

# Progress Report to Districts and Schools SEDL's Working Systemically Model



**RESEARCH REPORT**



**Southwest Educational  
Development Laboratory**

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# PROGRESS REPORT TO DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

## SEDL's Working Systemically Model<sup>1</sup>

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### WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT?

In December 2000, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) was awarded a five-year research and development (R&D) contract to develop and refine a systemic model to improve student achievement in reading or mathematics in low-performing districts and schools. The Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin and American Indian Research and Development, Inc., are partnering with SEDL on this work. SEDL expects that as districts and schools increase their capacity to work systemically, student achievement will increase.

At the onset of the project, 20 districts in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas in which one or more of the schools were having difficulty meeting state expectations for student achievement agreed to participate. At the end of 2002, 16 districts and 29 schools within those districts were working with SEDL (early on four districts decided to discontinue and were replaced).

The purpose of this report is to present findings based on analyses of more than 260 interviews with teachers, administrators, parents, and other staff and field notes of SEDL coordinators who worked with the districts. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, we do not differentiate between types of participants (teachers, administrators, parents, or other staff) in calculating the results. Responses from all participants are grouped at the district level; thus, all persons regardless of their role in the school system will be referred to as "educators." The one exception to this is in the section on leadership.

## WHAT DOES WORKING SYSTEMICALLY MEAN?

Before we present the findings, let's quickly review SEDL's Working Systemically Model. Working systemically means that the whole district, as a system, will work together to improve student achievement in reading or mathematics. SEDL is guiding this process.

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The model has three distinct features:

1. Multiple levels of the educational system (i.e., district, school, classroom) must be involved.
2. All parts or components of the system must be considered in making improvements (i.e., standards, curriculum and instruction, assessment, policy and governance, professional staff, resources, and family and community).
3. Five competencies must be mastered by those individuals involved in the improvement effort (i.e., collecting, interpreting, and using data; creating coherence; forging alliances; building capacity; and promoting innovation).

SEDL site coordinators and specialists help district and school teams through each of the five stages of the model:

1. **Site entry/Data scan** - districts identify a general problem from data related to reading or mathematics achievement with the help of a SEDL site coordinator.
2. **Systems exploration** - districts and schools look more closely at data-driven problem areas and develop a root cause problem statement that will help determine what needs to be accomplished for improvement in reading or mathematics.
3. **Planning action** - districts and schools develop an ideal statement or overall goal from which to develop a system plan and action elements as part of the plan.
4. **Taking action and monitoring results** - districts and schools implement the plan and its action elements, monitoring and refining the plan on a regular basis.
5. **Recycling the process** - districts and schools reassess needs and success with the plan, develop a new plan, implement and monitor that new plan on an ongoing basis.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

The following questions are addressed in this report:

1. At what stage of the model districts at the end of December 2002 after one to two years of work with SEDL's Working Systemically Model?
2. What factors have emerged as key issues in continuing to work with districts and schools?

## FINDINGS

### Progress Through the Model

SEDL recruited 17 districts in 2001 and another 3 in 2002. Four districts chose to discontinue, leaving 16 districts working with SEDL through 2002. Each district nominated one or two schools to work with the project. District leaders selected the schools with some input from SEDL staff, who encouraged district leaders to consider student achievement and feeder patterns. Of the 16 districts, 13 have two schools participating in the partnership, two with pairs at the same level (i.e., elementary) rather than across levels. Of the 29 participating schools, 12 are elementary schools, 6 are middle schools, and 11 are high schools. Three districts have only one participating school. In four small districts, all schools are involved in the project.

The progress of districts and schools in relation to the model was determined by analyses of SEDL site coordinator field notes and interviews. Based on the information presented in Table 1, it is clear that districts and schools progressed through the model's stages at different rates.

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**Table 1: Sites at each Stage of the Model by Start Date (Fiscal Year and Quarter) as of December 2002**

Start Date	FY01 2nd Qtr.	FY01 3rd Qtr.	FY01 4th Qtr.	FY02 2nd Qtr.	FY02 3rd Qtr.	Totals
<b>Model Stage</b>						
Site Entry						
Systems Exploration		2		1	1	4
Planning Action	1	2	1			4
Taking Action	2	3	3			8
Recycling						
Total Number of Sites	3	7	4	1	1	16

Based on SEDL site coordinator field notes and interviews, a number of factors influenced progress through the model stages, such as the frequency of district team meetings, steady attendance at those meetings, or consensus on a focus from which an action plan could be developed. Given the variety of districts and schools that SEDL is working with, variability in the rate of progress through the model stages among the sites is expected.

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However, districts that developed an early focus on either reading or mathematics created action plans more quickly. Six of the 16 districts reported a focus on reading or mathematics early in their discussions and moved ahead to formulate plans (one district had a plan focused on another area). Developing an early focus on an instructional goal contributed to taking action more quickly.

In the nine districts where there was no plan, only one had a focus on reading or math. Some districts or schools had started taking action while plans were still in discussion, or were taking action in one school but not at the district level or across schools. While this may have addressed an immediate need expressed by the school or district team in a piecemeal form, it had little impact on the system. In some districts and schools, plans focused on issues like parental involvement, discipline, or attendance rather than instructional goals.

### **Focus Areas**

As part of the process of developing plans, the districts are working on techniques or skills to help them accomplish the goals of the Working Systemically Model. The following is a list of the 5 skills or competencies and the number of districts focusing on each:

- **Building capacity** - 16 districts are strengthening their capacity to improve student achievement
- **Using data** - 14 districts are developing their ability to work with data
- **Forging alliances** - 13 districts are reaching out to work with other parts of the system
- **Creating Coherence** - 11 districts are working on aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment to standards
- **Promoting innovation** - 1 district is investigating new programs.

The districts will use the skills discussed above to develop and implement plans to strengthen parts of the school system. The following is a list of focus areas and the number of districts working in each area:

- **Curriculum and instruction** - 12 districts are focusing on improving curriculum and instruction
- **Assessment** - 11 districts are working on assessment

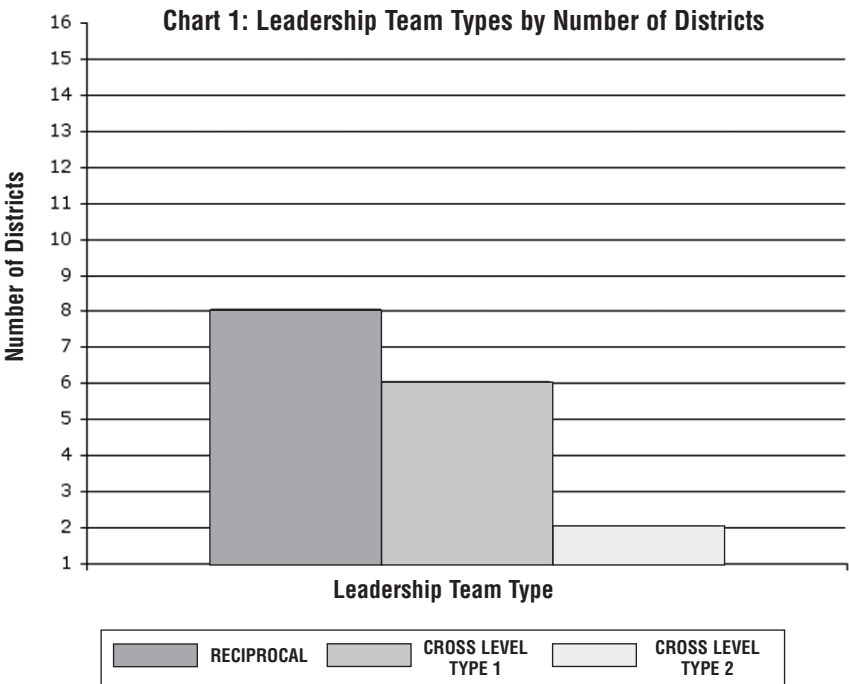
- **Professional development** - 8 districts are utilizing professional development as an important piece of their plan
- **Standards** - 6 districts are focusing on working with standards

**Progress of Leadership Teams**

All project work is centered on leadership teams. SEDL is training the districts and schools to develop the skills to continue the process after the contract ends. Teams should cross levels or be reciprocal. Cross level teams have members of the school team on the district team or members of the district team on the school team but not both. Reciprocal teams have members of the school team on the district team and members of the district team on the school team. As schools interpret plans made at the district level, district representation helps to clarify goals as they apply to the schools. In the reverse, as districts develop activities across the system, school representation allows for better information and alignment. Where efforts are not coordinated, improvements have less impact and receive less support across the system.

As of December 2002, 12 districts had district-level teams. Districts that were still early in their interactions with SEDL and the Working Systemically Model may not be at the stage where a district team has been formed. Chart 1 shows the number of districts that have reciprocal teams and the number with cross level teams. By the end of 2002, half of the districts had reciprocal representation on school and district teams.

Field notes indicate that working on teams and developing reciprocity across teams was difficult for some districts and schools. Further, some teams were not able to maintain focus when SEDL was not present—they depended on SEDL to provide direction and maintain momentum.



*Definitions:*  
*Reciprocal - on both schools and district teams*  
*Cross Level Type 1 - schools on district but not on reverse.*  
*Cross Level Type 2 - district on schools but not on reverse*

## SUMMARY

### Progress through the Model

While the information presented in this report reflects work in progress, a number of general conclusions can be drawn from the data (as of the end of 2002):

1. Half of the districts and schools are in the taking action stage, i.e., they are implementing some part of a plan at district or school levels.
2. Three-fourths of the districts and schools are building capacity through some combination of curriculum, instruction, and assessment activities supported by professional development.
3. SEDL coordinators guide most of the work at districts and schools in conjunction with local staff (this is part of the model for training local staff).
4. Few districts showed strong connections between the work of the district teams and that of the school teams.
5. Many team roles and relationships are still developing; many teams show a need for SEDL support to maintain focus.

### WHAT OTHER FACTORS EMERGED AS KEY ISSUES?

This section describes issues that emerged as SEDL reviewed the progress of districts and schools.

Studies indicate that the following areas are important to the success of improvement efforts—alignment of district curriculum with state standards, sufficient resources to support core instruction and student achievement, and high expectations held by district and school staff for student achievement (see end of report for references). SEDL considered how districts and schools were addressing these factors: 1) Is the curriculum aligned to standards? 2) Are resources sufficient for instruction? 3) Did educators feel that they could be successful with all students or only part of the student group?

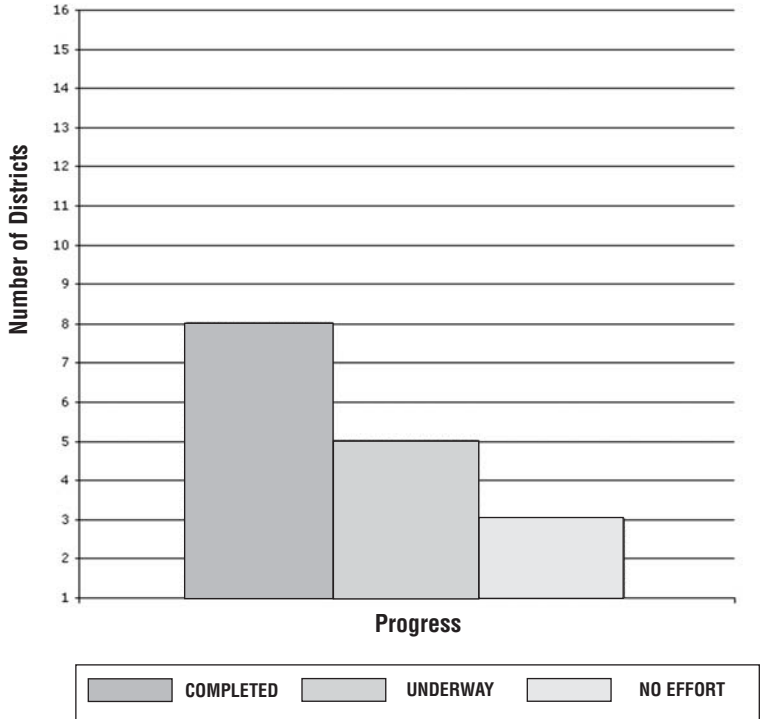
#### Alignment of District Curriculum with State Standards

Curriculum alignment to state standards helps promote student achievement. Chart 2 shows the progress of curriculum alignment to state standards based on educator responses. Educators in 8 districts reported that curriculum alignment to standards is completed, in 5 districts curriculum alignment is under way, and in 3 districts no efforts are being made to align the curriculum. However, when asked if instruction was aligned to the curriculum, responses varied greatly. Some

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recognized that the curriculum was aligned to state standards and it was being taught in the classroom; others saw it as aligned but questioned whether it was being taught in the classroom.

**Chart 2: Progress of Curriculum Alignment to Standards by Number of Districts**

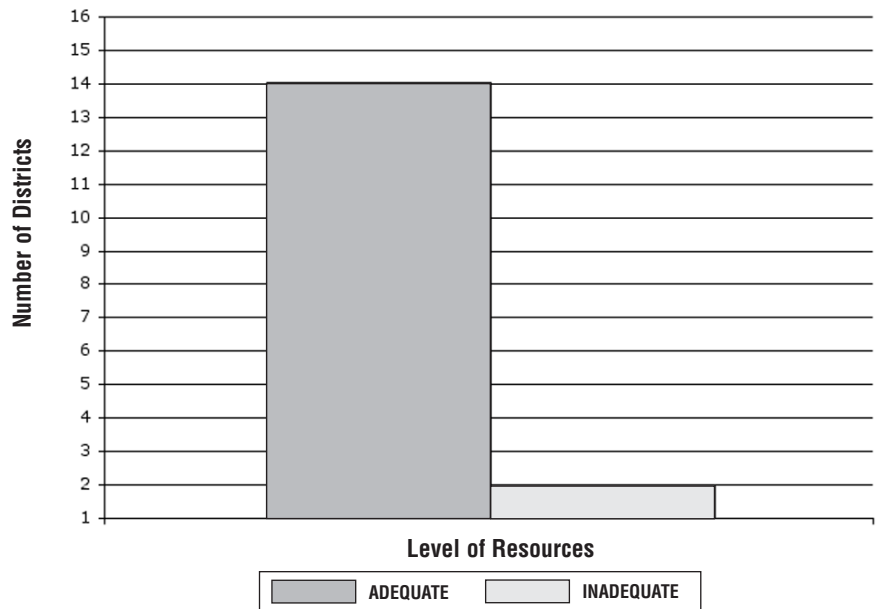


**Resources**

SEDL asked educators whether district resources were sufficient to support classroom instruction. Regardless of the economic status of the district, most answered “yes” to this question. Chart 3 (page 8) shows the level of resources available for instruction as either adequate or inadequate by number of districts. The first bar in the chart indicates that 14 of the 16 districts rated the level of resources for instruction as adequate. The second bar indicates that only 2 districts rated the level of resources for instruction as inadequate. However, when researchers compared resources across districts, some districts clearly have more resources than others. Educators commonly reported that the resources in their own districts were sufficient to meet their needs regardless of outside comparisons.

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**Chart 3: Resources for Instruction by Number of Districts**



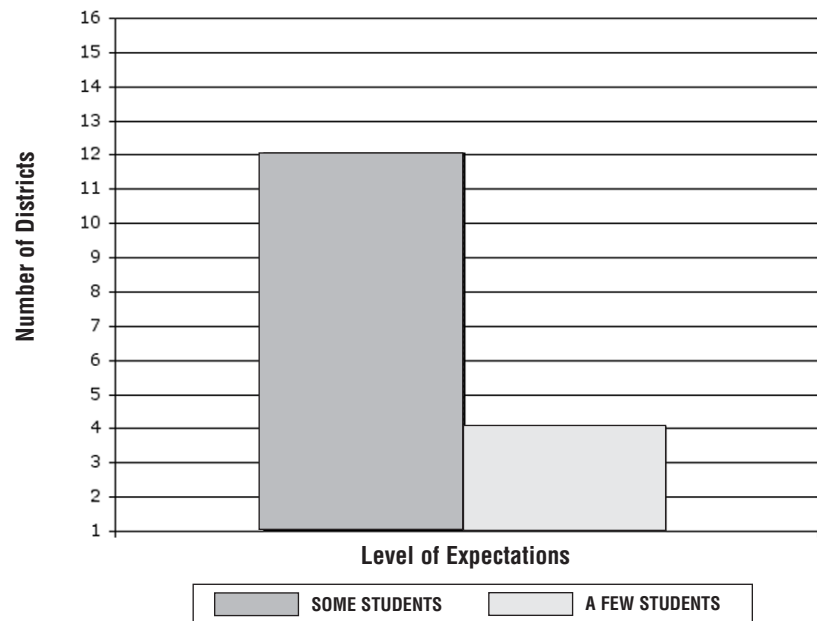
Educators described how changing budgets have reduced curriculum materials to the bare necessities and, in a number of cases, reduced what monies were available per pupil in the past.

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**Expectations**

Expectations can influence how districts address student outcomes. For instance, if expectations are high for only a few students rather than for all students, educators might not press all students to achieve. Most educators initially responded that they generally held high expectations for students.

**Chart 4: Number of Districts with High Expectations for Some or a Few Students**



However, when asked whether these expectations were held for all students, more variation arose in educator responses. Chart 4 (page 8) indicates that educators in 12 of the 16 districts had high expectations for some students. Only four of the districts reported having high expectations for only a few students. No districts reported having high expectations for all students.

In some cases, educators said that many of the students did not have sufficient help at home to succeed; in other cases, they said that students' native language or culture interfered. A number of educators felt that the students had difficult lives, and they did not want to make it even more difficult for them. Many educators said that regardless of circumstance, they felt it was their responsibility to help students succeed.

## Leadership

Leadership is not an explicit element of SEDL's model, but it is strongly associated with the outcomes of reform efforts. Leadership changes have occurred in half of the districts and schools, some more than once, in the relatively short period that they have been engaged with SEDL. Two districts have had changes at the superintendent level; another two districts have had changes at both the superintendent and principal levels; three other districts have had changes at the principal level; and another district lost a district staff leader. It is difficult to maintain reform efforts without some stability of leadership.

Leadership stability is not the only concern, however. A consistent theme that emerged during the first two years of work was the ability of district and school leaders to diagnose needs, to plan ahead, and to do necessary follow-up to support improvement in the long term. Too often, leaders were overwhelmed by the daily problems that confronted their districts and schools. Across the 16 districts, SEDL looked at the ability of leaders to prioritize instruction over operation, to be proactive instead of reactive, and to follow through on improvement agendas.

**Instruction plus management.** While some superintendents combined instructional leadership with operational management, all were stronger operational managers than instructional leaders. In contrast, six out of 29 principals fell into the instructional leadership category. When leadership becomes more involved with instruction, instruction is likely to improve.

**Proactive or reactive.** Another leadership theme is related to whether leaders were proactive or reactive in their work with SEDL. Proactive means that they planned how to address issues, were organized, had procedures in place, and anticipated changes in the district or schools. Reactive means that they operate in more of a crisis management mode and were caught by surprise when changes occurred. Two of the 16 superintendents were characterized as "proactive," while seven of the 29 principals were considered proactive. This means that the majority of leaders in these districts and schools were responding to needs on a day-to-day basis.

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*If student achievement is going to improve, then leadership must increase the attention they give to instructional concerns, be proactive, and follow through to ensure objectives are realized.*

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**Follow-through and attentiveness.** Another leadership theme was whether leaders were able to provide follow-through and attended to the work needed. Based on field notes, interview data, and interactions with the SEDL leadership team, the principals' and superintendents' leadership styles were identified according to their demonstrated level of follow-through and attentiveness. Of the 16 superintendents, 2 superintendents were considered to be high in attentiveness, 2 moderate rate, and 12 low. Of the 29 principals, eight were in the high category, six in moderate, and 15 in the low category.

These data show the challenge for leaders in these districts and schools. If student achievement is going to improve, then leadership must increase the attention they give to instructional concerns, be proactive, and follow through to ensure objectives are realized. What superintendents spend their time on sends a clear message to principals. The same is true for the messages principals send to classroom teachers.

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THESE DATA?

This report describes SEDL's work with 16 districts and 29 schools. This work focuses on the development and refinement of a systemic model to support improvement in student reading or mathematics achievement.

Over the one to two years of implementation, SEDL and the 16 districts have made substantial progress in implementing the model. All of the districts and schools are involved in improvement efforts, although there is great variability in how directly or quickly their efforts will impact student achievement. SEDL is continuing to support and focus the work more directly on student outcomes.

Based on SEDL's progress review, site coordinators have made some refinements to the model to increase its responsiveness to the needs of sites and enhance the likelihood that educators will successfully use the model now and in the future. Some of the refinements implemented or under consideration follow:

- Increase the time for discussion between SEDL and a district before making a commitment to work together, so that both can learn more about each other and understand better what the process will be.
- Begin work at the district level first, with representation from schools, and then progress to the schools to create a systemic approach and make sure that work is coordinated and aligned across the system.
- Focus on reading or mathematics first rather than other areas that may also be of concern.
- Consider ways to address educators' leadership skills.
- Examine expectations for students in ongoing work with districts and schools.

As the SEDL five-year project of work extends into 2005, SEDL coordinators are continuing to engage districts in an ongoing process to improve outcomes for their students. Specifically, the information presented in this report has reinforced the following themes:

- Leadership, especially instructional leadership, is critical to the process.
- What gets focused on gets done. Whether it is about instruction or support, a clear and simple focus makes planning and taking action more effective.
- Change is most likely to succeed when all parts of the system support each other, especially around issues of curriculum, instruction, and assessment related to student achievement.
- Training and skill building (building capacity) is part of a change process.

*This report finds that schools and districts are off to a good start in the five-year process of implementing the SEDL model and addressing student achievement. SEDL coordinators have revised and adjusted their work based on the input and responses of the teachers, administrators, parents, and community members across the districts and schools.*

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## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY DISTRICT?

Although the results presented in this report summarize the progress of work with SEDL across the 16 districts, the findings are not representative of every district and school. The following questions are intended to help district and school staff reflect on the work they have done in their own districts or schools in relation to the SEDL model and build their capacity to work systemically.

*Although the results presented in this report summarize the progress of work with SEDL across the 16 districts, the findings are not representative of every district and school.*

1. What does it mean to work systemically? How are district and school teams collaborating and working across levels? What evidence do you have to support your conclusion? What could be done to improve collaboration among the teams?
2. To what degree does your district's and school's use of resources, curriculum, instruction, and assessment support student achievement? How might resources be optimized to improve the use of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment?
3. In what ways are data used to make decisions about classroom instruction? What sources of assessment data are used? What do teachers need to know to use assessment data to guide instruction?
4. What roles do district and school leaders play in improving reading and/or mathematics instruction? What roles do leaders play in improving student achievement? What roles do leaders play in supporting teachers?
5. How might you ensure that all district and school personnel have high expectations for all students? How are high expectations communicated to teachers, staff, and students?

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## SELECTED WEB RESOURCES

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Topic Packs. <http://www.ascd.org/cms/index.cfm?TheViewID=366&flag=366>

National Center for Educational Accountability. Just for the Kids.  
<http://www.just4kids.org>

Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002, September). *Foundations for success: case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement*. MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools.  
<http://www.cgcs.org/pdfs/Foundations.pdf>

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. *Annotated bibliography of resources for educational reform, coherent teaching practice, and improved student learning*. <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/pic02/>

Hord, S. M., Rutherford, W. L., Huling-Austin, L., & Hall, G. E. (1987). *Taking charge of change*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL).<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/cha22.html>

Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacity in schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).  
<http://shop.ascd.org/ProductDisplay.cfm?ProductID=198058>

Marzano, R. J., & Kendall, J. S. (1996). *A comprehensive guide to designing standards-based districts, schools and classrooms*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory. <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

Schmoker, M. (2001). *The results fieldbook: Practical strategies from dramatically improved schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).  
<http://shop.ascd.org/ProductDisplay.cfm?ProductID=101001>

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