# Taking Deeper Learning to Scale

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# Executive Summary

For some time now, it has been evident that the policies pursued by the United States to elevate the academic performance of students, particularly those who are most economically disadvantaged, have not produced the results that were promised or hoped for. Lack of progress and growing opposition to high-stakes testing have led a growing number of educators and policy advocates to conclude that education policies and the strategies used to help underperforming schools and to promote student achievement must change. Some have called for a more deliberate focus on creating conditions that promote highly effective teaching and that support more deeply engaged learning.

This paper analyzes the efforts of schools and school districts to improve academic achievement, particularly among students who have historically underperformed. Three cases are presented: (1) Ocean Unified School District (OUSD), (2) Brockton High School (BHS), and (3) Washington High School.* OUSD is an affluent school district that seems to have all the resources needed to ensure that the educational needs of students are met, yet for a variety of reasons it remains unable to reduce race and class disparities in student achievement due to the maintenance of a system that is highly tracked and where traditional approaches to teaching and learning (e.g., lecture format) are pervasive. The second case, BHS, is presented to illustrate how deeper learning has been used as a strategy to raise achievement at a large school with a low-income, minority population. I examine how the school managed to overcome internal and external obstacles as it implemented changes in teaching and learning that led to sustained improvements in student achievement. Finally, the case of Washington High School is presented to show how teaching strategies that foster deeper learning can be implemented in high-poverty schools and serve as a lever for broader school change. The case also shows why the school's preoccupation with raising test scores had prevented its leaders from recognizing the potential for using deeper learning to promote student achievement and to address some of the other challenges facing students.

The cases are presented to reveal the potential of using deeper learning as a reform strategy that can lead to greater equity in academic outcomes. Equity is the critical challenge facing American education today. By drawing attention to schools that have met these challenges successfully and by identifying the obstacles that have prevented others from obtaining similar results, the hope is that it may be possible to promote greater progress elsewhere.

* The names of the districts and schools described in this paper have been changed to protect the anonymity of the educators. An exception was made for Brockton High School because the case has received considerable public attention.

# Introduction: Why Haven't We Made More Progress?

For some time now, it has been evident that the policies pursued by the United States to elevate the academic performance of students, particularly those who are most economically disadvantaged, have not produced the results that were promised or hoped for. Several highly regarded studies have shown that No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and other related policy initiatives designed to raise academic standards and increase accountability on schools through standardized testing have not led to significant gains in achievement.[1] In 2015, mathematics scores for 4th- and 8th-graders dropped on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—widely regarded as the best indicator of student performance—for the first time since 1990, and scores in reading have dropped or remained stagnant since 2013.[2] Meanwhile, scores on the SAT and ACT have barely improved, particularly as the number of test takers has increased.[3]

Results from the recent PISA (Programme in Student Assessment) exam—a test given to students in 35 industrialized nations that provides an international comparison of academic performance—are perhaps the most telling indication of America's educational challenges. U.S. scores in reading and science were nearly the same as they were 3 years ago, leaving Americans near the middle of the pack among the 35 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member nations that participated in the assessment. Results were lower in mathematics in 2015 compared with 2012, placing the U.S. near the bottom among the OECD member nations. According to Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills of the OECD, "Students are often good at answering the first layer of a problem in the United States. But as soon as students have to go deeper and answer the more complex part of a problem, they have difficulties."[4]

Indications that there are serious problems with respect to educational performance in the United States are most evident among poor and minority students. In 2011, 25% of African American students and 17% of Latino students attended high schools the U.S. Department of Education labeled as "dropout factories"—schools in which 12th-grade enrollment is 60% or less of its 9th-grade enrollment 3 years earlier. This compares with only 5% of White students.[5] Although graduation rates have risen in recent years to an all-time high of 82%, throughout the country large numbers of students who graduate and pass state exams are required to enroll in remedial courses in mathematics and English when they enter college.[6]

## Reconsidering the Focus on High-Stakes Testing

Lack of progress and growing opposition to high-stakes testing have led a growing number of educators and policy advocates to conclude that education policies and the strategies used to help underperforming schools and to promote student achievement must change. Some have called for a more deliberate focus on creating conditions that promote highly effective teaching and that support more deeply engaged learning.[7] That is, rather than relying on accountability (via high-stakes testing) as the primary lever used to produce higher levels of achievement, and holding schools and the educators who work in them accountable when that doesn't work, a growing number of advocates are calling for a policy that develops the capacity of schools to meet the needs of students.

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS or some similar version has been adopted by 42 states) emphasizes the need to ensure that all students have access to "deeper learning opportunities," which generally refers to the utilization of higher order thinking capacities and learning experiences that include critical thinking, problem solving, independent research, evaluation, comparative analysis, and the opportunity to acquire the skills needed for college and career readiness.[8] To prepare students to meet these standards, schools are expected to create "fewer, higher and deeper" curriculum goals[9] so that students can develop their intellectual competencies. These include: a flexible understanding of content and an ability to apply core ideas to real-world issues and problems, as well as an ability to work collaboratively, to communicate effectively, and to learn how to learn.[10] As I will show in the pages ahead, these learning goals are currently not available in many schools, particularly to the most disadvantaged students.

With the adoption of the CCSS, many states have developed more complex forms of assessment to both support and evaluate these college- and career-ready standards rather than the multiple-choice tests that have been used throughout the United States that primarily measure low-level skills of recall and recognition.[11] New assessments developed by two consortia of states—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—include more open-ended tasks and complex problems that are designed to evaluate higher order thinking.

However, for the tests to serve as a lever for moving schools to expand and deepen learning opportunities for students, a tremendous transformation in how schools approach teaching and learning will be necessary. Although high-stakes testing has succeeded in getting schools to become more focused on achievement as measured by test scores, it has also led many schools to adopt scripted curricula and test preparation as high-leverage change strategies. Such interventions have been especially common among schools serving large numbers of low-income and "high-need" students (e.g., English language learners, students with special needs, over-age and under-credited students, etc.). With many of these schools struggling to meet the previous lower standards, new systems of support and a concerted effort to build the capacity of teachers and schools will be needed as states raise the academic bar to avoid a massive increase in the number of students and schools that are deemed to be failing.

Given that the accountability strategy that has dominated state and federal policy has been in place for the past 15–20 years, states will need to make a significant shift to move to a capacity-building approach. Under the accountability regimen created previously by NCLB, states applied pressure, and in some cases sanctions, on struggling schools when improvement as measured by student test scores did not occur. Such an approach fostered compliance but largely failed to provide resources, guidance, and support to schools so that they could be more successful in meeting the needs of students. It also did very little to develop the professional capacity of educators, which has proven to be

New systems of support and a concerted effort to build the capacity of teachers and schools will be needed as states raise the academic bar to avoid a massive increase in the number of students and schools that are deemed to be failing.

particularly problematic for schools serving the most disadvantaged and vulnerable students. More often than not, such schools have been labeled "failing" and subjected to a variety of sanctions, including the removal of personnel (principals and teachers), reconstitution (i.e., closing a school, firing and/or replacing many or all school staff, and reopening under a new banner or as a charter school), state trusteeship (i.e., takeovers), and even closures.[12] Following the enactment of Race to the Top, such sanctions became common and pervasive.

## Introduction of the Every Student Succeeds Act

Gradually, states and the federal government came to realize that this approach did not work. An analysis of achievement patterns in all 50 states reveals that demographic factors such as poverty, race, and language are the strongest predictors of school performance.[13] Moreover, several states experienced a growing "opt out" movement as more and more parents began refusing to allow their children to take high-stakes exams. The combination of these and other factors led Congress to adopt the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which has significantly scaled back state testing requirements. [14]

It is too early to know whether ESSA will be any more successful than NCLB in moving the nation's schools forward. Thus far, there is little reason for optimism given that most states have yet to adopt strategies that would effectively provide support to schools that have historically struggled. In an effort to explain why the United States has not made more progress in its efforts to improve schools, Canadian education policy expert Michael Fullan[15] argues that U.S. policymakers have relied on the wrong "drivers" to spur improvement. He writes, " … policies and strategies must generate the very conditions that make intrinsic motivation (of educators and students) flourish."[16] He adds, "The right drivers—capacity building, group work, instruction, and systemic solutions—are effective because they work directly on changing the culture of school systems (values, norms, skills, practices, relationships); by contrast the wrong drivers alter structure, procedures, and other formal attributes of the system without reaching the internal substance of reform—and that is why they fail."[17]

## The Structure of This Report

Drawing on Fullan's notion of the "right drivers," in this paper I analyze the factors that limit or help to create conditions for changing the culture of school systems so that highly effective teaching flourishes and deeper learning is embraced as a strategy for improving academic performance. I also analyze why race and poverty are often perceived as obstacles to deeper learning, particularly in schools struggling to find ways to raise student achievement. Finally, I use three cases to explore what it will take to make deeper learning opportunities available at a larger scale than they are now.

I begin by profiling an affluent school district that seems to have all of the resources needed to ensure that the educational needs of students are met, yet for a variety of reasons it remains stuck in a system that is highly tracked and where traditional approaches to teaching and learning (e.g., lecture) are pervasive.[18] I use this case to show why the district's efforts to reduce the disparities in student learning outcomes that correspond to the race and class backgrounds of students (the so-called achievement gap) have gained little traction despite a pledged commitment and genuine desire from educational leaders and policymakers to address the issue. The case is important because the disparities that plague this district are common in schools throughout the United

States, and it serves as a useful means to draw attention to the obstacles that many schools encounter in using "deeper learning" as a lever for change.

From there, I profile Brockton High School (BHS) to illustrate how deeper learning can be used as a strategy to raise achievement at a large school with a low-income, minority population. I examine how the school managed to overcome internal and external obstacles as it implemented changes in teaching and learning in the hope that other schools attempting to follow a similar approach might learn from the Brockton model. I also examine the role of the district central office in supporting efforts at BHS to make deeper learning more widely available to students as an example of how such strategies can be used to leverage change at other school sites and make it possible for deeper learning to be taken to a larger scale.

Finally, I profile a high school in an impoverished community that has been struggling with low student achievement and poor school performance for many years. This case illustrates how teaching strategies that foster deeper learning can be implemented in high-poverty schools and shows deeper learning's potential to serve as a lever for broader school change. I also explain why the school's preoccupation with raising test scores meant its leaders were largely unable to recognize the potential for deeper learning to promote improvement and address some of the other challenges facing students.

At the conclusion of the paper I offer some reflections on the policy changes that are needed to implement deeper learning strategies at a larger scale and the supports that schools will need so that they are able to become more effective in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable students.

The cases presented reveal the potential of using deeper learning as a reform strategy and to achieve greater equity in academic outcomes. Equity is the critical challenge facing American education today. As a result of rising child poverty rates (since 2008, one out of every five children in U.S. schools comes from a household in poverty; just over 50% of all public school students now qualify for free or reduced-price lunch) and changing demographics, many schools are struggling with producing equity in academic outcomes.[19] By drawing attention to schools that have met these challenges successfully and the obstacles that have prevented others from obtaining similar results, it may be possible to promote greater progress elsewhere.

Learning from success may sound like a common-sense approach to education policy; however, for the most part this has not occurred in American education. Since the enactment of NCLB, the policies and strategies promoted at the state and federal level have largely ignored the need for schools to create conditions that promote teaching that challenges, stimulates, and engages students. In some states and communities there may now be greater interest and willingness to change policy and practice so that this can occur on a greater scale than it does today.

## The Elusive Search for Equity in an Affluent School District

The Ocean Unified School District (OUSD) is widely regarded as having some of the best public schools in California. With high scores on standardized tests, excellent graduation and college attendance rates, and a high Academic Performance Index (API) at most of its schools, OUSD is widely perceived as successful. Its stellar reputation is well known throughout the region, and for this reason, its schools attract students from many surrounding school districts who utilize inter-district transfers to enroll.

However, despite its excellent track record, OUSD schools are characterized by wide and persistent disparities in academic achievement and long-term academic outcomes. Specifically, White and Asian American students have on average performed at relatively high levels, while African American and Latino students have historically performed at much lower levels. The persistence and pervasive nature of these disparities, despite several high-profile efforts to address them, suggests that schools in OUSD are unclear about how to meet the educational needs of minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students. Closer examination reveals that even students who do well academically describe themselves as unchallenged, bored, and largely unmotivated in most classrooms.

### OUSD's 2015 Equity Initiative

In its search to find ways to reduce and hopefully eliminate persistent disparities, in 2015 the district embarked on a major equity initiative aimed at identifying the barriers to improved academic outcomes for minority and low-income students. I and a team of researchers were asked to conduct a comprehensive examination of the school district to identify the causes of disparities in student in achievement that had been present for many years. For more than 20 years, OUSD had undertaken a number of initiatives to reduce racial and socioeconomic disparities in student achievement. However, for a variety of reasons, none of these efforts were successful in producing significant or sustainable improvements in academic outcomes for African American and Latino students, English language learners, children with learning disabilities, and low-income students generally.

That 2015 equity study showed that several factors contributed to a lack of progress: a high rate of turnover in leadership at both the district and site level; a failure to implement and evaluate new initiatives aimed at improving teaching to ensure fidelity in implementation; political distractions; and a wide variety of institutional obstacles. Most importantly, the equity study found that there was a lack of clear and consistent focus on how to deliver high-quality instructional support to all students.[20]

The equity study consisted of the following: (a) a quantitative analysis of educational achievement across the district and at each school related to students' race, gender, and socioeconomic disadvantaged status , as well as those students who were English language learners or had special needs; (b) an analysis of prior districts' reports related to past attempts

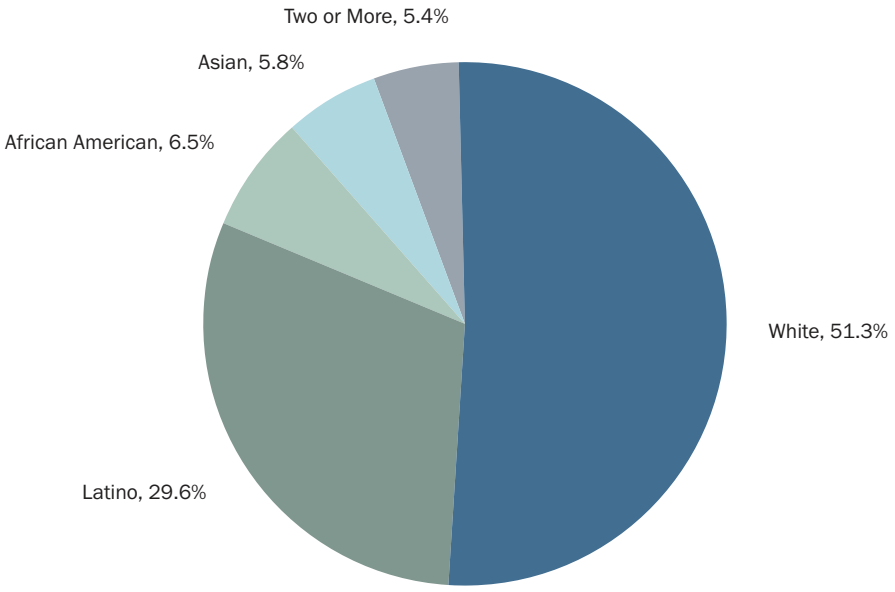
The equity study found that there was a lack of clear and consistent focus on how to deliver high-quality instructional support to all students.

to address educational inequities; (c) stakeholder interviews (N = 40) with current and former district employees, students, parents, and community members, as well as all current OUSD school board members; and (d) school site reviews to understand the systems, structures, practices, and processes currently used to support student learning. The site reviews were in many ways the most important part of the equity study. They included extended interviews with principals; focus groups with a sample of teachers, classified staff, and students; and classroom observations. A total of 545 classrooms were observed during the course of the review, which took place over 6 months.

## Who Attends OUSD Schools?

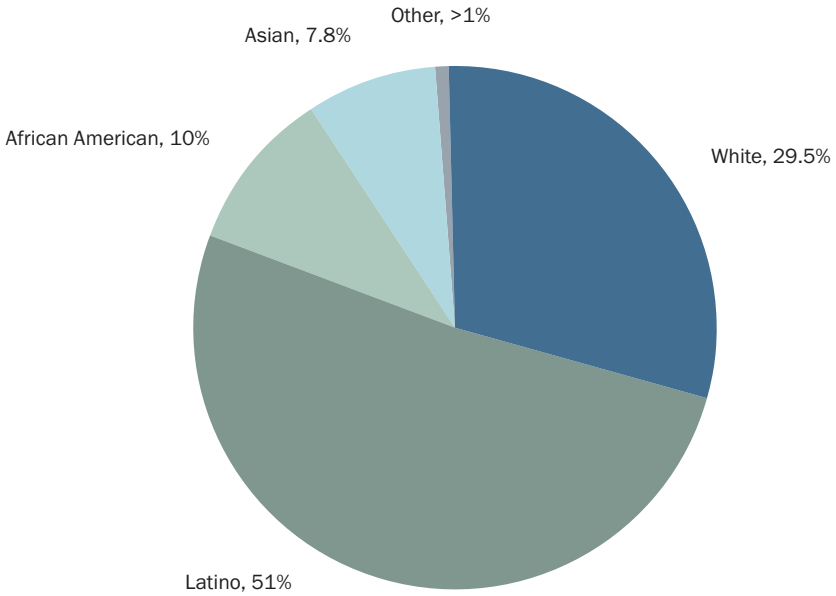
OUSD serves approximately 11,000 students at its 10 elementary schools, two middle schools, one k-8 alternative school, one 6-12 secondary school, one high school, and one alternative (continuation) high school. Another 800 students are enrolled at preschools in the district. In grades k-12, the ethnicity/race distribution has been fairly consistent for the past 6 years. Currently it is 51.3% White, 29.6% Latino, 6.5% African American, and 5.8% Asian; 5.4% of children identify with two or more racial/ethnic groups (see Figure 1). At 51%, Latino students make up a much higher percentage of the preschool population than their percentage of the k-12 population. White children make up only 29% of the preschool population (see Figure 2). In addition, 10% of children in preschool are African American, 8% are Asian, and 1% are Native American, Native Hawaiian, Alaskan, or Pacific Islander.

**Figure 1**
**K-12 Enrollment by Ethnicity**




Source: Unpublished data from the Ocean Unified School District (2016).

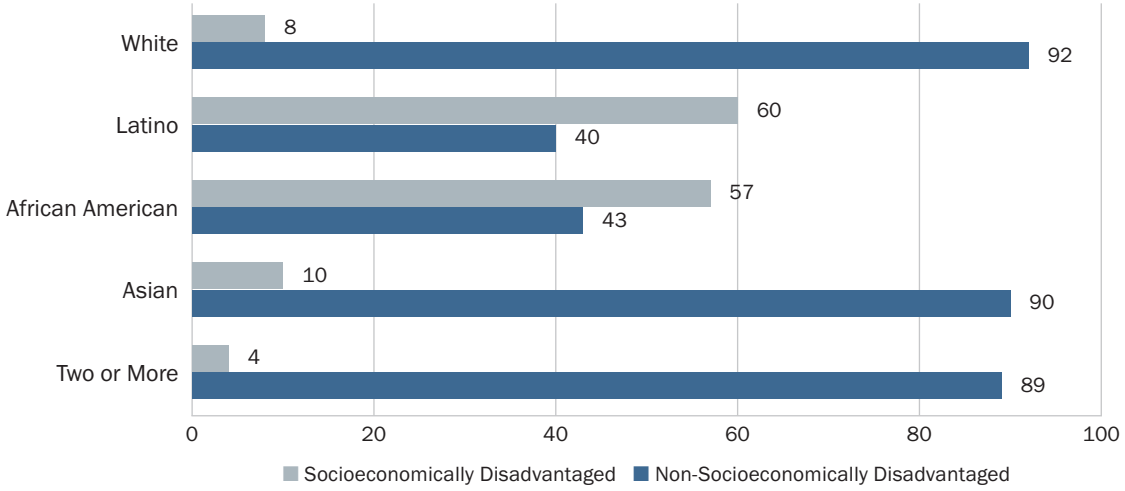
## Figure 2
## Preschool Enrollment by Ethnicity




Source: Unpublished data from the Ocean Unified School District (2016).

Twenty-nine percent of OUSD students are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. The differences in the percentage of SED classification between ethnic groups are large: 60% of Latino students and 57% of African American students are SED, while only 10% of Asians and 8% of Whites are so identified. Latinos make up 30% of the districtwide population. However, they represent between 40% and 76% of the student population at the four schools with the highest rates of SED students. While Whites represent 51% of the district population, they are underrepresented at the four schools with the lowest poverty rates (see Figure 3).

## Figure 3
## OUSD: SED/Non-SED by Ethnicity

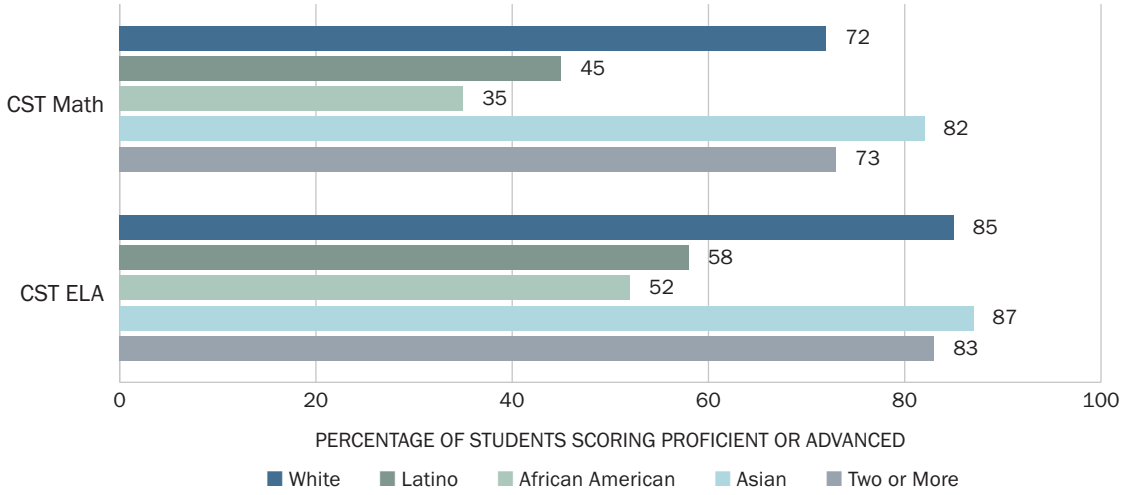



Source: Unpublished data from the Ocean Unified School District (2016).

## Student Performance

A 3-year average API was produced in May 2014 before the state of California changed its testing requirements. All but one of the OUSD schools with valid scores exceeded the statewide target API of 800 on their schoolwide score. Over the past decade, the schools have performed well and progressively better according to their API scores. In 2006, six of 16 schools with valid scores performed below 800. By 2008, 15 schools with valid scores performed above 800, and only Ocean High School performed below 800. However, despite this progress, all the schools posted large gaps between ethnic groups (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**
**2013 California State Test:**
**English Language Arts and Mathematics by Ethnicity**

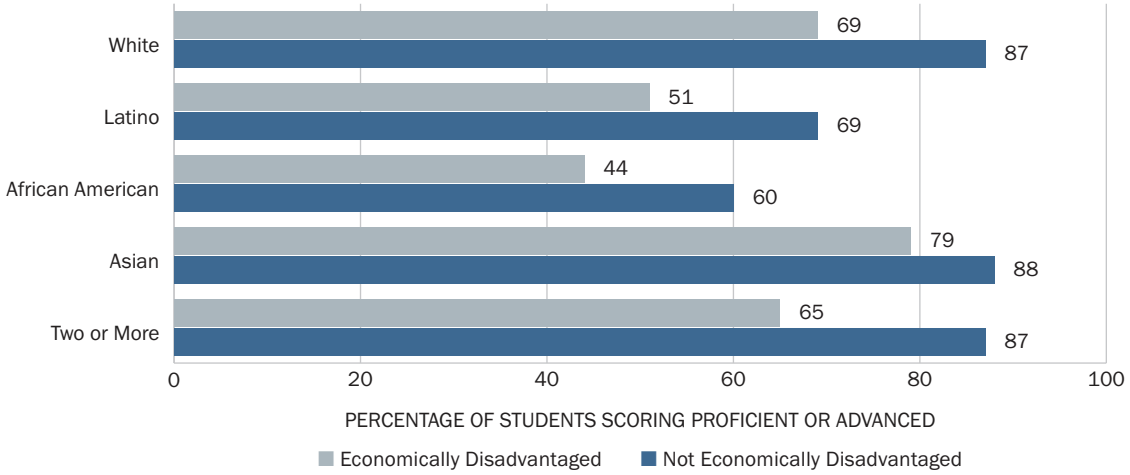



Source: Unpublished data from the Ocean Unified School District (2016).

Across the district, 75% of students scored at proficient or advanced on the English Language Arts test. However, a closer look reveals wide disparities by ethnicity/race. These are exemplified by the 52% proficiency rate for African American students and 58% proficiency rate for Latino students. Further disparities within the ethnicity groups exist between SED and non-SED students (see Figure 5). Girls outperform boys in both groups; African American girls outperform boys 56% to 46%, and Latino girls outperform boys 60% to 55%. Only 55% of students identified as SED demonstrated ELA proficiency. The outcomes in mathematics were lower across the district, and high school scores were significantly lower than elementary scores.

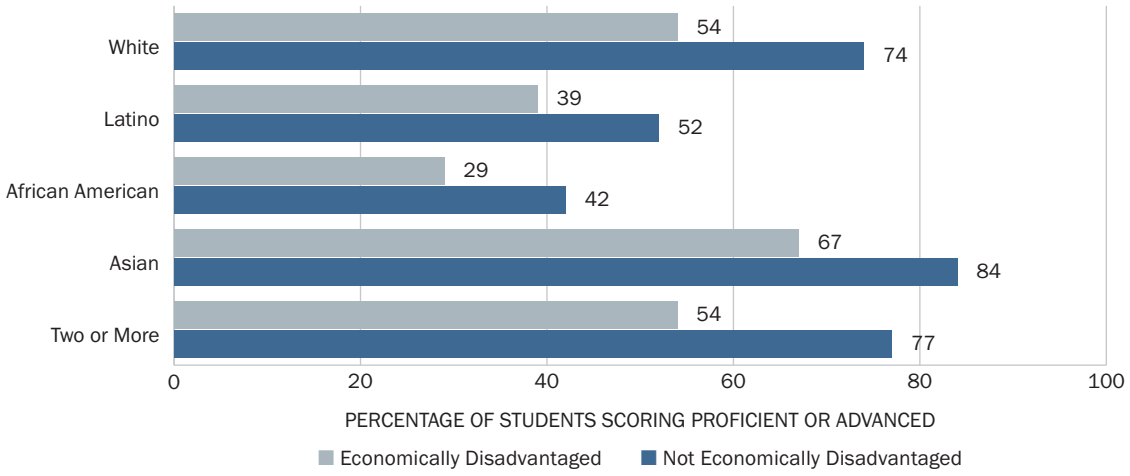
On the Mathematics CST, 62% of students scored proficient or advanced. As with ELA, disparities between students from different ethnic backgrounds are persistent and pervasive. Whereas the district average proficiency is 62%, the proficiency rates for African Americans (35%) and Latinos (45%) are far below those of their White (72%) and Asian (82%) peers. The subgroup with the lowest rate of proficiency is Students With Disabilities (36%), followed by SED students (42%). Within ethnic groups, females outperform males in most groups by as many as 9 points (African American). Non-SED students outperform SED students in all groups by as many as 23 points for students who identify with two or more races to a 13-point difference for African American and Latino subgroups (See Figure 6).

## Figure 5
## 2013 California State Test: English Language Arts by Socioeconomically Disadvantaged and Ethnicity




Source: Unpublished data from the Ocean Unified School District (2016).

## Figure 6
## 2013 California State Test: Mathematics by Socioeconomically Disadvantaged and Ethnicity




Source: Unpublished data from the Ocean Unified School District (2016).

Results of the baseline California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) indicate that achievement gaps exist for African American and Latino students, English language learners, and SED and SWD (Students With Disabilities) students across the district. There is a 35-point achievement gap between African American and White students, and a 30-point gap between Latino and White students. Only 44% of African American and 49% of Latino students

met or exceeded the ELA standards, in contrast to 83% of Asian and 79% of White students. The differences by socioeconomic status are also striking: 71% of non-SED students met or exceeded the ELA standard, while only 50% of SED students did. Latino students who are also poor (SED) fared even worse: Only 40% met or exceeded the ELA standard. Sixty percent of socioeconomically disadvantaged White students met or exceeded standards in ELA, and 57% of all tested students met or exceeded mathematics standards on the CAASPP.

## The Role of Teachers

Classroom observations conducted as part of the equity review revealed that most teachers throughout the district did not utilize strategies aimed at engaging students in deeper learning. Instead, we observed students who were generally well behaved but were expected to listen passively to lectures in nearly every classroom. Focus groups of students revealed that most felt insufficiently challenged and were frequently bored even in honors and advanced placement courses. The fact that achievement rates were high, especially among White and Asian students, was attributed to the hard work of students and the fact that many received external support outside of school from parents and private tutors.

Interviews with teachers revealed that district efforts to improve teaching and learning were sporadic and inconsistent. Most schools lacked a coherent strategy for supporting teachers, which many attributed to the high turnover in district leadership. We learned that at many of the schools, non-evaluative classroom observations were rare because principals and district leaders were preoccupied with managing the demands of parents and other constituencies. Additionally, at most of the sites, professional development was not consistently tailored to address the specific needs of teachers. Instead, the focus of professional development changed each year without any clear explanation of why.

Classroom observations revealed that most teachers throughout the district did not utilize strategies aimed at engaging students in deeper learning.

Interestingly, few educators or community members questioned the results of the research in OUSD. In fact, when the findings were shared with teachers and principals throughout the district they responded enthusiastically and welcomed the opportunity to change the focus of instructional practice. Though some asserted that large class sizes made it difficult to utilize more engaging pedagogical strategies, the majority welcomed the opportunity to shift to a focus on deeper learning. One veteran teacher explained her response to the equity report in this way:

> This study confirmed what I have assumed for many years: we're not pushing our students to think very hard. When I hear that many are bored because we lecture too much I feel embarrassed. I didn't go into teaching to talk. I became a teacher to inspire my students and clearly this is not what we're hearing is going on. I believe that we can do better than we have and this study has shown us that we better if we want to retain the confidence and support of our parents.[21]

Although there was little opposition from educators to the findings from the equity report, most readily acknowledged that it will take time to change classroom practice and the culture of the district. Shortly after the release of the report, the superintendent of OUSD and four principals (including the principal of the high school) resigned. The new administrators have professed a willingness to follow through on the recommendations of the report, but it is clear that the structural obstacles that have contributed to the isolation of teachers at most schools are still present. Moreover, at several of the schools there is still a lack of clarity about the role and purpose of professional learning communities, and only two principals have reported that they are able to provide teachers support and guidance in their classrooms. Until such obstacles are addressed throughout the system, progress in reducing disparities (particularly those that are correlated with differences in race, language, and income) through the implementation of changes in teaching and learning will take time to achieve.

## Deeper Learning Comes to Brockton

With more than 4,200 students, Brockton High School (BHS) is by far the largest high school in Massachusetts. Like many urban high schools, it had struggled for a number of years with high dropout rates, serious discipline infractions, and poor academic performance generally. The school and district leadership had taken the position that little could be done to improve the school because of the large number of poor and disadvantaged students it served. The city of Brockton, like many formerly industrial, economically depressed cities in the northeastern region of the United States and the rust belt, has high rates of intergenerational poverty, unemployment, crime, and substance abuse.

A broad variety of educational programs (e.g., interventions to support at-risk students and academic supports that were largely remedial) were available at the school, but there was little focus on ensuring that these programs were effective and that they were meeting the needs of students. Administrators at the school were accused of having a passive approach toward the academic challenges facing the school, and many teachers took the position that it was up to the students to take advantage of what was available. One longtime principal of BHS often told the faculty that "students have a right to fail."

### Who Attends Brockton High School?

The student population of BHS is racially and socioeconomically diverse. Approximately 60% of the students are identified as Black, which includes African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Haitians, and many other immigrants from countries around the world who do not speak English as their first language. The school population is 22% White, 12% Latino, 2% multi-race, and 2% Asian American, while 17% of students are classified as Limited English Proficient and 11% receive special education services. Overall, approximately 40% come from families that do not speak English as their first language, and 76% come from families in poverty and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education classified over 80% of students at BHS as "High Needs."

A broad variety of educational programs were available at Brockton High School, but there was little focus on ensuring that these programs were effective and that they were meeting the needs of students.

### High-Stakes Testing: The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

In 1998, Massachusetts introduced the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a high-stakes exam (covering both ELA and mathematics) that all students in the 10th grade are required to take and pass to earn a diploma. When the results of the first MCAS were released, BHS was ranked as one of the lowest performing schools in the Commonwealth with a 44% failure rate and a 22% proficiency rate in English Language Arts. In mathematics, the failure rate was 75% and proficiency was only 7%. Based on their performance, hundreds of BHS students were at risk of being denied diplomas when the state put its new requirements into effect in 2002. When similar results were obtained the following year, BHS was featured on the front page of the *Boston Globe* as one of the worst schools in the state and described as a "cesspool."[22]

Interestingly, instead of responding to the article with anger after the school was labeled a failure, district officials and teachers were prompted to act. Recognizing that many students entered high school with weak literacy skills—and that the mathematics and language arts portions of the exam required strong literacy skills—veteran teachers argued to the new principal that every teacher at BHS would have to start teaching and reinforcing literacy in their classrooms. The principal acknowledged the need to strengthen the literacy skills of students but said that she could not force teachers to embrace this strategy. The teachers responded by stating that they could begin by "working with the willing."

### *Teachers take action*

Calling themselves the Restructuring Committee, the teachers began their first meeting by posting the MCAS scores with a question: Is this the best we can be? Initially, the committee thought that it could improve test scores by focusing solely on preparing students for the test. They noticed that in the first 3 years of testing, there were several questions and readings pertaining to Shakespeare. Assuming that this would continue to be the case, they launched what they called a "Shakespearean offensive," getting teachers throughout the school to teach a Shakespearean text. However, the following year there were no questions on Shakespeare on the MCAS and they soon realized that the "Shakespearean offensive" was a mistake. The Restructuring Committee concluded that school improvement could never be about outguessing the test or preparing by simply providing students with test-taking skills.

After closely examining the data from the previous year's exam they determined that their students were struggling in reading, problem solving, vocabulary, thinking, and reasoning skills. They also recognized that failure was not limited to any one subgroup. Therefore, they concluded that they could not address the problem only through remediation to students who were failing. Rather, the data clearly revealed that failure was widespread, and therefore changes in teaching and learning would have to occur throughout the school.

The teachers began their first meeting by posting the MCAS scores with a question: Is this the best we can be?

## Deeper Learning as an Improvement Strategy

While urban districts in other parts of the state that were faced with similar challenges focused on test preparation through prepackaged courses to avoid high rates of failure,[23] BHS set off on a path to make deeper learning its high-leverage improvement strategy. The committee asked a series of questions that helped them to develop and frame their work:

- **What are we teaching, how are we teaching it, and how do we know the students are actually learning it?** The leadership group recognized that most classes at the school were focused primarily on delivering content. As in most high schools, BHS was compartmentalized into highly structured departments. Although many teachers were knowledgeable in their content areas, most taught in a manner that paid very little attention to evidence of student learning—they covered the material and students were expected to learn it. Many other teachers struggled with classroom management and relied primarily on lecture and worksheets. In response to the question about how they knew the

students had learned the material, the leadership group came to the painful realization that teachers had not been focused on evidence of learning at all.

- **What do our students need to know and be able to do to be successful on the MCAS, in their classes, and in their lives beyond school?** This generated what was perhaps one of the richest discussions that the faculty had ever had and led directly to the development of a schoolwide literacy program. Teachers identified the essential skills that students needed to acquire to be prepared for the rigorous state exam and, ultimately, college. Based on their review of the state assessments, the school adopted a concerted focus on reading and writing in all classrooms with clear rubrics for teachers to use to evaluate and monitor student performance.
- **We are not likely to get any additional staffing or resources, so what resources do we have now that we can use more effectively?** The faculty committee recognized that time was the most important resource needed to propel their improvement efforts. They knew that a great deal of time during the school day was not dedicated to instruction; for example, many students had schedules that were filled with one or more study halls. The committee strategized to figure out how to convert this time into structured learning opportunities. They understood that to improve academic performance students would have to become more engaged in their classrooms and receive targeted support in the areas where their needs were greatest. To do this they recognized that they would have to increase the amount of class time spent on student learning, and this would force them to revise the schedule. The schedule change resulted in fewer preparation periods, which for the faculty was initially controversial. However, to compensate for the loss of time, traditional faculty meetings, which had in the past served as the setting where administrative announcements were made, were used to provide ongoing professional development in literacy.

Teachers understood that to improve academic performance students would have to become more engaged in their classrooms and receive targeted support in the areas where their needs were greatest.

- **What can we control, and what can't we control?** They knew that they could not control the challenges facing students: poverty, homelessness, violence, family turmoil, transience, language acquisition, etc. While recognizing that these obstacles were not insignificant, they decided that instead of using poverty as an excuse and feeling sorry for their students, they would take a hard look at how they utilized external resources (e.g., social services provided by community partners) to support students so that the staff could remain focused on teaching and learning. Shifting the focus of their conversations in this way proved to be the key to the changes that were implemented throughout the school.

The central office in Brockton Public Schools was aware of the strategy that the faculty committee had devised. Initially, some in the central administration questioned whether an intensive focus on literacy would produce the increase in student test scores that the state demanded. They also questioned whether in a district with a strong union they could compel teachers to be trained in a manner such that they could help students to acquire the literacy skills they needed. However, after meeting with the BHS staff over the course of several months and recognizing the value of teacher

leadership at the school, the superintendent and central office staff embraced the strategy: Every teacher in the school—not just those in the English or mathematics departments (the subjects tested on the MCAS)—would be responsible for preparing students to take the rigorous state exam. In fact, the success of the strategy at the high school ultimately led the central office to adopt similar teacher-led initiatives at schools throughout the district.

## Literacy Goals

In 2000, the school implemented the Literacy Initiative and clearly defined the literacy skills that every teacher would have to teach and develop: reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning. Within each area, there was a detailed series of objectives that every student at BHS was expected to master. These became the school's academic expectations for every student, regardless of their background or some preconceived notion of their academic ability.

Drafts of the literacy goals were presented to faculty in small interdisciplinary discussion groups facilitated by members of the Restructuring Committee. Presentations about the initiative were made to the school board, parents, and even to the Chamber of Commerce to seek their input and to demonstrate that the school was not going to accept its dismal performance. From the outset, the committee understood that each of the skills they identified would have to be applied differently in each content area, and therefore, professional development would have to be adapted and personalized for each teacher. Regardless of the class or subject they taught, teachers needed to see the importance of getting their students to master essential literacy skills.

### *Teacher response*

Initially, the teachers' union objected to the literacy initiative and supported teachers who refused to participate. In response, the school devised a strategy to "work with the willing," based on the hope that, as evidence of success was obtained, teachers could gradually be won over to support and implement the initiative throughout the school. The willingness of the site and district leadership to accept a gradual approach rather than to demand immediate, widespread adoption proved to be fortuitous. More often than not, school districts adopt a top-down approach toward school reform, and expect schools and staff to comply with orders from the central office rather than working for genuine "buy-in" around a particular strategy.

In Brockton, the literacy initiative was teacher led, and this was undoubtedly a key factor responsible for the success that was achieved. With the initiative's emphasis on using deeper learning as its high-leverage improvement strategy, it was essential that the initiative not be driven by the administration but by strong leadership provided by teachers on the Restructuring Committee.

### *Teacher training*

As time passed, teacher leaders won over their colleagues, and, rather than resisting change, many teachers admitted that they had never been trained in how to teach reading or writing. The Literacy Initiative provided differentiated training to every teacher at the school in how to teach literacy skills in their content areas using a

The literacy initiative was teacher led, and this was undoubtedly a key factor responsible for the success that was achieved.

common process, a common vocabulary, and a common assessment. Teachers also received training in how to utilize pedagogical strategies such as Socratic seminars, various forms of group work, and project-based learning in each subject area to support literacy development and higher order thinking on the part of students.

Using contractual faculty meeting time, the entire faculty was trained over several years in what became known as the "open response writing process." The process, developed by the Restructuring Committee, called on teachers within all departments to collectively choose texts that were relevant to their content areas in order to provide the context for the writing. Those leading the effort understood that to be successful the school needed a coherent strategy, which could only be achieved if teachers implemented similar processes throughout the school. Consistency by teachers would ensure that students would be more likely to acquire the skills that were taught and applied in every classroom consistently.

### *Implementation*

Once every teacher was trained in the open response writing process, the Restructuring Committee developed a calendar to set the dates for implementation. Teachers in specific departments were assigned a week during which they would teach the writing process to students using their subject area content. Though such an approach might seem highly regimented and at odds with the teacher-led approach, the school opted for two reasons to proceed and to create an implementation calendar to monitor the process and results. First, doing so ensured that every teacher was involved and accountable for teaching the literacy skills through a structured implementation process that left nothing to chance, which in turn ensured that the Literacy Initiative was not treated as yet another fad reform that would be cast aside as other goals became new priorities. Second, the implementation calendar allowed every student to have numerous opportunities for repeated practice of literacy skills. The staff believed that deliberate practice and reinforcement were essential ingredients for mastery, and the Restructuring Committee believed strongly that internal accountability was needed so that these practices were implemented with fidelity in the classroom.

As the literacy process was implemented over several years administrators continued to carefully monitor the training to make sure that each teacher received adequate guidance and support. They also conducted regular non-evaluative classroom observations to monitor how literacy strategies were implemented. Teachers continued to meet regularly in small groups to analyze the quality of work produced by students and to share both the challenges they experienced and the lessons they learned about which strategies were most effective. Utilizing professional learning communities in this way proved to be the most effective means to provide teachers with feedback. The professional learning communities created a nonthreatening setting where teachers' impact on student learning could be assessed. Finally, a rubric was developed and utilized by every teacher to ensure that consistency was maintained in assessing student writing.

As faculty met in interdisciplinary groups to review the work of students, powerful discussions about teaching and learning ensued. By comparing and analyzing student work they were able to see where there were inconsistencies in expectations, and to debate what sort of evidence was needed to ensure that students had acquired the skills deemed most important. In a faculty of more than 300 teachers, and with the school's long track record of failure, there were many who doubted that their students could meet the rigorous standards that were set. However, when teachers who expressed doubts saw the quality of writing that students were producing in other classes, they

began to understand that high-quality instruction and the utilization of deeper learning strategies could directly improve the quality of student work.

## Outcomes of the Literacy Initiative

Ultimately, true buy-in from teachers came with results, and BHS experienced dramatic improvement quickly. In the first year of the Literacy Initiative the failure rate on the MCAS was reduced by half, and the proficiency rate doubled.[24] The second year showed similar results, and as it became clear that the progress could be sustained, the voices of dissent abated, and more teachers became committed to the effort.

> Utilizing professional learning communities proved to be the most effective means to provide teachers with feedback.

The meticulous process used to monitor implementation revealed that some students needed more support through short periods of direct instruction. They also needed regular feedback. Teachers identified students who needed more assistance than the school day allowed. To address this need, opportunities were created to provide these students with one-on-one support during the day, when time was available (e.g., before and after school, during lunch periods, etc.). Students with Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) had them revised to include literacy goals and the supports they would need to reach the standards. A portfolio for every student with an IEP and every English language learner was created to ensure that their progress was monitored.

The Access Center was created to provide individualized tutoring to students and was available throughout the day and after school. Teachers who were willing to provide tutoring assistance to students were recruited to work in the Access Center. Juniors and seniors were also recruited to serve as peer tutors, and like their teachers, they received training on the writing process so that their tutoring was consistent with the schoolwide process. Initially, a teacher referral was required for a student to report to the Access Center, but over time, word spread among the students that help was available. Gradually perceived as a positive, safe, and supportive place to receive assistance, the Access Center became a place where students sought help voluntarily.

By 2006 the failure rate on the MCAS had been cut in half, and the school had dramatically improved the number of students who achieved proficiency in mathematics and literacy. Of the 2008 graduates, 97% went on to higher education, with 47% accepted at 4-year colleges. For the graduating class of 2009, 98% of Brockton's students passed the mathematics and English exam by graduation. Also in 2009, 78% of Brockton's 10th-grade students achieved either advanced or proficient levels in ELA (matching the state percentage), and 60% achieved similar levels in mathematics.

In 2005, 2006, and 2007, over 20% of Brockton's graduating seniors were awarded an Adams Scholarship that provided tuition support for 4 years at any state college. In 2008, 2009, and 2010, that number had risen to 25%, the maximum allowed under state program guidelines. In 2005, the Governor of Massachusetts and the Commissioner of Education came to Brockton to announce the John and Abigail Adams Scholarship program, recognizing the high number of Brockton students who achieved this distinction and especially noting that students of color received 35% of these awards. The percentage of minority recipients has been increasing annually, and for the BHS class of 2010, 49% of the recipients were minorities, compared with only 19.8% statewide.

## Promoting Improvement

Evidence of progress enabled BHS to continue its focus on using literacy to promote improvement over the next decade. Teacher leaders continued to train their colleagues in how to teach literacy skills using the same differentiated approach to professional development that had been used in the past. Once the faculty felt confident and well trained, the same skills were taught to the students. Workshops themes included: Using Active Reading Strategies; Analyzing Difficult Reading; Reading and Analyzing Visuals; Analyzing Graphs and Charts Across the Curriculum; Developing Speaking Skills; Checking for Understanding; Problem-Solving Strategies; Helping English Language Learners Achieve; and Teaching Vocabulary in Context. These are the skills and strategies that research has shown are essential for deeper learning.[25]

> By 2006 the failure rate on the MCAS had been cut in half, and the school had dramatically improved the number of students who achieved proficiency in mathematics and literacy.

The success achieved at Brockton High School gradually resulted in similar strategies spreading to other schools throughout the district. The central administration invited teachers from other schools to visit BHS so that they could observe classrooms and talk with teachers and students about the literacy initiative. Though progress has been incremental, it has been steady:

- In 2013, the median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) for Grade 10 ELA increased to 73.0. The ELA proficiency rate increased from 67% in 2010 to 85% in 2013.
- BHS received four Bronze Medals (in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2013) in the Best High Schools Rankings by *U.S. News & World Report*. It has also been recognized as a National Model School by the International Center for Leadership in Education for 11 consecutive years (2004–2014).
- In response to student achievement data, the 2012–2013 Brockton Public Schools' strategic goals for learning and teaching identified writing as a key instructional focus. The district provided professional development to all schools during the 2012–2013 school year to train teachers on how to use various modes of writing (narrative, expository, persuasive, and research).
- Teachers throughout the district have been provided writing resources in content areas. For example, the Science Writing Binder for grades 6–8 includes writing standards, templates, explanations of the 6 + 1 Traits, and writing resources for the four modes of writing, including rubrics and writing prompts.
- The district reaches out to parents through the Brockton Community Schools program, the Parents Academy (which offers workshops of all kinds), and Coordinated Community and Family Engagement of Brockton.
- The BPS website lists resources for homeless families in great detail, and includes a variety of community social services. In addition, businesses and organizations such as Wal-Mart, W.B. Mason, Good Samaritan Hospital, and Stonehill College provide materials, services, and clothing for these families.
- The school district has established partnerships with outside agencies and businesses to support the work of the schools.

It is important to reinforce the point that the turnaround at Brockton High School was not quick or easy. Rather, it was made possible by a steady focus on ensuring that teachers had the ability to teach a full range of literacy skills by using strategies that developed higher order thinking skills among students. Throughout the process, BHS teachers played a leading role in implementing the initiative. They also took the lead in supporting and guiding their colleagues, and in tailoring that support so that the individual needs of teachers could be met as they learned new practices that they found difficult. Finally, there is an ongoing willingness to analyze student work regularly to ensure that there is concrete evidence that students are acquiring critical skills and that the strategy is working.

> The success achieved at Brockton High School gradually resulted in similar strategies spreading to other schools throughout the district.

The improvement strategy has now been sustained for nearly two decades, and the Brockton strategy has been replicated in schools across many districts and states. Essentially, there were four steps in the development of the Brockton Literacy Initiative:

1. **Empower a team**. The Restructuring Committee served as a think tank in which ideas and strategies could be developed and discussed. It provided a context for shared leadership of the work and created a setting where teachers could voice concerns about the process. Importantly, what started out as a mission to improve test scores evolved into a more comprehensive focus on using deeper learning to guide the school's improvement.
2. **Focus on literacy**. Too often, school improvement efforts embrace too many goals that shift from year to year. The literacy work at BHS became the high-leverage intervention that the school relied upon to bring coherence and consistency to the work of teachers, and to guide student learning. Research on school improvement shows that such an approach has the greatest likelihood of success.[26]
3. **Implement with fidelity**. Faculty were trained and required to implement the literacy skills according to a calendar so that students received the deliberate practice needed for mastery. Implementation of the strategies at the classroom level was carefully monitored, and teachers and students who struggled received sustained support.
4. **Monitor, monitor, monitor.** Administrators at BHS meticulously monitored every aspect of the process. They made it easy for faculty and students to obtain help and solicited feedback on how things were working. By establishing schoolwide standards, ensuring that students knew what excellence looked like, and designing mechanisms for regular feedback, the faculty was able to establish consistent standards for all students.

Teaching all students the literacy skills in reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning prepared them for success on state assessments and in their classes, for college, for work, and for their lives beyond school. Improving the quality of instruction was the driver of the school's improvement. As the faculty learned to teach differently, they maintained a focus on evidence that students were obtaining the literacy skills they needed.

As noted earlier, by 2010, 90% of students at BHS were passing the state exam, and one-third of the senior class earned proficiency in mathematics and literacy,[27] which meant that these students were eligible to receive the Adams Scholarship. These results have now been sustained for the past 7 years, and BHS has been transformed from a school labeled a failure to one recognized as a national turnaround model. Most importantly, as district leaders understood the factors that had produced the changes at the high school, they began implementing similar strategies at schools throughout the school district.

> Improving the quality of instruction was the driver of the school's improvement. As the faculty learned to teach differently, they maintained a focus on evidence that students were obtaining the literacy skills they needed.

Eleven years after the school had been labeled a cesspool, *Boston Globe* reporter James Vaznis began his article "Turnaround at Brockton High" with the following statement:

> Brockton High School has every excuse for failure, serving a city plagued by crime, poverty, housing foreclosures, and homelessness … But Brockton High, by far the state's largest public high school, with 4,200 students, has found a success in recent years that has eluded many of the state's urban schools: MCAS scores are soaring, earning the school state recognition as a symbol of urban hope.

The Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, Mitchell Chester, added:

> To me, Brockton High is evidence that schools that serve diverse populations can be high-achieving schools. It's just very graphically ingrained in my mind after having walked through the building and gone into classes that there's a culture of respect among students and adults. You don't see that in every school.[28]

In addition to the accomplishments mentioned earlier, Harvard University's Achievement Gap Institute also featured BHS as a model, and the school's accomplishments were highlighted by former Governor Deval Patrick in his State of the Commonwealth Address.

## Deeper Learning in the "Deeper Part of Hell"

In the winter of 2016, I was invited to visit and meet with the administration of Washington High School, a large urban school in Del Pacific Hills (DPH) in northern California that was part of a struggling school district. The purpose of the visit was to discuss the many challenges confronting the school, and for me to offer suggestions on how they might go about addressing these challenges.

The administrators began by sharing information about their backgrounds. I was surprised to learn that nearly every member of the leadership team, including the principal, had attended Washington as a student, and they continued to live in the community by choice. Several had been athletes at the school, and they spoke with pride about the school's accomplishments in basketball and football. The one administrator who was not from DPH was a former mathematics teacher who had been recognized as a Teacher of the Year by the state 3 years earlier.

### Challenges to the School

Despite their pride, they spoke openly about the many challenges facing the school: low student achievement in all subjects, low graduation rates (though they had been rising in recent years), low A–G (the courses required for college admission) completion rates, and chronic truancy. Having worked with underperforming schools for many years, I found the challenges they described familiar. However, what struck me as different about this team of administrators was their deep commitment to the students. Their determination to improve the school was rooted in their ties to the community. I had no doubt that their desire to provide better educational opportunities to the students at Washington HS was sincere.

The determination of this team of administrators to improve the school was rooted in their ties to the community.

However, while their commitment was strong and their desire to make a difference was genuine, the school's leaders made it clear that they felt overwhelmed by the challenges they faced and were at a loss for what they could do to move the school to achieve greater progress. The administrators described the enormous obstacles that many of their students faced: intergenerational poverty, families in crisis, homelessness, high rates of interpersonal violence, and a broad range of psychological and emotional difficulties described as related to toxic stress and trauma. They spoke with compassion but also expressed their frustration over the pressure to meet state and district expectations for improved academic performance. The Principal put it this way:

> We're working our butts off to get better but we're not making any real progress. My team is committed to these kids. We see ourselves in them. But nothing we've done so far has produced the kinds of gains the district wants. They're supporting us but they're not going to wait forever for us to produce results.[29]

The leadership team stated that they had not found ways to address the fact that some teachers seemed to use the students' and community poverty as an excuse for low expectations and for failure. In contrast, they emphasized the school's strengths: strong athletic teams; many committed, staff members; and a culture that they characterized as nurturing and supportive of students.

According to the Head Counselor. "Our kids know we care about them. When the bell rings at the end of the day many of them want to stay up here because they're safe. They know that at least at Washington someone is looking out for them."[30]

Although they valued the school's strengths, school officials made it clear that they understood this was not enough to produce the gains in test scores that the district and the state sought. Said the Assistant Principal:

> The district wants clear evidence of improvement, and they want to see it soon. We feel as though we are making progress, but we haven't received guidance on how to do this work. We are committed to these kids but the barriers we face are formidable. We're working hard but I don't see a clear path forward.

## Realities on the Ground

Sobered by our conversation and the challenges facing the school, I was invited to tour the school and visit some classrooms they regarded as exemplary. Sadly, in nearly every classroom I visited, I observed either teachers lecturing or students talking while doing worksheets assigned by the teachers. At the end of the tour, I was invited to observe a literacy circle that was in progress. The circle consisted of 22 students gathered around a rectangular table. A poet-mentor—a community member who was not a regular member of the staff and who had been hired through a grant to support efforts to improve student performance in literacy—led the class. I sat at the periphery of the classroom as the poet-mentor prepared the students to engage in a writing workshop.

### *The Literacy Circle: Changing challenges into curriculum*

To get the workshop started, she offered the following prompt: "I am not who you think I am." She then modeled what she was looking for from the students by explaining that though the students might see her as a professional woman who "has it all together," she is in fact a single mother who once dropped out of high school, who takes care of several family members, who has a brother in prison, and who struggles every day just to make ends meet. She said, "There's a lot more to me than what you think you see. I struggle every day just to get by. I'm sure that's true for some of you, too."

The students embraced the prompt and immediately went to work writing. I walked around the room to observe the students as they wrote. I was impressed to see that several had written more than a page within a few minutes. After about 20 minutes of writing, she asked who among the students was ready to share. Several hands shot up immediately. She looked around the room and called on a girl with long braids and glasses who had written more than two pages. The girl stood up at her seat and proceeded to read an essay that started, "I am not cancer." The girl explained that she had recently been diagnosed with cancer and had been consumed with worry about what it meant for her life. She wrote that she had undergone several tests already and made numerous visits to doctors. Then, speaking in a clear, firm voice, she explained, "I will not allow this disease to define me. I am more than cancer. I am a young woman with hopes and dreams. I want to go to college, and eventually, I want to have a family. I will not allow this disease to control my life."

When she sat down after reading the essay, the room erupted with sustained applause, and a few students walked over to hug the girl. The poet-mentor then asked for another volunteer, and more hands shot up. This time she called on a tall young man wearing athletic gear. He laughed as he spoke, which led me to assume that his laughter meant he was not taking the activity seriously. However, after hearing just a few sentences from his essay, I realized this was not the case.

> After about 20 minutes of writing, she asked who among the students was ready to share. Several hands shot up immediately.

He began, "I am not a homeless kid that no one loves, even if my mother kicked me out of her house and attacked me." He proceeded to tell a wrenching story about how he and his brother were expelled from their home by their mother and her boyfriend. He described how his clothes were ripped from his body and how he and his younger brother had to walk through the streets in the dark, barely clad, to their grandmother's home. He read his story carefully, slowly enunciating each word as if he was reading a report written by an observer to the incident. After he finished his two-page story, he smiled broadly and sat down. Once again, there was applause and several students walked over to the young man to offer hugs and words of sympathy. I realized then that his smile had nothing to do with his story or his feelings about the incident.

The literacy circle continued like this for another 30 minutes. Repeatedly, several students raised their hands to share their work. In each case, the stories conveyed personal experiences with hardship, and in some cases, hopes and aspirations for a better life. When the bell rang, indicating the end of class, several students exchanged hugs with the poet-mentor and their classmates. As they filed out of the room, the poet-mentor thanked the students for sharing their stories and told them that when they met in the following week they should bring their essays with them. She admonished them, "This was a great start but we don't do our best work on the first draft. Bring your essays back with you when we meet next week so that we can work on the vocabulary and the writing. I want you to be able to share your stories with others, and I want your work to be excellent."

Struck by the intimacy I witnessed among the students, I asked one of the students if she knew the other students who participated in the class. She explained, "Kind of, but it's not like we're friends or anything. I mean, we see each other at school but I barely know some of the people in here."

## Lessons From DPH

I'm sharing the observations from my visit to Washington High School as the final case study in this paper because I believe it offers concrete lessons for addressing the limits and possibilities of education in distressed communities in the context of using deeper learning as an intervention for change. During my visit to the school, I learned that the students called their community Del Pacific Hills, or DPH, the "Deeper Part of Hell." A student explained that the moniker was adopted after several students were killed in drive-by shootings in 2011. Several students told me that they hoped to escape DPH because the community offered nothing but tragedy and hopelessness for them. One girl, a senior with short hair and a big smile, elaborated: "This is not a place where you want to live and raise a family. There's too much violence here. All of us are hoping that one day we can get out, but the truth is many of us will probably be stuck here for the rest of our lives."

The experience of students and staff at Washington High School illuminates both the opportunities and the challenges for using deeper learning as a high-leverage strategy to promote change and improvement. During my short visit, it was clear that, while the administrators at the school were deeply committed to their students and serious about their desire to do whatever it takes to improve the school, they were at a loss over what they could do. Simply working harder to raise student test scores—the primary evidence that the district and state demanded—had not resulted in any tangible progress.

"These kids have a lot to say, if we just ask them to share. Many of them are carrying heavy burdens that prevent them from focusing on school. Once they see that they can write about their lives, they start to see writing as an extension of oral communication, and they begin to embrace it."

According to the site administrators, progress had been made in improving the culture of the school, but improvements in student learning outcomes as measured by test scores had been negligible. Undoubtedly, the school's lack of progress on standardized tests could be attributed to many factors: low teacher expectations (and low teacher morale), a lack of resources to address student needs (e.g., social workers capable of providing case management for the neediest students, teachers in core subjects capable of delivering instruction to English language learners, etc.), and the weak academic skills of many students. The literature on the "science of improvement" identifies all of these factors as essential to efforts to change student outcomes.[31]

Many of the adverse social conditions present at Washington High School in DPH were also present at BHS in Brockton. Both schools serve impoverished populations and lack sufficient resources to address the challenges that accompany economic disadvantage. However, unlike the educators in Brockton, the administrators at Washington did not focus on changing the nature of teaching and learning even though they were desperately searching for a path to move the school forward.

Meanwhile, the poet-mentor who was not even a regular employee of the school had found a strategy to get students deeply engaged in learning. By asking students to write about their lives, she created a supportive classroom environment and got her students writing. Research on trauma shows that strategies that build a sense of community, foster positive relationships, and provide social and emotional support to students in need are also highly effective at addressing the effects of toxic stress.[32] Similarly, research on literacy development shows that the strategies utilized by the poet-mentor—revise and resubmit—can be highly effective in improving the literacy skills of students .[33] Once students completed their first draft, the poet-mentor was in a position to get them to improve the quality of what they produced. As she explained:

> These kids have a lot to say, if we just ask them to share. Many of them are carrying heavy burdens that prevent them from focusing on school. Once they see that they can write about their lives, they start to see writing as an extension of oral communication, and they begin to embrace it. As they do they start writing a lot more. It's not like what they write is perfect. But who writes perfectly on the first draft? I want them to see writing as a process of communicating what you think as clearly as possible.[34]

Imagine what might be possible if the administrators were able to see and appreciate the powerful learning opportunities that were created in that classroom. What would happen if similar learning opportunities were available in classrooms throughout the school? Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS), a writing program established at the University of California at Davis, utilizes this kind of approach to develop writing and other literacy skills in all subject areas. Research has shown that SAYS is highly effective at getting students to utilize their higher order thinking skills.[35] Sadly, in too many schools, students regarded as slow or in need of remediation are denied access to instruction that calls upon them to utilize such skills.[36]

By inviting students to write about their lives, the poet-mentor created a context in which deeper learning through writing and sharing was possible. As I glanced at the papers of the students in the classroom, I noticed misspelled words, run-on sentences, and lots of poor grammar. However, what impressed me about the writing was the fluency and ease with which students put their ideas on paper. When I spoke with the administrators about the school's challenges, they stressed the need to raise student achievement. However, they never mentioned the need to increase student engagement in learning. How was it possible that they failed to see the connection between engagement and achievement? Why is it that many schools, even affluent schools like those described in the first case study in OUSD, disconnect their efforts to raise student achievement from teaching strategies that engage students and provide access to deeper learning? The administrators at Washington High School told me that most students were well behaved but many were struggling to pass their classes. Unlike the teachers at BHS, their concerns focused on achievement outcomes as measured by grades and test scores. Washington administrators had no strategy for getting students motivated to learn, nor had they enacted a process or strategy that would lead to better outcomes.

By inviting students to write about their lives, the poet-mentor created a context in which deeper learning through writing and sharing was possible.

## Final Thoughts on Taking Deeper Learning to Scale: From NCLB to ESSA

Throughout this paper, I have focused on the need to expand access to deeper learning as a primary equity challenge. Research has shown that developing higher order thinking and skills, such as analytical writing, research, and problem solving, may be the key to increasing college readiness and providing students with greater access to high-wage jobs.[37] Such an effort is especially important for students who have historically been deprived of access to high-quality instruction and a rigorous curriculum, namely English language learners, special education students, and poor and minority students. Few argue with the goals of deeper learning or the need to make the teaching and learning practices that foster it available to a broader number of students, but these goals have not been the central focus of state or federal policy. Moreover, even when such practices are evident in a single school, taking them to scale throughout a district or state is extremely complex and difficult. Although many districts may recognize the need for such change, it is not clear that they are able or willing to undertake the time and work involved in scaling up the practices.

As the BHS case illustrates, one aspect of the complexity inherent in such initiatives lies in the need for time so that staff can engage in deeper learning themselves. Although many districts might want to follow the BHS example, they will experience similar success only if there is a willingness by central district staff to engage in a protracted effort to build professional capacity over time.[38] It is important to recognize that this is a long-term strategy and not a quick fix. It is not reasonable to expect district staff accustomed to teaching in traditional ways (that is, teacher-centered, with a heavy emphasis placed on rote learning) to quickly embrace and successfully implement new strategies. As the OUSD case illustrated, even when district staff appear willing to take on an important social issue such as the achievement gap, knowing what they must do differently to obtain different results is another matter altogether.

Most of the popular reforms pursued over the past few years—site-based management, data-based decision making, or value-added measures of teacher efficacy (to name just a few)—have done little to change the nature of teaching and learning. Those that relied on prepackaged curricula—Open Court and phonics-based reading, for example—did very little to alter the fundamental problem facing many American schools: the mismatch between the learning needs of students and the skills (or lack thereof) of the faculty who teach them. Closing that gap through a concerted effort aimed at building the professional capacity of teachers is the only way to ensure that deeper learning opportunities will become more widely available.

Both the OUSD and Washington High School cases illustrate how easy it is for local educational leaders to fail to see the need for a protracted approach to capacity building. In both cases, district and site leaders wanted to see greater equity in student achievement but were unclear about what would be required to bring about such changes. The same could be said of some of the well-known reformers who have led the efforts to bring change to urban school districts (e.g., John Deasy in Los Angeles, Joel Klein in New York, and Michelle Rhee in Washington, DC). Like the district leaders who thought they could simply apply pressure on Washington HS to obtain improvement, many reformers have exhibited a similar lack of understanding of how schools must change and a high degree of impatience for quick results. While there is indeed a need for urgency in addressing the needs of underserved students, pressuring and blaming educators who cling to practices and policies that maintain the status quo[39] are unlikely to bring about improvement.

To bypass opposition, the reformers have wholeheartedly, and often uncritically, embraced technology or called for expedited means to remove teachers deemed to be ineffective. There is some evidence that creative applications of technology may be helpful in supporting student learning,[40] but tools such as iPads and software that are used to promote and facilitate personalized learning are too often treated as panaceas. They fail to address the larger issues related to professional capacity because the districts that embrace them rarely invest sufficient time in teacher training.[41]

For a variety of reasons, policymakers and reformers have typically ignored the importance of implementing instructional strategies that foster critical thinking, problem solving, analytical writing, and deeper learning.

The evidence shows that the churn of reform has done little to produce sustainable change. In several cities reform leaders have initiated widespread closures of struggling schools and pushed to open more charter schools. For these efforts they have been heralded as innovators and agents of change. However, more often than not, they have paid scant attention to the hard work involved in improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Because the measures that have been pursued have had relatively little impact on classroom instruction, particularly at schools serving children in America's poorest communities, some observers have characterized the reforms carried out over the past 20 years as little more than "spinning [their] wheels."[42]

For a variety of reasons, policymakers and reformers have typically ignored the importance of implementing instructional strategies that foster critical thinking, problem solving, analytical writing, and deeper learning. It may well be that because such strategies require a higher level of buy-in from teachers and students, and few districts demonstrate the patience or willingness to adopt a strategy that will not generate quick results, strategies like those used at Brockton High School are rarely considered. Despite the fact that such an approach is relatively cheap and can be implemented without heavy reliance on technology, deeper learning strategies are less likely to be embraced unless superintendents and policymakers recognize that changing the nature of teaching and learning is essential to obtaining better results.

As a result, shifting the approach to school improvement will not be easy. To illustrate this point and to further explain why we can expect significant resistance to using deeper learning as a change strategy, it may be helpful to share an encounter with a former high-ranking state Commissioner of Education. I was invited to accompany a group of educators who were part of a performance-based consortium of schools to meet with the Commissioner. We wanted to use the meeting to share findings from a recent study of schools in the consortium. The schools had been operating on a state waiver from high-stakes exams (in every subject except for mathematics) since 1992.[43] Findings from a multiyear study showed that students from consortium schools outperformed students from similar backgrounds on SAT/ACT exams, had higher graduation and college admission rates, and were less likely to be placed in remedial courses while in college.[44] The results for the 38 schools in the consortium seemed compelling, and therefore we asked the Commissioner to allow more schools to join the consortium. The Commissioner commended the schools for their accomplishments, but then explained that he would not support expansion because he couldn't trust other schools to implement performance-based assessment effectively.

The Commissioner's response is indicative of the way many policymakers have responded to calls for using deeper learning as a reform strategy. In an analysis of such opposition, Jal Mehta, a Professor of Education at Harvard University, has suggested that advocates of deeper learning have a "race problem." He points out that the practice of "deeper learning in the U.S. is much more likely to occur in predominantly White, affluent schools than in schools serving low-income students of color." He suggests that many educators and civil rights advocates have been skeptical of calls for deeper learning because they fear it will prevent students from acquiring basic skills. He explains that, as a result of this fear, "students in more affluent schools and top tracks are given the kind of problem-solving education that befits the future managerial class, whereas students in lower tracks and higher-poverty schools are given the kind of rule-following tasks that mirror much of factory and other working-class work."[45]

"Students in more affluent schools and top tracks are given the kind of problem-solving education that befits the future managerial class, whereas students in lower tracks and higher-poverty schools are given the kind of rule-following tasks that mirror much of factory and other working-class work."

There is considerable evidence that Mehta's point is valid. In both traditional public schools and many charter schools that serve poor children of color, there is an assumption that children from disadvantaged backgrounds learn best in highly structured classrooms that rely heavily on strict discipline and teacher-centered direct instruction.[46] Such assumptions have led proponents of reform to resist—and in some cases, belittle—progressive approaches to teaching and learning. Instead, they have championed highly regimented approaches to teaching and learning,[47] and called for policies broadly labeled "no excuses" that utilize highly prescriptive approaches to teaching and tight controls on student behavior as the primary levers for improvement.

Despite evidence showing that this approach has at best produced modest gains in test scores but not led to the increases in achievement that have been promised or hoped for, it persists as the dominant strategy used by school districts across the country.[48] In contrast, several provinces in Canada have produced greater progress in raising student achievement and reducing race/class disparities in academic outcomes by focusing on capacity building and deeper learning.[49] In a comparative analysis of the factors that have contributed to the persistence of academic disparities in the United States and the reduction of these in Canada, the following explanation was offered:

> Canada and several other high-performing countries (Finland, Japan and Korea) … have implemented policies to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools by recruiting, supporting and adequately compensating more effective teachers, implementing more rigorous curricula, setting higher expectations and providing more support for low-achieving students.[50]

However, since the adoption of ESSA, some states and school districts that have demonstrated greater openness to expanding access to deeper learning. New Hampshire and Maine and 40 schools in New York City have now embraced "mastery learning," an approach to teaching and learning that places greater emphasis on ensuring that students have mastered key skills needed for college. In California, the new state accountability framework invites school districts to explore

a broader strategy for expanding learning opportunities and to implement criteria for monitoring progress.[51] New Hampshire has adopted performance-based assessment as a statewide strategy to further change.[52] Finally, in Virginia, a new center at the College of William and Mary is working with districts that are ready to adopt performance-based assessment, and the State Department of Education has actively encouraged these initiatives.[53]

Because ESSA has scaled back federal requirements for using high-stakes testing for accountability purposes,[54] other states may adopt similar strategies. There is also evidence that the once-heralded and now much-maligned Common Core learning standards and the new assessments that are aligned to them are opening the door to deeper learning strategies in some schools because the assessments include more open-ended tasks and complex problems. The new standards and the assessments adopted by the states evaluate higher order thinking and performance skills to a greater degree than those they have replaced. To prepare students for these exams, a growing number of educators recognize that it will be important to adopt approaches similar to those used at Brockton High School that place greater emphasis on the utilization of teaching strategies that promote deeper learning.

The Common Core learning standards and the new assessments that are aligned to them are opening the door to deeper learning strategies in some schools because the assessments include more open-ended tasks and complex problems.

Beyond changes at the state level, changes will also be needed at the district and site levels if more schools are to follow the example of districts like Brockton. These changes include:

- Districts must ensure that staff has a clear understanding of the academic needs of students and that the strategy implemented is designed to address those needs.
- Differentiated training and support for teachers.
- Data must be analyzed and reports should be issued at regular intervals so that progress can be monitored and interventions can be modified when necessary.
- At the district level, central office teams will have to engage in collaborative problem solving with site leaders to devise strategies for building the capacity of schools. This will be particularly important for schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged students—English language learners, students with special needs, over-age and under-credited students, etc.—who have struggled to meet lower state standards in the past.
- New systems of support will be needed at the state and district levels, and these will need to be combined with equity-based funding policies that provide supplemental social supports to schools in high-poverty communities.

This final point should not be confused with past initiatives to expand access to pre-k or afterschool programs, or to create more community schools.[55] Although these efforts are important and helpful, they will not be sufficient to produce sustainable changes in academic outcomes. Several studies on federally funded Head Start programs have shown that the benefits of early childhood education are often undermined when children do not receive ongoing support, both within and outside of school, after they enter kindergarten.[56] To take deeper learning to scale, we must learn from past efforts at reform and adopt strategies that are more systemic if our goal is to produce results that are sustainable and truly transformative.[57]

As the OUSD case illustrates, it is important to keep in mind that even in more affluent communities, difficulties in providing quality education to poor and minority students and other high-need populations are common.[58] In many of these schools, tracking and other institutional obstacles have prevented educators from creating enriched environments where children are challenged and stimulated and higher order thinking and performance are expected. Even when such schools exist, taking good practices to scale districtwide has proven difficult. In this regard, a recent warning by Larry Cuban on the challenges involved with scaling up promising reforms is important. In describing why many districts falter even after experiencing some degree of success in particular schools, he warns:

> … scaling up was then (and is now) seen as a technical task that capable managers can easily replicate to do good elsewhere. Reproducing a complex innovation anchored in thousands of human interactions in a sea of uncertainty is neither technical nor easily reproduced in a highly political and uncertain environment. [59]

Again, developing the capacity of teachers to teach a more sophisticated curriculum to a diverse range of students is imperative. To advance equity in academic outcomes, teachers need time for collaboration with their colleagues so that they can engage in the types of activities that lead to sustained improvement: collaboration time to learn from the work produced by students, non-evaluative observation to ensure fidelity in implementation of new teaching strategies, and opportunities to discuss the challenges they experience in teaching on a regular basis. Collaboration, reflection, mentoring, and coaching must be central to the effort to improve student outcomes.[60] All of these activities are more likely to be carried out in a culture like Brockton's that fosters a strong degree of trust, that is safe for risk taking, and that allows for internal forms of accountability to emerge.

> To take deeper learning to scale, we must learn from past efforts at reform and adopt strategies that are more systemic if our goal is to produce results that are sustainable and truly transformative.

The potential for shifting the focus of policy away from high-stakes accountability and toward capacity building could be enormous. A recent study by the American Institutes of Research (AIR) examined a set of 13 schools in California and New York that were members of school networks focused on deeper learning strategies. These schools were compared with schools serving similar students. The study found that, on average, students who attended the network schools achieved higher scores on the OECD/PISA-Based Test for Schools—a test that assesses core content knowledge and complex problem-solving skills—as well as on the state's English Language Arts and mathematics tests.[61] These students were more likely to graduate from high school on time, to enroll in 4-year colleges, and to be admitted to colleges that were more selective. The benefits were similar for students who entered high school with low achievement and those who entered with high achievement.

Aside from expanding choice, vouchers, and charter schools, it appears unlikely that President Donald Trump and his administration will take the lead in setting a new course for education in the U.S.[62] However, even if the federal role recedes and the administration chooses to leave ESSA in place, it is not clear that educators across the U.S. will know what to do with their newfound

freedom. Many have grown accustomed to passively complying with the federal mandates that have accompanied standards-based accountability over the past 16 years, and they may not know what to do with the greater flexibility to teaching and learning that ESSA potentially affords. However, several schools and districts have chosen to embark upon a different direction without waiting for official permission. We must continue to learn from these cases in order to find ways to expand educational equity and improve schools on a much larger scale.

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