
	Principal change	School	District	6



“Our population has shifted as we absorbed another school... We

have needed to refocus our instructional priorities, professional development, hiring practices, and scheduling to serve all the students that now make up the school’s enrollment... We have moved away from district- recommended curricula to our own collaboratively designed units of study.”

**TEACHER, ORCHARD GARDENS
PILOT K-8 SCHOOL**

2013 & 2014 School on the Move Finalist

The district initiates operational changes. Educators reported that district-initiated decisions were likely to introduce operational changes. For example, district policies implemented at these schools modified the grade spans served (e.g., by expanding an elementary school to a K-8 school), changed facilities and school location, and initiated new student enrollment patterns. Enrollment changes—which often result from modifications in the types of programming available at nearby schools—usually led to significant demographic shifts for a school community. School leaders reported that responding to district-driven changes is often as time-consuming as addressing building-level instructional needs, and that it often presents more of a challenge. District-initiated changes often required broad-based implementation, touching multiple aspects of operations (e.g., staffing, school schedule, and transportation) as well as instruction; school leaders needed to respond quickly to be fully prepared for roll-out.

School leaders are implementing many new school-wide initiatives all at once, creating instructional and operational challenges.

Educators expressed frustration with district expectations for school-level changes; they perceived policies as temporary in nature and considered the pace of implementation to be misaligned with other school priorities. In the balance of what school leaders are called to handle, leaders felt stretched to target both building-level instructional priorities and district directives that are often operational and not necessarily aligned with school goals. Policies that have a district-wide focus often clashed with school-level priorities. Nearly universal among SOM school leaders interviewed for this study were concerns about the “pace of change,” or how many school-wide changes they were expected to implement at once. School leaders felt that the pace of change challenged the goal of meeting student learning needs.

Frequency and type of change matter for sustaining school performance. Data suggest a nuanced relationship exists between performance and school-level changes, regardless of whether changes are instructional, operational, or resource-related. While there are no clear patterns in the changes needed to drive improvement in school performance, there are apparent linkages between the types of changes that challenge schools’ ability to continue to improve. (See Table B.1 in Appendix B for a summary of changes in study schools and performance data in both ELA and math). For example, in the six schools that experienced a decline in performance in at least one content area (e.g., ELA or math), or both subjects, school staff reported turnover as a major change. At five of these schools, there was at least one change in leadership; at three of these schools there were multiple levels of turnover (i.e., teacher,^B leader, and partner turnover^C). Nearly all of these schools also simultaneously grappled with operational changes (e.g., changes to the school’s schedule, enrollment)—which survey data identify as district-initiated. To be clear, schools experiencing performance declines did also adopt many of the instructional changes common to most study schools. But, the high frequency and types of changes—including leadership turnover—combined to be important factors limiting higher levels of performance.

^B School leaders and teachers, as part of survey data collection, reported on instances where more than 25 percent of teachers turned over.

^C School leaders and teachers reported on instances of nonprofit or community partner turnover—or where a partnership providing services to the school has ended or changed.

Overall, SOM winner and finalist schools have implemented many new changes since being recognized for exemplary gains in student achievement. Leaders in SOM winner and finalist schools have initiated core instructional strategies—such as introducing new curriculum and professional development offerings as well as refining the ways in which schools use data. Leaders in SOM winner and finalist schools also reported being responsive to new district policies and/or operational changes. They described challenges in balancing the instructional needs of their building with district-initiated policy changes. Finally, school communities have also weathered changes in resources and staffing, most notably a change in leadership. While some SOM schools saw performance declines since winning the Prize, others were better able to manage the balance between instructional needs and new district policies to maintain strong performance, or even drive continued improvement.

KEY QUESTION:

How do schools sustain improvement?

In light of the observed relationship between the types of school changes and performance trends, a deeper analysis of existing practices was needed to understand the ways in which school communities are sustaining improvement. For this stage of the research, the Rennie Center visited four study schools—Charles Sumner Elementary, Joseph Lee K-8, Clarence R. Edwards Middle and Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA)—to analyze ongoing practices. These schools were purposefully selected to profile at least one study school where strong performance had improved, held steady, and declined.

Before meeting with school teams to discuss how they approached continued school improvement, an extensive review of existing literature on school improvement was conducted. This process was not without challenges. The literature on sustaining school improvement can be difficult to interpret; school improvement strategies are notably neither linear nor sequential, and they often overlap.⁹ Table 2 on the next page summarizes some of the key differences identified by school improvement literature between strategies that initiate school improvement, and strategies that sustain and/or drive improvement over time. Common across existing literature is a focus on the need for school communities to “identify and progressively solve more difficult and challenging questions of student learning”¹⁰ in an effort to continue to improve.

Deeper analysis of the schools visited revealed that in settings where strong performance has been maintained or improved, schools are working to pose and answer complex questions about student learning—a key strategy for sustaining school improvement as outlined above and in Table 2. In contrast, where a decline in school performance has eroded previously achieved gains, research-based practices have not been fully or consistently embedded in school practice. Overall, several cross-cutting themes from school improvement literature were evident in visited schools—albeit in varying degrees—that maintained strong performance:

- Leaders engage teachers in school improvement efforts, starting with a shared student-centric vision.
- Leaders cultivate a school community that values collaboration and continuous learning for all educators.
- Schools use data to make a comprehensive set of decisions on improving student learning.
- A culture of high expectations drives instructional practice.
- Educators invest the entire school community in the vision for the school.

Implementation of these practices in SOM winner and finalist schools are highlighted below. The accompanying text boxes allow the reader to dig deeper and review more illustrative examples of how research-based practices are being implemented in study schools.

Leaders engage teachers in school improvement efforts, starting with a shared student-centric vision. School improvement literature posits that bringing together faculty, students, and parents around a common mission and

commitment to quality can help ensure educational activities are focused on student learning and spur action to overcome persistent challenges.²⁸ To successfully implement a student-centric vision, teams of educators, including school leaders and teachers working together to identify priorities, serve as catalysts for the vision-setting process.²⁹ These teams also maintain a commitment to this vision over time.³⁰

In SOM winner and finalist schools, school leaders have typically led collaborative processes with extensive teacher involvement to develop a vision for the school based on expectations for academics and school climate. Many leaders started with implementing changes in school climate, garnering teachers’ buy-in for the kind of school environment that was desired, and then tackled more challenging questions on student learning. At the Charles Sumner Elementary School, school-wide implementation of a positive behavior system produced desired improvements in school climate and afforded the principal the ability to focus more exclusively on student learning issues with a high level of buy-in among educators. At all study schools, the vision-setting process has been anything but static. Leaders and teachers work together annually to set and pursue specific school goals, often using formal protocols to re-visit the alignment between school mission and student learning priorities. All of the schools use performance targets to identify and decide on specific instructional goals—such as improving reading comprehension and providing writing practice—that align with a student-centered school vision.

Table 2. Initiating and sustaining school improvement: A summary of research-based strategies^D

	<i>To initiate improvement, school community members begin to address core instructional issues by:</i>	<i>To sustain improvement, school community members dig deeper on challenging questions of student learning by:</i>
Strong leadership and shared ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing a student-centric vision among the members of the school community Identifying a cadre of teachers for leadership roles in the school¹¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing collective responsibility for a vision for student learning¹² Engaging teachers in school improvement and building their leadership capacity¹³ Facilitating participation for all educators in the building through teacher leaders¹⁴ Teachers and all staff actively participating in decision-making¹⁵
Meaningful teacher collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outlining expectations for feedback (e.g., educators will regularly receive feedback and modify classroom practices)¹⁶ Setting aside time for educators to collaborate on issues affecting classroom instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fostering a professional culture that values continuous learning for all educators¹⁷ Establishing collaborative work routines among teachers that focuses on student learning priorities Adopting and routinizing peer feedback opportunities¹⁸
Effective use of data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilizing grade-level-appropriate assessments¹⁹ Reviewing student performance to identify gaps in student mastery²⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using data to guide school-wide decisions on instruction Identifying classroom practices that are, and are not, working to improve student learning Developing pedagogical approaches aligned with gaps in student mastery
Academic rigor and student support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing a safe and orderly environment²¹ Endorsing ambitious behavioral and academic expectations for all students²² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internalizing a culture of high expectations for teachers and students Identifying specific annual student learning priorities (aligned with school vision)²³ Developing instructional materials and resources that align with expectations²⁴
Effective family and community partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicating regularly with parents about school priorities²⁵ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investing the entire school community—including students, parents, and families—in the vision for the school²⁶ Linking student performance and school improvement goals in a manner accessible to families²⁷

^D The categories in Table 2 are based on the five key practices and essential conditions for rapid school improvement which formed the foundation of EdVestors’ Improving Schools Initiative (ISI), launched in 2012. Literature on urban school reform, like *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, and EdVestors’/Rennie Center’s own *Charting the Course: Four Years of the Thomas Payzant School on the Move Prize* form the basis for the ISI initiative and framework.

Leaders cultivate a school community supporting continuous learning and collaboration. According to the research literature, sustained school improvement requires a positive environment that values and supports continuous collaboration and learning among staff, leading to deep staff investment in the improvement process.³¹ Typically, school leaders provide time and resources during the school day so teams of teachers can work on issues of student learning.³² Effective communities of practice provide opportunities for teachers to refine their skills by discussing new practices that they have tried and debriefing what they are learning.³³ When the school has cultivated a professional culture of learning among educators, staff members are more likely to seek feedback about their classroom practices.³⁴ Over time, school leaders and teachers gain a sense of collective responsibility for all students' achievement.³⁵

Nearly all of the study schools visited have teacher-led teams that bring together a diverse set of educators, including specialists and interventionists, to tackle student learning challenges together during commonly scheduled planning blocks.^E At the Joseph Lee K-8 School, teacher-led content teams typically identify a particular standard or skill and bring a lesson plan, an instructional activity, and student work samples to team meetings to compare expectations for student work. Discussion then centers on how teachers can use different techniques to support student mastery, especially where learning gains remain elusive. Over time, this level of collaboration—with dedicated meeting time scheduled by a school leader—has brought forth a professional culture focused on continuous learning.

At three of the SOM schools visited for this study—where strong performance has largely been sustained or improved—teachers describe a working environment characterized by a culture of “transparency and trust.” Teachers seek each other out for support, making peer observations common in most study schools as teachers “feel safe” having colleagues observe their practice. Leaders are intentional about introducing the professional culture to new teachers.

As Brett Dickens, the headmaster at BCLA, explains: “The culture of our building is not explained, it’s part of what you see when you work with other teachers. [We] give new people mentoring that is intentional; [we] show them practice that is good enough to spread, think about who is a good fit to make them feel welcome, and provide feedback, from the beginning, in a non-threatening way.”



How can building a student-centric vision drive school improvement? Lessons learned from Boston Community Leadership Academy

Since being identified as a School on the Move Prize winner, school leaders and teachers at Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA) have worked together to refine the school’s mission of cultivating community leadership among students—a critical aspect of the staff’s vision for the school. The current headmaster, Brett Dickens, arrived at the school four years ago focused on strengthening the community leadership mission. As a BCLA teacher describes: “When Brett came in 2011-12, among her first questions were: Where’s the community leadership? What part of what you do with students is defining how to be a community leader?”

Headmaster Dickens established a task force of teachers to work on the challenging questions of what it means to be a community leader and what kinds of educational experiences might provide a sense of community leadership for students. Among the first activities of the task force was to find out more about teacher perspectives. The answer was pretty clear: 70 percent of teachers reported that community leadership needed to be better defined, and a similar majority of teachers thought that student learning opportunities at BCLA should include a focus on leadership.

While the community leadership component is “still under development,” leaders and teachers have created a vision for this aspect of students’ learning, including a significant time commitment to community service. Educators at BCLA continue to develop specific learning opportunities for students that align with their evolving definition of community leadership and meet the expectations for student learning set forth by the school vision.

^E Survey respondents in all 12 study schools reported having time/opportunity to regularly collaborate with other teachers in their school.



“Despite adding an additional inclusion strand, our principal has managed to give each grade level time for intervention blocks, progress monitoring blocks, and common planning time for grade level teams.”

**TEACHER, CHARLES SUMNER
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**
2012 School on the Move Finalist



“We now have a focus on aligning our curriculum to the Common Core and preparing students for PARCC and AP courses...We’re doing this school-wide with a cycle of inquiry led by each content team each year, and it’s a focus for professional development, too.”

TEACHER, NEW MISSION HIGH SCHOOL
2012 School on the Move Prize Winner

A culture of high expectations drives instructional practice.

School improvement literature points to the importance of teachers and leaders working together to articulate how all the adults in the school can support student learning at high levels.³⁶ Educators collaborate on how instructional practices can be designed for all students to master rigorous content. School communities develop classroom-based resources (e.g., benchmark documents, curriculum maps, and weekly calendars) that act as “road maps” in reaching school improvement goals.³⁷ Over time, this influences school leader and teacher mindset about the learning possibilities for students.

Across all the SOM schools visited, teachers engage in conversations focused on aligning expectations. In a few of the schools, these conversations about new curriculum and instructional materials are leading to a purposeful change in teacher mindset about the kinds of rigorous work that students can learn and do—a key prerequisite for sustaining school improvement. In short, teachers have internalized new expectations (largely due to new district curriculum frameworks aligned with national Common Core State Standards),^F and they now hold themselves accountable for these new levels of student learning. As a teacher at the Joseph Lee K-8 School describes, “[I]n the old days, we might have said [the students] can’t do this [level of work]. Now it’s more like how do we think about getting them to do it. We monitor our ‘can’t’ statements.”

Schools use data to guide a comprehensive set of decisions on improving student learning.

School improvement literature supports the notion that sustained school improvement requires using data on what’s working to inform practices in curriculum, instruction, and student supports.³⁸ The strategic use of data seems to prompt a more focused improvement-oriented conversation in schools as school staff routinely collaborate on classroom-level instructional changes that are needed to improve student mastery.³⁹ Additionally, when teachers and leaders become more practiced with using data, they often develop their own tools or protocols to help colleagues understand results.⁴⁰

As discussed, the SOM schools visited have implemented school-wide routines regarding setting annual student learning goals aligned to the vision for the school. Perhaps what is more important for sustaining school improvement, however, is the ways in which leaders and teachers use student performance data to answer questions about how students are making progress toward grade-level benchmarks. To gauge students’ skill development more regularly, for example, teachers map the alignment between classroom-based assessments (e.g., quizzes, chapter tests, exit tickets given at least weekly) and school-wide formative assessments (given every six to eight weeks).

^F Survey respondents in all 12 study schools reported implementing a new curriculum and/or using new instructional materials since being recognized for the SOM Prize.

Teams of educators at the Joseph Lee K-8 School and BCLA are creating new formative assessments that more closely align with student learning priorities and classroom instruction. This affords teachers the ability to carefully monitor student mastery of content, especially after implementing a re-teaching plan or using new pedagogical approaches to cover challenging content.

While all SOM schools were using data in some way at the time they were recognized for the Prize,⁶ reviews of student data at these schools now involve a diverse array of staff. At BCLA, non-instructional staff members (such as social workers and counselors) join discussions incorporating data on academic and non-academic issues (e.g., student behavior, tardiness, home life) aimed at achieving a more comprehensive notion of student support.

Educators invest the entire school community in a vision for school improvement. In school communities where students and families are actively engaged, the expectation that all students can learn at high levels is purposefully and regularly communicated with the entire school community, including students and their families.⁴¹ In addition, all members of the school community—staff, students, and parents—have a voice in school-level decisions.⁴²

School leaders and teachers in visited schools maintain a number of internal communication protocols to keep the school community focused on high expectations for students. Leaders and teachers, for example, open many meetings and building-based professional development sessions with explicit statements about the goals for student learning. These schools have not yet universally built the kinds of connections necessary to fully involve families in school-level planning and decision-making. However, they have established thoughtful strategies for apprising students and their parents of school improvement goals and protocols for reviewing individual performance data. The next step is to move from a process of sharing information to involving families directly, and more deeply, in sustaining each school's vision.

How does data use deliver on high expectations? Lessons learned from the Joseph Lee K-8 School

At the Joseph Lee K-8 School, leaders and teachers work collaboratively on classroom-based assessment practices in an effort to develop common routines to monitor individual students' progress toward grade-level benchmarks. Most of these classroom-based assessments are developed by grade-level teams and exist as a supplement to school-wide data inquiry cycles structured around externally developed formative assessments that are administered every six weeks.

Perhaps more important is what teachers at the Lee do with the information about student performance gained from these assessment routines. Each student assignment is returned with a copy of a completed, student-friendly rubric to provide meaningful and purposeful guidance on how to improve. In the words of a Lee teacher, "It's more effective than giving students grades."

Educators also communicate directly and frequently with students about their performance. Teachers set up instructional activities to have students reflect on their performance: "[We] look at student work together; sometimes it's one-on-one, other times it's a group activity to critique each other's work." Teachers use a question posed to the student to guide these weekly or bi-weekly conversations: "This is where you are. What do you think?" These conversations articulate a specific goal for learning, personalized for the student, while also allowing teachers to look for opportunities to recognize and praise improvements.



⁶ Survey respondents in all 12 study schools reported changes in the ways in which student performance data are used to support decision-making about student learning.

Considerations

As the School on the Move Prize approaches its tenth anniversary, the experiences of Prize winners and finalists highlight a number of important themes about how urban schools can sustain improvement. According to the empirical literature, and evidence from the SOM study schools, addressing increasingly complex issues of student learning is a key prerequisite to sustaining school improvement. In SOM study schools where strong performance has held steady or improved, leaders have maintained a consistent vision for student learning. Educators in these schools have developed a professional working culture where continuous learning is prioritized; teachers seek out peers for support, guidance, and feedback on their classroom practice. Leaders engage teams of teachers in school improvement efforts and aspire to integrate parents and families more fully into the school community. Informed by these findings, the Rennie Center offers the following policy considerations for district and school leaders.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

Consider school capacity for change and the pace of implementation when devising district-wide improvement plans. This study reveals that leaders in SOM Prize winner and finalist schools are constantly balancing choices about competing priorities. Leaders must decide how to allocate resources and capacity across building-level instructional needs, new district policies, and changes in available resources. If educators are frequently implementing new initiatives, attention and capacity—necessary for ensuring full implementation—may be sacrificed. Further, asking school leaders to add new priorities often constrains their ability to determine which school improvement approaches are working and why. Over time, the value of different school improvement strategies can become less clear if educators, especially school leaders, lack purposeful opportunities to determine which aspects of their approach are most effective for making and sustaining improvements at their school.

Reflect on leadership “fit” and professional culture in making decisions on new school leaders. In study schools where leadership changes occurred, they were seen as moments of transition that challenged the existing vision for school improvement. More successful leadership transitions were often characterized by a consideration of the school’s professional working culture. For example, many SOM Prize winners and finalists possess mature models of teacher leadership; teachers are invested in their school’s mission and current practices that drive particular improvement strategies. When such schools face a change in leadership, selecting a new principal whose leadership style complements this professional culture of participatory leadership seems key. Incorporating teacher voice into the hiring process is another critical strategy to promote the effective placement of new leaders, especially in schools that are high-performing.

Differentiate supports offered to schools based on performance and existing practice. Schools that have demonstrated evidence of success implementing key school improvement practices need different supports from district leaders than struggling schools. Leaders in schools with embedded school improvement practices need to be given an opportunity to reflect on the approaches that are working and a commitment from district leaders to “stay the course” with an established vision for the school. Where and when major changes are called for (e.g., grade level configurations, specific programs for students, merging with other lower-performing schools), these changes need to be carefully considered and made in collaboration with the school leader and the broader teacher community with enough time to plan for implementation and roll-out. Further, unintended consequences of changes to schools within the same neighborhood need to factor into any decision-making.

Cultivate and develop school leaders and leadership teams. In the SOM schools visited for this study where strong performance has been sustained or improved, leaders have built capacity in teacher-led teams to drive instructional changes. To create this collaborative culture, leaders at these schools prioritize managing their teams effectively and promote a shared focus on student learning that can drive further school improvement. Leaders identify strong practices in their buildings that can be shared and develop cadres of teacher-leaders to strengthen instruction school-wide. It

seems critical, therefore, for the district to expand access to leadership training programs and ensure that leadership training includes a focus on managing teacher teams toward successful student learning outcomes. Some leadership training programs like these already exist; the district can work to ensure that every new BPS leader has the opportunity to complete an in-school residency program prior to becoming a principal or headmaster.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Set annual goals linked to the school’s vision and measure progress regularly toward these goals. In SOM Prize winner and finalist schools where performance is steady or continuing to improve, leaders have charted annual goals consistent with their vision for the school. In a number of SOM schools, this plays out in a collaborative goal-setting process that engages leaders and teachers in identifying relevant, challenging issues of student learning. Improvement strategies are consistently reviewed and refined, but the overall commitment to high performance is maintained. Teachers see their daily work in classrooms “rolling up” to a larger school improvement goal, which strengthens buy-in. Leaders place a high value on explicitly linking annual goals to progress monitoring routines.

In schools where strong performance has been maintained or improved upon, teacher teams also use sophisticated student assessment practices to produce specific performance data that measures learning progress. Doing so provides teachers with clear information on existing gaps in student mastery, allowing them to re-teach content as needed.

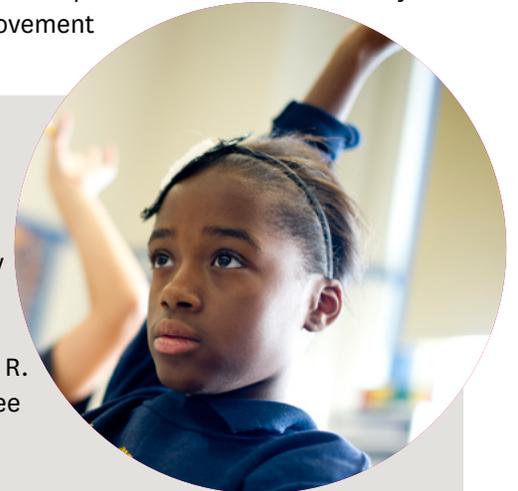
Build a professional working culture focused on high expectations and accompanied by regular feedback opportunities. Teacher buy-in to a school-wide culture of high expectations has emerged as a key ingredient for sustaining positive school climate, student learning, and school performance. In SOM schools where performance has held steady or improved, a strong professional culture has been a major part of the school improvement

How do changes in leadership impact urban schools? Lessons learned from the Edwards Middle School

SOM Prize winners and finalists are not immune to the challenges faced by many schools in large urban districts, including leader and staff turnover. Leadership turnover can have a significant impact on a school’s chance to translate promising gains into a sustainable school improvement trajectory. The Clarence R. Edwards Middle School in the Charlestown neighborhood of Boston has had three principals since being recognized as a finalist for the 2010 SOM Prize.

Multiple changes in leadership brought different perspectives on how best to achieve the school’s vision, as well as new ideas on how adults in the building are best positioned to support student learning. Previously, when strong teacher leadership models were in place, teacher leaders led content teams and grade-level teams focused on supporting student learning needs. Blocks of common planning time were scheduled during the school day and available for teams to use at their discretion to tackle issues of student learning.

Following leadership changes, teacher teams did not have the same opportunities to make decisions about instructional issues and act upon these decisions; teacher-leadership became a more elusive factor in school-level decision-making. As one teacher noted: “Before, ideas came from the staff as a whole and we, administration and staff, came together around an idea and operationalized it together. Now, ideas come to the staff, and the staff act on them.” With the current principal in the third year of his tenure at the Edwards, the school community is re-committing to instructional goals after a period of transition. School leaders have taken steps to re-design the Instructional Leadership Team and have re-engaged with critical school partners. Moving forward requires leaders and teachers to invest in new ways of working together to achieve collaborative practice focused on student learning, a key strategy in improving and sustaining schools.



approach. As the next step in a few schools, leaders have established routines for peer feedback among teacher teams. These feedback routines reinforce notions of high expectations for teachers' practice, allowing teachers to reflect on classroom practices they think are "good enough" to demonstrate to colleagues. Teachers also report the benefits of explicit communication about expectations for their work and the specific, timely guidance that peers can provide (including the value of receiving feedback anchored in a classroom setting); these become models of practices to use with students. And over time, peer feedback routines can foster a culture of transparency and trust that characterizes the professional working culture in selected SOM schools.

Initiate a school-wide focus on tackling progressively more challenging questions about student learning. More than any other school improvement practice, supporting a school-wide focus on engaging complex issues of student learning is key to sustaining, and driving, improved school performance. Critical prerequisites need to be in place for school communities to be able to do so over time. For example, school leaders need to maintain consistency with the student-centric vision that has been collaboratively developed for the school. Leaders and teachers need to uphold a commitment to a professional working culture focused on continuous learning and trust. With these in place, leaders are well-positioned to be able to reflect on what school improvement strategies are effective for their school community, and perhaps more importantly, which are not. This chance for reflection presents an important opportunity for school-wide collaboration on issues of student learning and ensures that increasingly challenging questions of student learning are routinely considered.

Seek out opportunities to invest the entire school community in student learning priorities. Engaging the entire school community—including students and their families—may be among the most challenging evidence-based school improvement practices for urban schools to implement. Even in SOM schools where strong performance has been sustained or improved, parents and students do not yet substantially influence the setting of school-level priorities—as research would suggest is crucial for sustaining improvement. However, leaders and teachers in these schools are expanding how they work with students and their families in regard to goals for student learning. Some schools have regular, one-on-one conversations with students about their performance. Other schools provide a data orientation for parents, followed by conversations to gather parent perspectives on student performance. Teachers regularly ask students and parents simple, straightforward questions, such as "What do you think about how you/your child did?" Teachers report that, over time, these routines have translated into more parents attending orientation activities and a greater awareness about school goals among parents who have participated in these engagement opportunities.

Conclusion

Sustaining school improvement is challenging, characterized by a set of choices that are neither linear, nor sequential in nature. Research-based practice suggests school communities need to address the increasingly complex issue of student learning. This often requires a professional working culture where continuous learning is prioritized so that school leaders and teachers can act on a set of high expectations for students. A number of SOM winner and finalists have overcome the inherent challenges of urban education—navigating an ever-changing school system, while working to meet the demands of their own school contexts—that have proven daunting to many other schools. In highlighting what it takes to sustain improvement, this report provides key lessons learned from SOM school communities in the hope that these will create an opportunity for many other schools, and the districts in which they reside, to reflect on their own practice as a precursor to driving further improvement in an effort to deliver a high-quality education to all students.



William Monroe Trotter Innovation School: 2014 School on the Move winner on a path to sustaining rapid growth

As part of this study, the Rennie Center team visited the most recent SOM winner, the William Monroe Trotter Innovation School in the Grove Hall neighborhood of Roxbury. During its prize-winning year, the Trotter enrolled more than 400 students, 84 percent of whom met the state’s low-income definition. The study team interviewed school leaders and teachers about the practices thought to contribute to the school’s strong performance, and what they believe will be needed to maintain improvements and long-term success.

When Principal Mairead Nolan and Assistant Principal Romaine Mills-Teque arrived at the school seven years ago, they set a goal: 90 percent of students should be achieving in the advanced or proficient performance categories on the MCAS, and no student should be failing. But, in the words of Principal Nolan, “[We] knew we had a lot of goals to accomplish before we could accomplish that.” The new leaders conducted home visits with many Trotter families in the weeks before school started. They heard nearly universal concerns about safety and discipline issues at the Trotter, comments echoed by educators and staff at the school. Principal Nolan described the very difficult decision to not focus on broad-based instructional changes in the first year: “[The school] was wild. Kids running everywhere, fire drills every week, fights every day; [we] wanted to focus on instruction, but had to get everything under control first.”

Very quickly, the school community became invested in the new leadership team, witnessing steady progress as school climate improved. Within two years, however, a new challenge presented itself as the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education identified the Trotter as a turnaround school, requiring tough choices for the leadership team as they were obligated to re-staff at least half of the school’s teaching positions. The leadership team stayed focused on the long-term performance goals they set when they arrived and communicated clearly with teacher candidates about their roles in helping achieve these goals. As Principal Nolan stated, “Before turnaround, [teachers] were grateful to have people come in, roll up their sleeves, and get the school in order. After turnaround, [we] felt like we had buy-in for the vision of the school.”

Leaders and teachers (both veterans and those newly hired) began to collaborate by setting annual learning priorities. Leaders developed rubrics for providing feedback and observed teachers multiple times each month. Peer observations were also introduced and focused on highlighting and sharing effective practices. As a teacher stated: “There is thoughtful planning and teaching [here]. You’re not by yourself, you are always being supported.” Teachers, in turn, did the same for students, developing rubrics that provided students with feedback on how to make improvements on assignments and meet grade-level benchmarks.

These promising practices—and the progress that followed—garnered recognition; as one teacher related, “The rest of the district knows about us: the hard work and the improvements. This gives us hopefulness.” Challenges remain, of course. During the 2014-15 school year, the district selected the school for expansion to a K-8 school. This decision came at a time when the leadership team was focused on other priorities, particularly the academic challenges of preparing students for new, more rigorous assessments and a school-initiated transition to innovation school status, which would allow the school to operate with more decision-making autonomy.

In moving forward, the leaders of the Trotter will tackle challenging issues of student learning, guided by the vision for the school that has driven progress against performance goals thus far. As Assistant Principal Mills-Teque describes: “We’re very proud of what we’ve been able to do here; we don’t need the bells and whistles, or the glory. We’re just very focused on the work.”

Appendix A Schools Participating in the Study

Below is a list of the 12 School on the Move winner and finalist schools that participated in this research study. Schools are listed alphabetically, and those selected for school visits appear in bold.

Boston Community Leadership Academy, 2006 & 2007 Finalist, 2009 Winner

Charles Sumner Elementary School, 2012 Finalist

Clarence R. Edwards Middle School, 2010 Finalist, 2011 Winner

Excel High School, 2007 Winner

George H. Conley Elementary School, 2013 Winner

Joseph J. Hurley K-8 School, 2012 & 2014 Finalist

Joseph Lee K-8 School, 2010 Winner

New Mission High School, 2011 Finalist, 2012 Winner

Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School, 2013 & 2014 Finalist

Rafael Hernandez K-8 School, 2008 Finalist

Urban Science Academy, 2011 & 2013 Finalist

Warren-Prescott K-8 School, 2009 Finalist

Appendix B Changes in Schools

Tables B.1 and B.2 document the school-level changes that have been made by these schools; this data was gathered from the school leader and teacher surveys administered for the purposes of this study. Tables B.1 and B.2 present changes described as “major” by a majority of school staff.

Table B.1 organizes schools by the year they were first identified as a SOM finalist or winning school, from Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA) in 2006 to the George H. Conley Elementary School (Conley) in 2013. Table B.2 organizes schools by the number and type of changes made by schools.

Table B.1: Performance Trend in English Language Arts (ELA) and math and Category of School Changes

	BCLA	Excel	Hernandez	Warren Prescott	Edwards	Lee	Urban Science Academy	New Mission	Sumner	Hurley	Orchard Gardens	Conley
Performance Summary												
ELA												
Math												
Category of School Change												
Instructional Core	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Operations	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Resources	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	-	*
	LTP	LTP	LP	P	LLL	TP	LP	P	-	-	L	-

Table B.1 Key

Table B.1 describes the changes in performance, measured by Composite Performance Index scores, among the 12 study schools.

	Increase of more than 6 CPI points
	Increase of between 2 and 6 CPI points
	A change of less than 2 CPI points
	Decrease of between 2 and 6 CPI points
	Decrease of more than 6 CPI points

✓	= School has made a change in this category
-	= School has not made a change in this category
*	(Resources category) = School experienced changes in technology/facilities
L	(Resources category) = School experienced change in school leader
T	(Resources category) = School experienced teacher turnover greater than 25%
P	(Resources category) = School experienced change in partnerships

Table B.2. Number and Type of Changes by School

Type of Change	Category of Change	Lee	BCLA	Excel	Sumner	Edwards	Orchard Gardens	Urban Science	Warren Prescott	Conley	Hernandez	New Mission	Hurley
Curriculum change	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
New curriculum	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Performance targets	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Data reviews	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teacher collaboration	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Professional development priorities	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Professional development plans	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Behavioral standards	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Classroom management guidelines	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
Technology	RES	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Enrollment change	OPER	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-
New academic options	CORE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	✓	-	-	-
Partnership change	RES	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	-
Schedule reorganized	OPER	✓	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓	-	-	✓
Principal change/turnover	RES	-	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	-	-	✓	-	-
Facilities	RES	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Teacher change/turnover	RES	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
New governance structure	OPER	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grade level change	OPER	✓	-	-	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Schedule change	OPER	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total Changes		19	18	16	14	13	13	13	13	12	12	11	9

Table B.2 Key

Instructional Core (CORE) includes:

- curriculum - new classroom-level curriculum in at least one subject; new instructional materials; new academic programs (e.g., inclusive classrooms, new special education strands);
- behavioral standards - student code of conduct; positive behavior interventions; classroom management guidelines;
- data use - setting performance targets for school-wide goals; regular reviews of student data; and
- professional development - priorities for educators; developing content for professional development sessions; creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate.

Operations (OPER) includes:

- schedule - school-wide change in school day start and end times; re-organization of instructional time/blocks during the school day;
- governance structure;
- enrollment patterns; and
- grade levels offered.

Resources (RES) includes:

- facilities - moving to a new school building, and/or new location;
- technology integration;
- staffing - principal turnover; teacher turnover of 25% or more; and
- partnerships – adding/ending relationships with school partners that engage in the delivery of services or instruction.

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