Within the evolving standards and accountability movement, states (rather than the nation or school districts) have borne the responsibility to develop standards, tests linked to those standards, and a system of rewards and punishments for schools depending on their performance. The target of accountability has generally been individual schools and students. In most states, this neat arrangement practically ignores school districts.

There are two grand conceptions of the role local school districts should play once a statewide accountability system is in place. One says the district should essentially disappear. In this view, the point of standards-based reform is to free schools from regulations; each school would then operate much like a charter school, with its principal acting as a CEO. Proponents of decentralization ask, How can a school be held responsible for its results if the district is forever meddling in its operations?

The alternative role is for districts to do everything in their power to align curricula and teaching practices in all their schools with the state’s academic standards. In this view, school districts should support standards-based reform by identifying effective methods of instruction and ensuring that all schools are delivering the material covered by the standards using the techniques approved by the district. Proponents of such top-down management argue that many schools would simply fail if they were left to sink or swim on their own, with no assistance from the district.

Against the backdrop of Texas’s fully developed system of standards and assessments, the Houston Independent School District’s approach has been to try to find a third way, not telling schools exactly what to do, but not stepping aside either. Schools are given considerable autonomy, but the district is proactive in its efforts to give them the direction, training, and resources they need to boost student achievement.

While standards-based reform relies on the ability of incentives to motivate students and teachers, teachers must be given the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills they need to provide more ambitious instruction, or they must be replaced by teachers who have the knowledge and skills. In other words, the reform strategy is incomplete if it doesn’t include...
ways of increasing the capabilities of schools. Houston's efforts to improve instruction were focused on building teacher capacity in three areas: reading, math, and curriculum alignment.

A Balanced Approach
In 1995 one-fourth of 5th graders and one-third of 6th graders in Houston failed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (T A A S) in reading. This was a matter of great concern to then-superintendent Rod Paige and the local business community.

The district was in the process of decentralizing many of its operations and decisionmaking, but Paige determined that reading instruction would have to be an exception. The idea that the district needed to adopt a single, uniform approach to reading instruction grew out of one of the superintendent's monthly meetings with the district's teachers of the year, one elected from each campus. They told the superintendent that the high mobility rate of children within the district would prevent reading scores from improving unless there was a consistent approach to reading across the district, so that students who changed schools would not receive bits and pieces of different methods of instruction.

Paige quickly convened a task force and charged it with developing a research-based approach to reading for the district and a plan for starting the program in all schools. The approach was to deal with the "reading wars" by bringing together supporters of various methods of instruction, having them consult with outside experts, and asking them to agree on a recommendation for the entire district.

The task force produced an 85-page report called "A Balanced Approach to Reading." Despite the word "balanced," the new philosophy would mean a significant shift away from "whole language" instruction to phonics. "Balance does not mean mindless eclecticism," the report warned; "balance involves a program that combines skills involving phonological awareness and decoding with language and literature-rich activities."

Training in the new reading program began in the fall of 1996. By the summer of 2000 it had reached almost 12,000 teachers. The district trains all new teachers, elementary and secondary, in the balanced approach.

Houston has mobilized a large number of specialists to bring effective methods of reading instruction to teachers. The 12 administrative subdistricts within the Houston school district hired teacher trainers to provide continuing support, working with teachers individually (in their classrooms) and in small groups. These trainers visit schools to ensure that the principles of the balanced approach are being put into practice. Trainers work most intensively with new teachers, teachers who request extra help, and those whose principals have requested extra help on their behalf. The district has also aimed to create a cadre of...
people with reading expertise in the schools themselves; most elementary schools have lead reading teachers. While the district has insisted that all teachers and schools adopt the “balanced” approach to reading, schools are given considerable flexibility in matters of instruction—as long as they put instruction in phonics front and center. The district describes its approach as a philosophy, not a package that is delivered to the door of schools.

Houston attempts to address reading problems proactively instead of remedially. The district requires all elementary schools to spend 90 minutes a day on reading instruction, and schools assess students early and often to identify problems and potential problems.

While all teachers are supposed to be observed as part of the state’s teacher assessment system, the reading initiative and programs like Success for All have created an environment that makes observation and monitoring a normal part of daily life for teachers. This contrasts with a typical school district, where teachers are observed once or twice a year, usually with plenty of advance warning, which is often required by the collective-bargaining agreement.

When using a program like Success for All, teachers become accustomed to having facilitators come in and out of their classrooms to observe and to deliver model lessons. Houston’s reading initiative has brought this to schools that aren’t using a comprehensive school-reform model. This has turned out to be a very effective way of producing school-level change. By making observation and advice a part of the teacher’s normal routine, particularly through the use of reading teacher trainers, the district has made it easier to target the use of ineffective teaching practices and to help struggling teachers improve.

**Algebra for the Masses**

The math initiative was launched in the fall of 1995. The previous spring, only 49 percent of all Houston students had passed the TAAS in math; only 36 percent of 8th graders had passed the test. Superintendent Paige asked his staff to examine the transcripts of all middle-school math teachers in the district to determine how many math courses they had taken in college. He was troubled to learn that many teachers lacked adequate preparation in math—40 percent had taken fewer than 12 credit hours of math—and he concluded that the district would have to teach math to some of its math teachers. The district quickly introduced a series of math courses and summits for teachers and principals.

At the time, Texas required all students to take algebra in order to graduate, though it was not necessary to pass the state’s end-of-course exam. That was fortunate for Houston’s students, because only 15 percent of them passed the state end-of-course exam in the spring of 1997 (in fact only 18 percent of students passed statewide).

During the 1997–98 school year, the district launched an algebra initiative as an offshoot of the math initiative. As a first step, a districtwide syllabus was developed so that the state’s expectations in algebra would be clear to students and teachers. This marked a major change for most teachers, who had been accustomed to basing their instruction on the textbook. However, the state exam was based on assumptions different from those contained in the textbook the district had been using for the past six years.

School-level planning teams were organized for all Algebra I teachers (from high schools and middle schools), and a districtwide meeting was held (at first weekly, later monthly) for a representative from each team. The goals were to increase teachers’ knowledge of the skills covered by the state’s academic standards and tested on the algebra end-of-course exam and to provide support for teachers in the use of new teaching methods.

Beginning in the second year of the algebra initiative, schools were asked to send a sample of student work to the district office each month to demonstrate their use of improved instruction. After two years, the schools were no longer required to hold weekly meetings for their planning teams; instead, unsuccessful algebra teachers (those whose teaching allowed fewer than 15 percent of their students to pass the end-of-course exam last year) would be pulled out of their classes for eight days of in-depth training.

After test results showed that students entering middle school were strong in computational skills but weak in problem-solving and the application of mathematical concepts, prerequisites for success in algebra, the algebra initiative was extended to middle-school teachers who weren’t teaching algebra and to 5th grade teachers.

The algebra initiative was an attempt to integrate
planning and collaboration into the routine of the school. At both the middle- and high-school levels, the initiative seems to have worked well for many teachers, but a significant minority of teachers has chosen not to participate. Attendance at the meetings has been incomplete: “Some just won’t do it. Some feel it infringes on their academic freedom, some just won’t be bothered,” an administrator told me.

Since the algebra initiative was launched, Houston has seen the passage rate for high-school students on the state’s end-of-course exam increase from 15 percent to 35 percent; for middle-school students the passage rate rose from 68 to 87 percent. The total number of students passing the test increased from 1,869 in 1997 to 3,583 in 2000 (see Figure 1).

Common Standards

Within the accountability movement, teachers often complain that the states’ new academic standards are not clear or detailed enough to guide their instructional planning. Houston answered their concerns by developing more specific guidance about what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. In January 1995 Houston launched an audit to determine whether the district’s written curriculum was aligned with the state’s guidelines and with what was tested by the state. The audit also investigated whether what was actually being taught in the district’s classrooms was aligned with the standards or tests. The district found that the majority of teachers still used the textbook as the primary resource for instructional planning, rather than the district curriculum or state academic standards.

The district then examined its textbooks to determine the degree to which these were aligned with the curriculum. It found that many of the textbooks were poorly aligned with the curriculum. Not surprisingly, examination of the district’s test scores objective-by-objective showed that students did well in areas where the textbooks were strong and performed poorly in other areas.

In response, the district launched an effort to provide more detailed information to teachers about the material they should cover. When Texas adopted a new set of curriculum objectives (the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) in 1997, Houston launched Project CLEAR (Clarifying Learning to Enhance Achievement Results) as a way of establishing uniform standards for student learning across the district. The product is a binder containing an annotated scope and sequence for each grade level or course. For each objective teachers are given detailed information about what content should be taught to meet the objective, the level of knowledge that has been developed in earlier grades, assessment ideas that can be used to determine if the student has mastered the objective, and ways the skills covered by the objective can be linked to other objectives.

In interviews, every teacher I spoke with said that he or she found the annotated curriculum useful. New teachers said they use it frequently and are likely to try the strategies and activities suggested; older teachers use it to make sure they are aware of changes in the curriculum.

“None educated child will fail TAAS,” said one Houston administrator. “These schools do not need to prepare children for the test. Well-educated children will do well without preparation.”
the opportunity to have a quality curriculum so they can be successful," another district administrator said. The introduction of a common curriculum was explicitly aimed at equity. "The superintendent feels strongly about all kids achieving academic success; if each teacher decides what the kids can handle, this complicates things," the administrator said.

Responding to critics who say that the state standards will cause a dumbing-down of the curriculum, one administrator said, "T A A S is the floor, but we're trying to make sure that the schools aren't spending all of their time on the floor, that they are enriching their curriculum. Some of our best schools said that they don't want to give up on what they are doing, but no educated child will fail TAAS. T these schools do not need to prepare children for the test. W ell-educated children will do well without preparation."

Teachers seemed to have somewhat mixed feelings about the standards and accountability policies that drove the district's effort to align the curriculum. W hile there is no shortage of teachers who say that there is too much emphasis on TAAS, the regime of standards and tests seems to have grown on many teachers. "You have to set standards. You have to give everyone something to strive for," one teacher said.

As with the reading initiative, the curriculum-alignment initiative has the power to improve instruction simply by making what happens in the classroom the subject of discussion and critique. In an ordinary classroom, it may be impossible for anyone to monitor the progress an individual teacher is making through the curriculum because the curriculum itself is so flexible. T he annotated curriculum provided by the district makes openness and monitoring possible, partly by making crystal clear what a teacher should be covering and partly by making explicit the links between what one teacher does and what other teachers are doing.

**Transparent Classrooms**

T he hardest part of capacity building is not identifying effective instructional methods or putting this information in the hands of teachers, but getting teachers to change what they do every single day. O vercoming the barriers to changing what teachers do will require a transformation in the culture of schools. Paige notes that in the past curriculum and assessment were left to the discretion of each teacher in the district. Teachers came to see themselves as private practitioners, and many of them are now reluctant to relinquish what they see as their professional prerogative to decide what to teach and how to teach it, Paige observes. W hat H ouston's reading, math, and curriculum-alignment initiatives share is that they open the classroom door and subject the teacher's daily practice to scrutiny and analysis. In H ouston teachers are no longer private practitioners who choose what and how to teach.

W hile the three initiatives all make that possible, each initiative embodies a very different approach to the exercise of power by a school district. In the case of reading instruction, H ouston has taken a decision out of teachers' hands and provided an answer of its own. T he district allows teachers some flexibility in how they teach, but teachers are not free to attempt to teach reading without phonics. In math the district has attempted to improve instruction not by setting a course for schools, but by creating live opportunities for teachers to improve their knowledge and skills. In curriculum alignment the district has simply made resources available to teachers and schools.

H ow has H ouston managed to make its distinctive strategy work? O ne key was R od Paige. In identifying areas of practice that may require central control, Paige's method was to seek the best advice he could find and then follow it. H e was also an inspiring leader, as any visitor to the district will attest. A lso noteworthy is the district's willingness to be guided by the evidence on matters both large and small. T he district collects mountains of data and analyzes everything that moves.

T aking the middle path between making all decisions centrally and leaving everything to individual schools is not an approach with which purists are comfortable. In particular, those who envision principals as CEO's bristle at the idea of so much outside interference in classroom practice. In reading, math, and curriculum alignment, Superintendent Paige and his staff identified key issues that needed to be addressed and responded boldly. T he district was willing to flex its muscles when necessary, but has thus far not yielded to the temptation to make many other decisions for schools. T his approach is certainly not for the faint of heart; if a district makes bad decisions about when to intervene, it could be dangerous for good schools that are doing well on their own. B ut given the reality of the schools we have now and the staff we have in them, H ouston's balanced approach to the role of the district seems a good bet.

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