

ALABAMA DISTRICT
IMPROVES BY SHARPENING

DATA
&
GOALS

BY JANE L. NEWMAN

W

hen students already are achieving at high levels, it

can be easy for teachers to become complacent. However, Mountain Brook Schools in suburban Birmingham, Ala., has developed a culture committed to continuous improvement that has resulted in an excellent system becoming outstanding. How has the district continued to reach new levels of student achievement? The key is professional development.

Professional learning has become such a part of the system's culture that it is now integral to each of 14 goals in the district's strategic plan and is explicit in two goals:

- To design and implement an effective, challenging,

and engaging curriculum that promotes the highest level of academic excellence and personal growth for each student; and

- To design, implement, and support an exemplary professional development program.

"Often when student achievement is very high, it is difficult to push for more improvement," said Superintendent Charles Mason, "but in our community, it has become a part of the culture of learning that we always strive to do better." (Mason is an NSDC board member.)

Mountain Brook Schools tallies a record of achievement

- **Brookwood** Forest Elementary, Crestline Elementary, Mountain Brook Junior High School, and Mountain Brook High School have earned Blue Ribbon Awards for Excellence from the U.S. Department of Education. The high school has achieved the award twice.
- **Mountain Brook** High School was ranked among the top 100 high schools in America by *Newsweek* magazine in 1983, 1992, 1997, 1998, 2000, and 2005.
- **Students** in grades 5, 7, and 10 scored highest in the state on the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing. Mountain Brook students' scores on the 2004-05 Stanford Achievement Test (SAT 10) were highest in the state in every grade tested.
- **In 2005**, Mountain Brook students took

658 Advanced Placement exams, up from 177 exams in 1992. Even with the increase, results remain high. Students scored a 3 or better on 560 exams. Mountain Brook High School was honored by the College Board's Advanced Placement Program for outstanding support and participation in the AP program.

- **While state** and national composite ACT scores have remained constant, Mountain Brook High School has consistently improved scores over the past decade, even as 90% of students take the exam. In 2004, the school's average composite score was 25.4. Alabama's average composite score was 20.2, and the U.S. composite was 20.9.
- **In fall 2004**, 83% of first-time test takers scored at or above grade level on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test, and after teachers

improved instruction, 93% scored at or above grade level in spring 2005.

- **More than 400** Mountain Brook High School students have been National Merit Finalists.
- **Thirty-one** teachers are National Board Certified.
- **Mountain Brook** Schools was awarded Gold Medal status in 2005 by *Expansion Management* magazine, a publication for companies' leaders to judge potential workforce quality in making expansion decisions. Schools are rated based on graduation rate, the community's financial commitment to education, and the community's adult education and income levels.
- **In 2000**, the U.S. Department of Education selected Mountain Brook Schools to receive the National Award for Model Professional Development.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF IMPROVEMENT

It wasn't always so. When Mason became the district's superintendent in 1993, the district's professional learning program centered on one-shot, hit-or-miss, sit-and-get experiences. Mason's vision for school improvement included a state-of-the-art professional development pro-

gram. He addressed the district's learning culture by appointing a task force of teachers, support staff,

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administrators, and community members to develop a plan for staff development. The task force used Fred Wood's model (1987, 1993) of readiness, planning, learning, implementation, and maintenance to create a plan that addresses the:

- Purposes, benefits, and advantages of professional development;
- Current research on the characteristics of effective professional development activities;
- Program areas of a comprehensive professional development program;
- Processes that should be used to plan, implement, and evaluate a

- comprehensive program; and
- Current resources available for professional development.

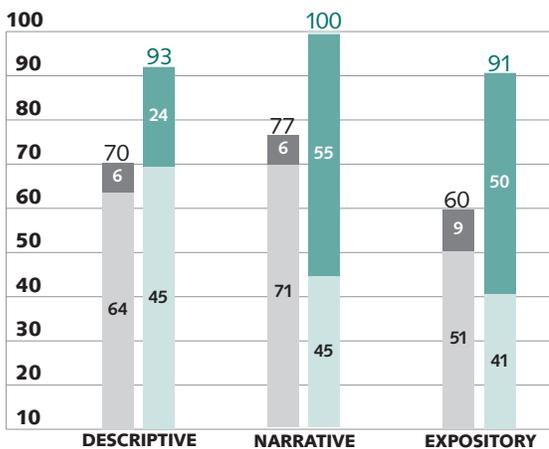
With ongoing improvements, the program became aligned with the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development (NSDC, 2001). The NSDC standards focus on staff development that improves the learning of all students within a framework for implementing continuous learning. The expectation within the district now is that every teacher will continue his or her own learning. In summer 2004, 85% of the district's 399 certified teachers and administrators participated in professional development opportunities, logging more than 10,300 hours of learning. The district provided a \$50-per-day stipend for participants.

While expectations for continual staff learning are the foundation for creating a system of continuous improvement, an important element of the work is having the necessary resources. The Mountain Brook Board of Education allocates 1% of its \$30 million budget to staff development. Each school receives a per-pupil allocation that can be used to target specific school needs. Individuals or small groups may apply to their school's staff development committee for funding to work on projects or to attend workshops, conferences, and conventions. Applicants demonstrate the relevance of their project to the system or school's overall plan for improvement. Principals and staff development committees also sometimes use PTA money for teacher professional learning. A districtwide community foundation additionally has provided nearly \$800,000 for staff development.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING AND PLANNING

Outlining a plan and using data to identify specific needs are the core components of the district's effort.

Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing: Mountain Brook
Grade 5. Percentage of students scoring at Level III and Level IV



Level III: Solid mastery of the writing task

Level IV: Powerful, expressive vocabulary, a creative presentation, and clear, coherent ideas in a logical progression.

GRAY=1995	LEVEL III	LEVEL IV
GREEN=2004	LEVEL III	LEVEL IV

Each year, members of the board and the superintendent review and evaluate the district's strategic plan and use it to set specific school improvement goals. While the process varies from year to year, over time the board, administrators, teachers, and parents have participated in this annual review.

Each of the district's six schools then sets measurable goals for improving academic achievement through its annual school improvement plan. Principals and teachers begin by studying standardized test results in school-based teams to determine areas for improvement. Some of this work occurs during the district's nine professional learning days. Teams also analyze data from a comprehensive survey of teachers, parents, and students, administered every three years. The school improvement team then develops a small number of goals, each with a professional development component.

For example, Alabama students take the Stanford Achievement Test, which assesses a broad sampling of curriculum and provides data to study changes in performance over time.

Mountain Brook students led the state in 2004-05 results in all content areas at all grade levels. Although the year's scores were the highest in Mountain Brook's history, principals led teachers at each school in disaggregating data to determine relative weaknesses in subtopics in each content area. Teachers then collaborated by grade level or department to design curriculum and instruction to address the weakest areas.

Currently, elementary school faculties dedicate one staff meeting per month to professional development. Teachers' planning periods are scheduled by grade levels so they can collaborate. At the secondary level, department meetings are frequently dedicated to professional learning, and teachers meet in small groups throughout the day to discuss curriculum and instruction issues or to co-plan.

Brookwood Forest Elementary Principal Yvette Faught said analyzing each year's performance helps schools focus on continuous improvement.

"We collect lots of data on our students, and it can be a bit overwhelming," Faught noted. "Working

in small groups, teachers study specific data, looking for patterns that indicate instructional needs both for groups and for individual students; then we share the findings of each small group (with the whole faculty). This information is summarized and put into a format that enables us to share our successes, recognize our needs, and develop common goals and actions. When we develop a shared focus and schedule time to work together, student achievement is affected positively.”

In 1996, when 3rd-grade math scores at Crestline Elementary School averaged in the 76th percentile, the school improvement team targeted 3rd-grade math for improvement. District staff development leaders developed professional development sessions focused on teachers learning to disaggregate student test scores. Each teacher analyzed data, child by child, and developed a plan to differentiate math instruction, develop critical thinking skills, and augment the rigor of performance-based tasks in mathematics. In addition, the district increased elementary schools’ time for math instruction from 35 or 40 minutes per day to one hour per day. Student achievement has improved as a result.

The district’s comprehensive approach to staff development includes a systemwide dedication to investigating and implementing strategies for increasing student engagement. The district focuses attention on the quality of teachers’ assignments and the resulting student work. Staff developers work with teachers to discuss which methods and lessons engage students. Teachers model lessons for each other and reflect with each other about their successes and failures after understanding 10 criteria for work most likely to engage students. Each school has created individual plans to involve all faculty to make this initia-

Mountain Brook Schools
Mountain Brook, Ala.

Number of schools: Four elementary schools, one junior high, one high school
Enrollment: 4,338
Staff: 399 teachers and administrators
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	99%
Black:	<1%
Hispanic:	<1%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	<1%
Native American:	<1%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: <1%
Languages spoken: English
Free/reduced lunch: <1%
Special education: 9%
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tive an integral part of local plans for school improvement. Teachers from kindergarten to high school now recognize criteria for assignments (see box on p. 14) that successfully engage students.

Meeting the challenge of improving on successes year after year is an ongoing test of perseverance and will. In 1995, when the majority of 5th-grade students scored at Levels II and III on the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing, district leaders didn’t rest on their laurels. Over the next decade, the goal became to raise the levels of all students, with the result that in 2004-05, the majority performed at Levels III and IV. In 2004-05, Mountain Brook students scored highest in the state in all areas of the test, which is given to 5th, 7th, and 10th graders (see chart on p. 12).

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS

Principals, assistant principals, and school-based staff development specialists lead the design of job-embedded staff development. All

10 CRITICAL QUALITIES OF STUDENT WORK

- 1. Content and substance.** Work should engage all students regardless of social or economic background and help them attain rich and profound knowledge.
- 2. Organization and knowledge.** Information and knowledge should be arranged in clear, accessible ways, and in ways that let students use the knowledge and information to address tasks that are important to them.
- 3. Product focus.** Work that engages students almost always focuses on a product or performance of significance to them.
- 4. Clear and compelling standards.** Students prefer knowing exactly what is expected of them and how those expectations relate to something they care about.
- 5. Protection from adverse consequences for initial failures.** Students should be able to try tasks without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or implications that they're inadequate.
- 6. Affirmation of the significance of performance.** Students are more highly motivated when their parents, teachers, fellow classmates, and significant others make it known that the student's work is important.
- 7. Affiliation.** Work should permit, encourage, and support opportunities for students to work interdependently with others.
- 8. Novelty and variety.** Students should be continually exposed to new and different ways of doing things.
- 9. Choice.** When students have some degree of control over what they are doing, they are more likely to feel committed to doing it.
- 10. Authenticity.** When students are given tasks that are meaningless, contrived, and inconsequential, they are less likely to take them seriously and be engaged by them. If the task carries real consequences, it's likely that engagement will increase.

— By Phillip Schlechty

Source: *Inventing Better Schools*, by Phillip Schlechty. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

these system leaders have been trained in *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (Roy & Hord, 2003) to help individuals in various roles determine specific ways they can support and lead professional development in their schools. Central office staff assist school administrators and teachers in designing effective job-embedded learning strategies. The system uses a variety of designs, includ-

ing teacher-to-teacher instruction, formal training by expert consultants, study groups, peer coaching, mentoring, examining student work, curriculum mapping, implementing and evaluating effectiveness of curriculum frameworks, peer coaching, and action research projects.

Principals are accountable to the superintendent to ensure that teachers are effectively engaged in professional learning and that students are achiev-

ing at higher levels as a result. The superintendent meets with the principals and central office administrators at least three times during the year to review schools' progress on individual goals and action plans, as well as goals included in the system's strategic plan. Through the Alabama Best Practices Center (2004), school leaders are learning to use the Powerful Conversations About Professional Learning: Self-Assessment instrument to improve the quality of staff development.

Principals, assistant principals, and lead teachers not only talk the talk as instructional leaders, but they walk the talk, which translates into higher student achievement. And through conversations, both using the self-assessment instrument and in teamwork throughout the district, central office and school administrators determine specific ways to support and provide leadership for schools as they work together to attain increasingly high standards.

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