

Toward Closing the Gap in Literacy Achievement

**High Performance Learning Communities Project
Community School District #2, New York City**

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February 15, 1999

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the extent to which student achievement in literacy improved across all elementary schools in District #2 during the 1997-98 school year. We then move on to investigate the extent to which changes in student achievement appear to be related to whether or not schools participated in the Focused Literacy Network. Our findings indicate that, on average, all elementary schools improved on most measures of literacy achievement collected in the district, with larger average gains in Reading than on Writing. These gains occurred even though student performance in District #2 elementary schools was already well above comparable schools in urban settings. Second, the thirteen schools in the Focused Literacy Network made larger gains in literacy achievement than did the other schools in District #2. If continued in future years, this trend would indicate that the work occurring in those schools is helping to close the gap in performance between them and their more affluent and advantaged counterparts. Finally, our results must be interpreted within the context of substantial amounts of variation in student performance across District #2 as a whole, as well as within the designated sets of Focused Literacy subset.

Introduction

The rhetoric of high achievement standards for all students has been in the air for some time now. In theory, the concept of "high standards for student achievement" is roundly endorsed by parents, educators, and policy makers. In practice, however, the enactment of standards over the past several years has been problematic. As increasing numbers of states and school districts have created or adopted high achievement standards and have begun to measure students with respect to those

standards, a question that skeptics have asked since the inception of the standards movement is being raised with increasing urgency: How can we hold students accountable to higher standards without also holding districts, schools, and classroom teachers accountable for providing students with the opportunity to meet those standards?

An equally compelling and related concern revolves around the issue of equity. Students who attend schools in high-poverty communities perform less adequately than their more affluent counterparts on most, if not all, existing measures of student performance. Most experts expect this pattern to repeat as increasing numbers of students begin to take more rigorous assessments tied to higher standards. If, and when, scores that illustrate this expected performance gap are publicly reported, many fear that the low scores of minority, poor, and limited English proficient students will be interpreted as yet one more piece of evidence that these students cannot, nor should they be expected to, reach high standards. If traditional patterns of assumptions about low-achieving students prevail, attention will not be devoted to exposing the opportunities for learning from which these students have been systematically excluded as it should.

The primary aim of this paper is to provide a portrait of the kind of assistance that one urban district is providing to students, teachers, and principals to help them to meet new and demanding standards and to examine the impact that assistance appears to be having on student achievement. Our portrait is of New York City's Community School District #2, a district which has invested heavily in improving teaching and learning in literacy over the past 10 years. We are especially interested in examining the issues that surround how District #2 identifies and provides assistance to low-achieving, high-poverty elementary schools.

A key element of District #2's strategy of systemic improvement has been the phasing in of instructional change by content area. Shortly after Anthony Alvarado took over as superintendent in 1987, district leaders chose to focus their efforts on literacy because of its overriding importance in a district characterized by extreme linguistic and ethnic diversity. Their primary strategy for achieving system-wide improvement was to gradually build and sustain an infrastructure of human expertise for helping teachers to provide expert instruction. This infrastructure is supported by a deeply ingrained culture of professionalism (also built up gradually over many years) that encourages teachers to take ongoing personal responsibility for continually upgrading their own and others' knowledge and skills. This culture of professionalism extends through the layers of school and district administration such that all professionals in the district are encouraged to see themselves as learners and as assistants of others'

learning in what Resnick has described as a series of nested learning communities (Resnick & Hall, 1998).

Within this culture of pervasive and continuous learning, a range of kinds of professional development and teacher support can be identified and described. For example, the district supports literacy instruction through regular professional development sessions geared to the experience level and needs of teachers. Professional developers assigned to a school for an extended period of time observe and co-teach in classrooms on a regular basis. Other forms of professional development include the Professional Development Lab in which a teacher works alongside an experienced teacher for a number of weeks and Intervisitations in which teachers from one school visit and observe teachers in another school for a specific pedagogical purpose. The district also attempts to support classroom teachers with the infusion of additional personnel for a variety of purposes including small group reading instruction and Reading Recovery for at-risk first graders.

Unlike many urban districts in which professional development is not particularly cohesive, well-coordinated, or integrated into day-to-day functioning of the system, District #2 has reconceptualized professional development as a pervasive, ongoing, and integrated part of its administrative organization (Alvarado, 1999). As such, their professional development has been successful in influencing practice on a large scale throughout the district in a manner that is both responsive to individual schools' and teachers' needs and coordinated with district goals. Their efforts have paid off. Over the past ten years, the district's enrollment has steadily grown and, most important, student achievement has consistently improved (Elmore & Burney, 1998).

Work with Low-Achieving Schools

The 45 schools which comprise District #2 are scattered geographically throughout Manhattan from densely populated, poor communities in Lower Manhattan's Chinatown and the West Side's Hell's Kitchen to extremely affluent areas on the Upper East Side. Given this extreme diversity, district leaders have developed a keen appreciation for the varying needs and performance levels of the students and schools under their purview. Starting in the early- to mid-nineties, the district began a concerted effort to identify, assist, and monitor their neediest schools in the area of literacy. Based on both quantitative achievement measures and their own personal observations of teaching practice and student work, they targeted a group of elementary schools—which became known as the Focused Literacy Network—who had historically low achievement scores in literacy, high-poverty levels in the student population and a significant proportion of students at-risk of failure in literacy. The district then

co-designed, with these elementary schools, a system of support and oversight. The Focused Literacy Network began with seven schools; by the 1997-98 school year the number had expanded to thirteen.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the positioning of these thirteen schools relative to the remaining thirteen elementary schools in the district for the 1997-98 school year. As shown in Figure 1, student performance on the Spring 1997 administration of the CTB provides a clear dividing line between the Focused Literacy schools and all other elementary schools. The best-performing Focused Literacy school had 65% of its students scoring at the 50th percentile or better, while among the rest of the District #2 elementary schools, the lowest-performer had 70% of its students scoring at or above the 50th percentile. Student performance in both groups, however, showed considerable variation. Within the Focused Literacy schools, student performance ranged from 30% to 65% of their students scoring at or above the 50th percentile; within the rest of the elementary schools, performances ranged from 70% to nearly 95%. The schools participating in the Focused Literacy Network are low achieving by District #2 standards, however, they are doing well in comparison to typical elementary schools, considering that the *lowest* performing school has 30% of its students achieving at or above the 50th percentile.

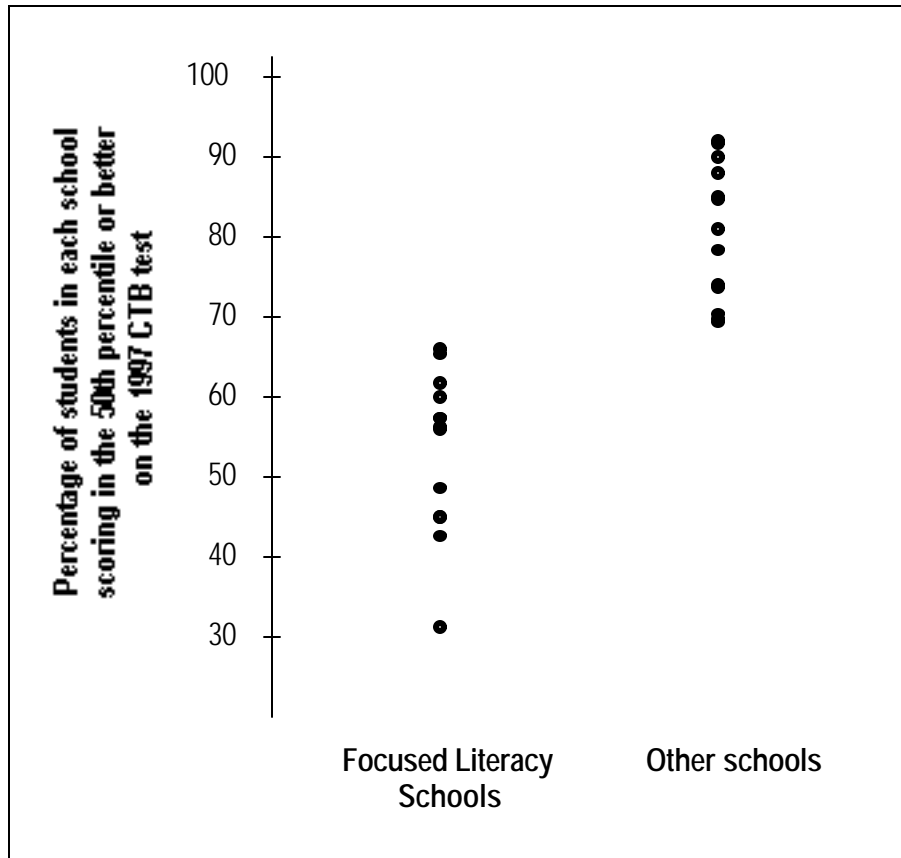


Figure 1: Differences on 1997 CTB performance between Focused Literacy schools and other elementary schools in Community School District #2

The next figure (Figure 2) illustrates the socio-economic status of each of the schools in 1997 in District #2 as measured by the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. It suggests that the students in the Focused Literacy schools endure levels of poverty similar to those of urban schools nationally. With the exception of one school, all the Focused Literacy schools fall in the bottom half of the SES distribution for District #2 elementary schools. Moreover, as shown by the cluster of dots at the top of the left column, twelve of the Focused Literacy schools have over 69% of their students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, while ten had more than 85% of the students qualify. In contrast, eleven of the rest of District #2's elementary schools had less than 35% of their students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, seven had less than 25% qualify. Thus, the thirteen schools Focused Literacy schools can be seen as a group facing a similar challenge—that of helping to develop the literacy achievement of under-privileged and under-prepared students.

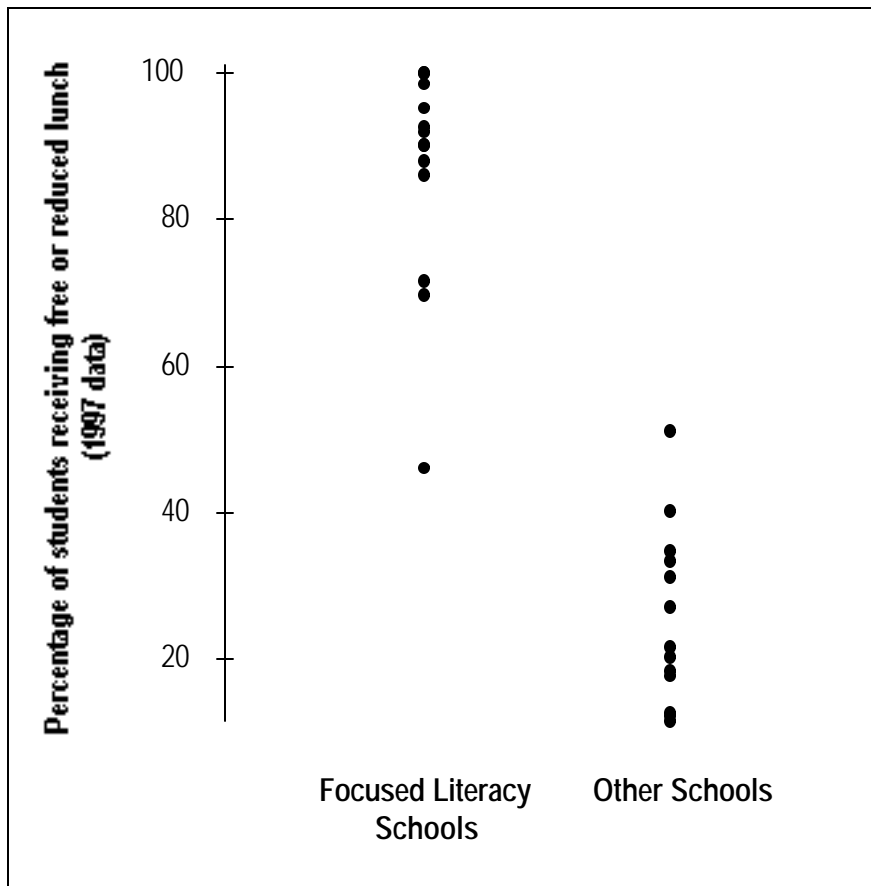


Figure 2: Differences in 1997 measures of SES between Focused Literacy schools and other schools in Community School District #2

The challenges faced by the Focused Literacy schools extend beyond the characteristics of their student populations, however. Similar to most high-poverty schools in urban areas, District #2's Focused Literacy schools often have a difficult time attracting and retaining strong teachers. Many of these schools have undergone changes of leadership in recent years and the new principals' endeavors to improve their staff have led to a significant number of new and inexperienced teachers. As a result, Focused Literacy schools face the formidable task of improving literacy for a challenging and challenged group of students with a teaching staff that often requires significant amounts of support.

Support Provided to Focused Literacy Schools

It is difficult to characterize the kind of support provided to Focused Literacy schools because it is at odds with conventional notions of "programmatic intervention." In fact, Focused Literacy is not a program at all, but rather a network of schools who are all focused on meeting the same set of instructional challenges. While each of these schools receive similar *kinds* of support and oversight,

there are differences in the actual programs and structures implemented within each school to meet their literacy challenges. Moreover, the specific recommendations and levels of support District #2 leadership provides varies based upon the needs of both the student and teaching populations within each school. While the Network provides coherence in both goals of and strategies for instructional improvement, the introduction of programs and structures in each school setting is necessarily unique.

Schools involved in the Focus Literacy Network receive a more intensive version of the supports available to all schools in the district. In this sense, the Focused Literacy “intervention” might better be characterized by variations in levels of intensity rather than as differences in the kind of support provided. For example, Focused Literacy schools receive more funding to support additional professional development time for their teachers, including money to pay for substitutes so that teachers can go to workshops and visit the classrooms of experienced teachers. Whereas all schools have building-based staff developers, Focused Literacy schools generally are provided with enough resources to permit them to hire more literacy staff developers than schools not so designated. Focused Literacy schools also receive extra funds for purchasing sets of books to be used in literacy instruction. Finally, the District #2 leadership sponsors regular meetings targeted specifically for principals and staff developers working at these schools to provide extra support for their efforts at helping teachers improve their literacy instruction.

Focused Literacy schools also receive increased oversight from the district. This occurs in two ways. All schools are visited by District #2 leadership. These visits include a tour of the building in which each classroom is visited, followed by a conversation with the principal about the status of instruction and current plans for improvement. Known as “walkthroughs,” these visits are regarded as a key element of the district’s program of leadership development. During the visits, district leaders make an objective assessment of instructional practice in light of both the school’s written objectives and the goals of the entire district, and they work with the principal to outline a specific plan of action to help move the teachers toward meeting those goals. Repeat visits ensure continuity and a sense of accountability. Most schools are visited once a year. Focused Literacy schools may be visited up to six times a year.

Second, Focused Literacy schools are asked to follow a more structured version of District #2’s Balanced Literacy program. In the Balanced Literacy program, students interact with texts at varying levels of challenge in a variety of settings with different levels of support from the teacher. It is not a rigid set of specifications applied uniformly across all situations. Instead it is a set of principles for good literacy instruction that teachers and administrators interpret to meet the needs of their student

populations (Stein, D'Amico, & Israel, November, 1998). District #2 community members have created a number of professional development supports for interpreting these principles. These include, but are not limited to, a structured and codified version of the program aimed at supporting the needs of at-risk students and providing teaching scaffolds for teachers learning about the program (Community School District #2, 1998; Stein & D'Amico, June, 1998). Because of the high levels of both at-risk students and inexperienced teachers in the Focused Literacy schools, district leadership encourages them to follow the more structured version of the Balanced Literacy program.

In sum, District #2's Focused Literacy Network can be seen as a system of support for schools who traditionally have had low scores on measures of literacy achievement, which exists within an overall culture of high expectations. Their efforts in this regard are an attempt to defy the trend revealed by a substantial body of empirical evidence that points to the strong relationship between poverty and low achievement. As is typical of urban districts, high levels of poverty in District #2 strongly correlate with low achievement (Harwell & Resnick, 1997). The Focused Literacy Network is an effort to ameliorate the effects of poverty on achievement.

District #2's Response to the Demands of Standards

District #2 adopted the New Standards Performance Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics in the 1996-97 school year. Their reasons for adopting standards and their readiness for dealing with the demands of a standards-based approach most likely differed from the typical urban district (Elmore & Burney, 1998; High Performance Learning Communities Project, 1998). Given that the district's students were already performing better than students in most comparable districts, the introduction of new and more rigorous standards was viewed as an opportunity to "push the edge of their own envelope" a bit further. Also, given district leaders' confidence in the system of professional development and literacy instruction that was already in place, they were not looking toward Standards as the main driver of their instructional reform strategy (as many less well-equipped districts sometimes do). Rather, they adopted the NS Performance Standards as *part of their continuing efforts* for improving instruction. More specifically, the district saw performance standards as providing them with the opportunity to compare their work with nationally and internationally benchmarked criteria and as a venue for deepening their focus on the assessment of student performance and needs as a tool for instructional planning (HPLC, 1998).

With the adoption of standards, district leaders also began to look critically at their efforts to provide opportunities for their most challenged students. Based on their deep-seated belief that *all*

District #2 students could, should, and would meet the new, more rigorous standards, district leaders began to look critically at the amount of instructional time that was being provided throughout the district. Along with professional developers, school principals, and teachers, they decided that many students needed more time to master both the conventions of reading and strategies for meaningfully interpreting text. Ideally, the additional time would not be a disconnected after-school program but rather a meaningful continuation of the work with which students were already engaged during the school day. District educators also felt that the return on their investment of extra instructional time would be magnified if that instruction occurred in a setting that offered a small ratio of teacher to students.

To meet these needs, all District #2 elementary schools began an extended day program in the winter of 1996-97. The program, which is taught by teachers in the school building, consists of one hour and fifteen minutes of additional literacy instruction four days a week to groups of 15 students or less. In a similar vein, in the summer of 1997, an extended year program was developed to offer selected students an additional month of half-day instruction in literacy. Both of these programs were designed to follow the same philosophy of instruction and learning (i.e., the principles undergirding the Balanced Literacy program) that form the backbone of instruction during the regular school day and school year. In addition, considerable time and thought were devoted to the training of teachers and decisions surrounding the assignment of students to teachers. (For example, in some cases, it was decided that a student should remain with his previous year's teacher for the extended year program and, in other cases, it was decided that a student should be assigned to his teacher for the following year, thereby allowing the next year's teacher to get a head start on learning the student's needs.)

Standards and Focused Literacy Schools

All students and schools in District #2 were expected to adopt and provide opportunities for their students to meet the new, high standards for student learning. District leaders felt that the most potent response to the demands of the new standards--for all schools--was a high-quality instructional program and the provision of time for students to progress to the levels of mastery required. Focused Literacy schools received increased resources that allowed them to expand the number of students who can participate in the extended day and extended year programs. For example, starting in the 1997-98 school year, Focused Literacy schools were given sufficient resources to permit them to include all students scoring up to the 50th percentile on the CTB in the extended day program. Similarly, by 1998, the extended year program was offered to all Focused-Literacy-school students in grades K-5 who scored at or below the 50th percentile on the CTB. This contrasts with more severe constraints on the

numbers of students who could participate in these programs (generally imposed by grade-level or risk-level) in the rest of the district's schools due to more limited funding.

In the remaining sections of this paper we examine the extent to which student achievement in literacy improved across all elementary schools in District #2 during the 1997-98 school year (the first year of the project on which change data were available for New Standards). We then move on to investigate the extent to which changes in student achievement appear to be related to whether or not schools participated in the Focused Literacy Network. Our findings indicate that, on average, *all* elementary schools improved on most measures of literacy achievement collected in the district, with larger average gains in Reading than on Writing. These gains occurred even though student performance in District #2 elementary schools was already well above comparable schools in urban settings. Second, the thirteen schools in the Focused Literacy Network made larger gains in literacy achievement than did the other schools in District #2. If continued in future years, this trend would indicate that the work occurring in those schools is helping to close the gap in performance between them and their more affluent and advantaged counterparts. Finally, our results must be interpreted within the context of substantial amounts of variation in student performance across District #2 as a whole, as well as within the designated sets of Focused Literacy subset. In the final section of this paper, we discuss the implications of this variation for shaping the kinds of claims that can be made about effective strategies for closing the gap in similar urban settings.

Methods

Data Sources

Two kinds of data were used in this paper: quantitative measures of literacy achievement and interviews and conversations with District #2 educators about the history and composition of the Focused Literacy Network. Literacy achievement was assessed using the Spring 1997 and Spring 1998 administrations of both the California Test of Basis Skills (CTB) and the New Standards Reference Examination (NSRE). District #2 has relied on the CTB as a measure for assessing student performance over a number of years. District leaders have less of a track record with the NSRE, having only begun administering it in May 1997. Nevertheless, adopting the NS Performance Standards and their companion reference exam represents a commitment to "raising the bar" of expectations for their students. Because both of these measures of literacy achievement are important to the district, albeit in different ways, both are used in this paper.

The CTB is a traditional standardized literacy test that all 32 community school districts in New York City are required to administer to elementary students in grades three through five. The elementary version of the English Language Arts NSRE, which is designed to be administered to fourth grade students, is a performance and multiple choice on-demand assessment that is systematically referenced to the New Standards Performance Standards for English Language Arts (New Standards, 1997). New Standards scores are reported in clusters, and each student receives a rating on each cluster. Five scores are possible: Achieved the Standard with Honors, Achieved the Standard, Nearly Achieved the Stand, Below the Standard, and Little Evidence of Achievement. Students receive ratings in the following four English Language Arts clusters: Basic Reading, Analysis and Interpretation, Writing Conventions, and Writing Effectiveness.

The CTB was administered to 85% of District #2's students in grades three through five in 1997 (n=5,642 students) and 87% in 1998 (n=5893). In both years, the vast majority of registered students who did *not* take the test were considered LEP exempt (13.5% in 1997 and 12% in 1998). The average difference in the number of students tested per elementary school between 1997 and 1998 was less than 25 students.

In contrast, the NSRE was administered to all District #2 fourth grade students who attended school on the days of its administration, *including* Limited English Proficient and Special Education students. In Spring 1998, a total of 2,148 fourth grade students were tested, with 1,993 completing the English Language Arts standards clusters (93%).¹ These completion percentages are similar to those for the Spring 1997 administration of the New Standards exams in District #2 (Resnick & Harwell, 1998). The difference in the number of students who completed the NSRE in 1997 versus 1998 was, on average, less than four per school.

School performance on the NSRE (measured as percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard) and the CTB (measured as the percentage of students at or above the 50th percentile) tend to correlate highly (see Table 1). In 1997, correlations between school performance on the CTB and that of any given English Language Arts cluster on the NSRE ranged from 0.81 (on Writing

¹ New Standards exams are typically administered over three days and only students completing all English Language Arts clusters have scores reported for English Language Arts. The failure of some students to complete the New Standards exams produced missing data (7% for English Language Arts) whose effects cannot be assessed since the data are at the school level, and, therefore, information about student characteristics is not available. Although it cannot be assumed that the missing data are missing at random (e.g., students for whom scores are not reported may be academically weaker students who deliberately avoided these exams, or may have higher than average absentee rates), we believe it unlikely that the relatively small percentage of missing data seriously distorts our findings and conclusions.

Conventions) to 0.88 (on Basic Reading). In 1998, the correlations were slightly lower, but still high, ranging from 0.62 (on Writing Conventions) to 0.81 (on Reading Interpretation and Analysis).

	CTB Scores	
	1997	1998
Basic Reading	.88	.73
Reading Analysis & Interpretation	.88	.81
Writing Conventions	.81	.62
Writing Effectiveness	.83	.72

Table 1: Correlations between the CTB and the NSRE

Information regarding the Focused Literacy Network has been gathered over the course of a two-year investigation of the district’s content-driven approach to reform (Elmore & Burney, 1998; Stein & D’Amico, 1998; Stein, D’Amico, & Israel, 1998). In this paper, we draw upon this information, as well as a series of focused conversations with district leaders that identified precise dates, schools, and offerings associated with their Focused Literacy initiative.

Procedures of Analysis

Analyses were performed on the available data from the district’s 26 elementary schools about which meaningful conclusions could be drawn. For the CTB scores in both years were available for 26 elementary schools. For the NSRE, data were available for both years from 24 schools—two schools had scores missing in 1998.

Data are reported for District #2 as a whole as well as by average school performance. District and school performance is described as the percentage of students who scored at or above the 50th percentile on the CTB or who met or exceeded the standard on each of the NSRE measures (i.e., combining Achieved the Standard with Honors and Achieved the Standard performance ratings). Average school performance is calculated by averaging the percentages for each school. Thus, schools with small populations of students were given the same weight as schools with large populations. These averages must be reviewed with some caution, as the number of students taking each of these exams in both years varies. In 1998, the number of students taking the CTB ranged from 34 to 442 students with a median of 220 per school. Similarly, the number of students for whom NSRE scores were reported ranged from 33 to 160, with a median of 83 per school. We believe that the numbers of students per school is large enough to ensure that the percentages can be meaningfully interpreted if done carefully. For example, in a median elementary school (i.e., 83 students) 50% scoring at or above

standard translates to 42 students whereas in an elementary school with 160 students 50% scoring at or above standard translates to 80 students.

Changes in performance between 1997 and 1998 are reviewed for both the CTB and all four ELA measures on the NSRE. For the CTB the percent of students in each school who scored at or above the 50th percentile in 1997 is subtracted from those who scored at or above the 50th percentile in 1998. For the NSRE, the percent of students for each ELA cluster who were at or above the standard in 1997 and 1998 was identified and then the 1997 percentages were subtracted from the 1998 percentages. Since the NSRE is designed to be administered only to fourth-grade students and hence the NS change scores have been computed on different cohorts of students from the 1997 and 1998 administrations.² Because the CTB exam is administered across three grade levels, two-thirds of the students taking the exam are (theoretically) the same across the two administrations. Finally, the average performance of Focused Literacy schools both in 1997, 1998 and their changes between those two years, is then compared to that of the other elementary school in District #2 on each of the literacy achievement measures.

Results

Overall Improvements in Achievement Between 1997 and 1998

Improvements in the Performance of District #2 as a Whole

In the last decade District #2 has improved student achievement in literacy significantly. Once sixteenth among the thirty-two NYC city school districts in literacy achievement, they now are consistently ranked second (Elmore & Burney, 1997). Their overall performance in both 1997 and 1998 as compared to national scores on both the CTB and the NSRE emphasize this point. In 1997, District #2 had 68.6% of its students score in the at or above the 50th percentile on the nationally normed CTB test, compared to 47.3% of the students in New York City as a whole. In 1998 an even larger proportion of District #2 students scored above the national average with 72.6% of them scoring at or above the 50th percentile. Similarly, Table 3 shows that students in District #2 outperformed the

² The interpretability of the percent change values depends heavily on the similarity of characteristics of fourth-grade classes in the schools across the two years, especially school-level SES. The results of applying hierarchical linear models to student-level New Standards ELA scores indicates that the effect of school-level SES on student achievement was similar in 1997 and 1998, providing support for examining percent change values.

rest of the students in the nation who took the NSRE in 1998³ by between 11% (on Writing Conventions) and 28% (on Reading Analysis and Interpretation).

	1997	1998
New York City	47.3%	49.6%
District #2	68.6%	72.6%

Table 2: Number of students scoring in the 50th percentile on the 1997 and 1998 CTB tests in District #2 as compared to New York City as a whole

	District #2		National
	1997	1998	1998
Basic Reading	57%	77%	56%
Reading Analysis and Interpretation	44%	57%	29%
Writing Conventions	46%	49%	38%
Writing Effectiveness	46%	45%	32%

Table 3: Percentage of fourth-grade District #2 students who met or exceeded standard in 1997 and 1998 compared to fourth graders who took the NSRE nationally.

Given these higher-than-average levels of performance—levels of performance that have been built over many years—achieving new gains each school year becomes increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, the performance of District #2 on both the NSRE and CTB improved from 1997 to 1998. The percent of students scoring at or above the 50th percentile on the CTB district-wide increased by 4 percentage points, from 68.6% in 1997 to 72.6% in 1998 (see Table 2). The percent of students scoring at or above standard on three of the four ELA clusters also improved (see Table 3). Student performance improvements were particularly noteworthy on Basic Reading (from 57% to 77% of the students meeting standard) and Analysis and Interpretation (from 44% to 57% of the students meeting standard).

Improvements in School Performance on Average

The average school performance also increased on the CTB, as did average school performance on three out of four of the NSRE measures of literacy achievement (see Table 4). Average school performance on the CTB increased 4.06 percentage points. The overall average

³National figures on the number of students who met or exceeded the standard on the NSRE are not available for 1997.

school increase in the number of students meeting or exceeding the standard in English Language Arts on the NSRE at each school was 6.13%, with changes on the individual measures of the NSRE ranging from a 16.91% improvement (Basic Reading) to a 5.37% drop (Writing Effectiveness). Table 4 and Figure 3 present this information in tabular and graphical form.

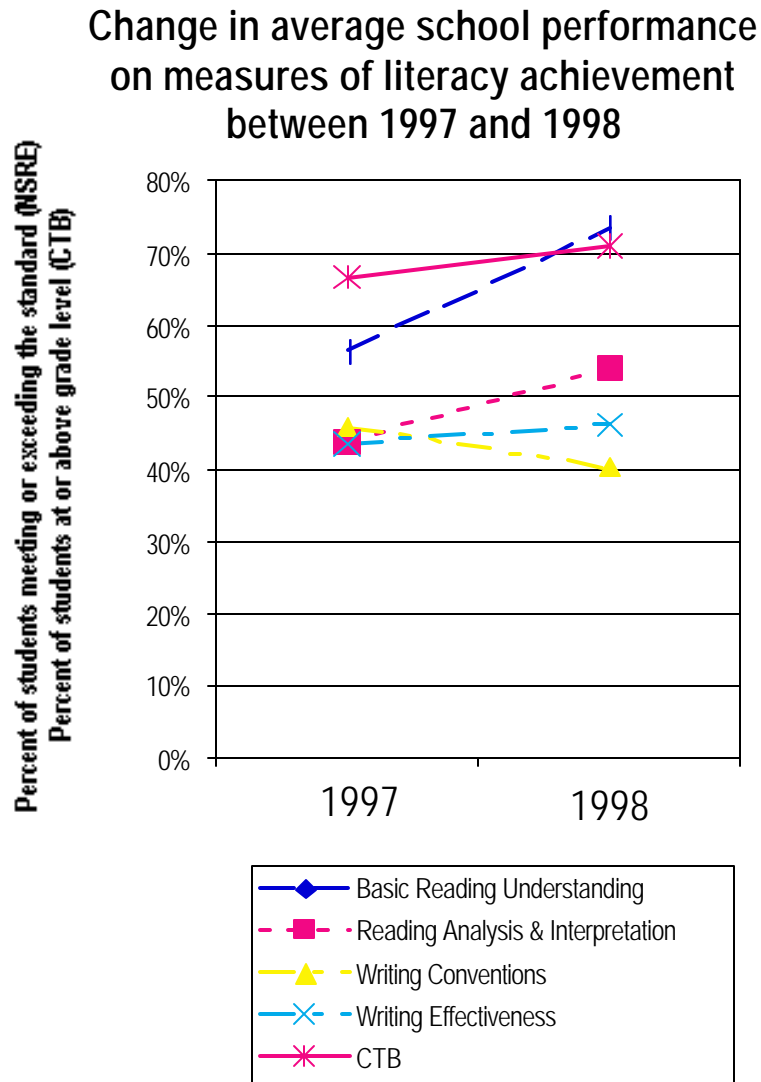


Figure 3: Change in average school performance on measures of literacy achievement in 1997 and 1998.

	1997	1998	Change
Basic Reading	56.63%	73.54%	16.91%
Reading Analysis & Interpretation	43.83%	54.13%	10.30%
Writing Conventions	43.42%	46.08%	2.66%
Writing Effectiveness	45.83%	40.46%	-5.37%
Average change for ELA	= 6.13%		
CTB	66.73%	70.79%	4.06%

Table 4: Change in average school performance on measures of literacy achievement in 1997 and 1998.

As noted earlier, these improvements, for both District #2 as a whole and in average school performance, come on the heels of a prior history of strong performance levels and substantial gains on the CTB and high initial scores on the NSRE. The stronger gains on reading compared to writing measures during the 1997-98 school year bear monitoring and, if continued, would suggest further investigation. District #2's literacy program includes a focus on writing as well as reading and a strong impetus towards exploring links between writing and reading. However, the core of its literacy philosophy is based upon reading and in particular on the instructional strategies and assessment techniques which will help early and emergent readers become fluent readers. While this may explain why the district's largest gains were on measures of basic reading understanding, more study over longer periods of time would be needed to substantiate this claim.

Changes in the Performance of Focused Literacy schools Compared to Other Schools in District #2

As a group, the Focused Literacy Schools made greater gains on all measures of literacy achievement than did the rest of the elementary schools in District #2. Table 5 provides summary statistics for the two groups of schools for the 1997 and 1998 New Standards and CTB performance, measured in terms of the percent of students scoring at or above standard or at or above the 50th percentile, and the difference in these percentages from 1997 to 1998. For example, for Basic Reading, on average there was an increase of 20 percentage points in the number of students in the Focused Literacy schools scored at or above standard in 1998 than in 1997. The rest of the elementary schools increased by an average of 14.3 percentage points on this same cluster during the same time period. The final column shows the difference in change scores between the Focused Literacy and the rest of the elementary schools in District #2. It demonstrates that the Focused Literacy schools made greater gains than the other elementary schools on all achievement measures. On average, the Focused Literacy Schools gained 5.7 more percent points than the rest of the elementary schools on the NSRE

measure of Basic Reading, gained 2.8 percentage points more on the Reading Analysis and Interpretation measure, gained 7.5 percentage points more on the Writing Conventions measure, lost 5.1 percentage points less on the Writing Effectiveness measure, and gained 2.5 percentage points more on the CTB.

	Focused Literacy			Other schools			Difference between FL and Other Schools 1998-1997
	1997	1998	'98-'97	1997	1998	'98-'97	
	Basic Reading	41.8%	62.7%	20	68.4%	82.7%	14.3
Reading Analysis & Interpretation	27.4%	40.5%	11.8	56.6%	65.6%	9	2.8
Writing Conventions	30.6%	39.1%	6.7	52.8%	52.0%	-0.8	7.5
Writing Effectiveness	32%	32.1%	-2.6	55.2%	47.5%	-7.7	5.1
CTB	53.3%	59.1%	5.8	80.6%	83.9%	3.3	2.5

*Table 5:
Changes in measures of literacy achievement between 1997 and 1998
in Focused Literacy schools compared with other schools in Community School District #2*

Overall, then, students in the Focused Literacy schools appear to have gained at a more rapid pace than students in the other schools in District #2. These differences suggest that the additional resources targeted for the Focused Literacy Schools and the extra work being done in them are having an impact. While the differences between these two groups are currently not statistically significant, if the trend continues over the next few years, claims may be warranted regarding a closing of the gap between these poor, historically underachieving schools and their more affluent, high-performing counterparts.

Discussion

The above results indicate that, overall, the Focused Literacy Schools made greater gains than the rest of the schools in District #2. A comprehensive understanding of these results, however, rests upon an understanding of the manner in which variation—both statistical and qualitative—forms an important context for our story line.

Understanding Focused Literacy Performance With the Context of Variation

There is a large degree of statistical variability in school performance across the district. This variability is evident in levels of student performance, with some schools performing at much higher absolute levels than others. It is also evident in the degrees of improvement shown by different schools, the focus of this paper. Although there was a general increase in student achievement from 1997 to 1998, the magnitude of that increase varied substantially across the 26 elementary schools.⁴ In fact, the degree of variability in performance gains between schools within the Focus Literacy Network is larger than the variation between the Network schools and the rest of the elementary schools in District #2. Comparisons of the thirteen Focused Literacy schools with the thirteen other schools must be made with this variability in mind.

Comparisons of these two groups also must consider qualitative forms of variation within each group and qualitative similarities between the Focused Literacy Network and the other elementary schools. While sharing the characteristics of high-poverty, historically low achievement, and increased levels of support and oversight from the district, the schools in District #2's Focused Literacy Network still differ from one another in powerful and important ways and should not be thought of as a homogeneous group. These differences include the unique needs of particular schools (e.g., a school of recently arrived immigrants in Chinatown has different needs from a high-poverty school bordering Spanish Harlem) and the shape of the specific interventions that are crafted to meet those needs. This heterogeneity implies the need for future studies of closing the gap in District #2 to include the examination of individual schools within the Focused Literacy Network in order to tease out their unique challenges, the nature of the supports that are put into place to address those challenges, and the related student performance data.

Comparisons between these two groups also must take into account the nature of the similarities between the support provided to Focused Literacy and other District #2 elementary schools. As stated earlier, Focused Literacy is not a distinct program, but rather a network of schools who receive a more intensive version of the supports available to *all* schools in the district. Thus, *all* schools receive school-based professional development, *all* schools participate in intervisitations, students in *all* schools have some degree of access to extended day and extended year programs, *all* heads of school participate in Principals' Conferences and Principals' Support Groups and so on. Focused Literacy schools should be thought of as varying in levels of intensity, not kind, from other schools in District #2.

⁴ For more information regarding between-school variability, the reader is referred to Appendix A.

Closing the Gap from a Systems Perspective

The findings in this paper suggest the beginning of a trend which, if continued in future years, would indicate that District #2's overall strategy of singling out at-risk schools for increased resources, oversight, and support is effective in closing the performance gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students and schools. The heterogeneity of individual school needs and the supports provided to ameliorate those needs make it impossible for this study to detail the specific strategies being used in specific Focused Literacy schools. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw some conclusions about what appear to be effective features of District #2's overall strategy to identify, monitor, and support at-risk schools. We propose that the district's strategy encompasses two important features: application of the same general principles of assistance across low-achieving and high performing schools; and tailoring the specific supports provided to individual schools to suit the unique needs of that school.

Application of similar principles

The district's strategy for improving the learning and performance of students in low-achieving schools has taken place against the backdrop of moving an entire district toward higher achievement standards; the supports received by the at-risk schools are based on the same set of principles that govern the support of all schools: practice-based professional development; cultural norms of continuous learning; and the integration of professional development and management. Moreover, the principals and teachers in Focused Literacy schools are viewed as an integral part of the overall community. By participating as full members in the broader group of 26 elementary schools that comprise District #2, teachers and principals in the Focused Literacy schools work side-by-side with colleagues who are further along, thereby benefiting from participation in a wider community that values and models high achievement for all.

Tailoring of specific forms of assistance

While participation in the overall District #2 community is guaranteed for all schools, the degree and kind of scaffolding that individual schools require in order to participate differs. This is where knowing schools as individual cases and tailoring strategies to each school's strengths and weaknesses comes into play. After district leaders assess "where a school is at," they work closely with the building principal to design a specific series of steps to raise the overall instruction and learning environment for teachers and students. This design is revisited over time and modifications are made in an iterative

process of design, testing, and redesign. While some common strategies may work in more than one school, the success of each specific school relies upon a unique configuration of decisions, strategies, and timing.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was two-fold: To provide a portrait of the kind of assistance that Community School District #2 is providing to all schools—but especially historically low-achieving schools—to help them to meet new and rigorous standards; and to investigate the extent to which changes in student achievement appear to be related to that assistance.

Our findings indicated that, on average, all elementary schools in the district improved on most measures of literacy achievement that were collected in the district, with larger average gains in Reading than in Writing. These gains, coming on the heels of already high performances, point to the continuing success of the district's overall systemic improvement strategy. In addition, the thirteen schools that comprise the Focused Literacy Network made larger gains in achievement than did the others schools in the district, implying a trend that, if continued, would point to the specific success of the district's approach to identifying, monitoring, and assisting low-performing schools.

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Appendix A: Variation in School Performance

This appendix presents information regarding the variation of performance exhibited across District #2's elementary schools for each of our five measures of literacy achievement. In Table A-1 below, the mean performance per school, standard deviation from this mean and the range of the scores is listed for each measure in 1997, 1998 and the difference between 1997 and 1998.

		Range	Mean	StdDev
CTB	1997	60.6	66.73	16.41
	1998	58.9	70.79	16.02
	Change 1998-97	23.5	4.06	6.19
Basic Reading	1997	65	56.63	18.06
	1998	52	73.54	14.64
	Change 1998-97	64	16.91	12.56
Reading Analysis & Interpretation	1997	73	43.83	19.98
	1998	69	54.13	17.90
	Change 1998-97	50	10.30	10.63
Writing Conventions	1997	63	43.42	16.76
	1998	48	46.08	12.78
	Change 1998-97	48	2.66	12.14
Writing Effectiveness	1997	56	45.83	14.95
	1998	67	40.46	16.27
	Change 1998-97	42	-5.37	11.88

Table A-1: Range of school performance on measures of literacy achievement in 1997 and 1998

Table A-1 shows that District #2 schools varied widely in their performance levels on all five measures of literacy achievement. In both 1997 and 1998, the widest variation in school performance was on the NSRE measure of Reading Analysis and Interpretation. In 1997, the scores ranged from 7% at or above standard to 80% at or above standard, a range of 73 percentage points (mean = 43.83, SD = 19.98). In 1998 the range was slightly smaller, (mean = 54.13% of students met or exceeded the standard, SD = 17.90, range = 69).

The measure which exhibited the least variation in school performance was the CTB in 1997 (mean=66.73% of students at or above the 50th percentile, SD=16.41, range=60.6), while in 1998 it

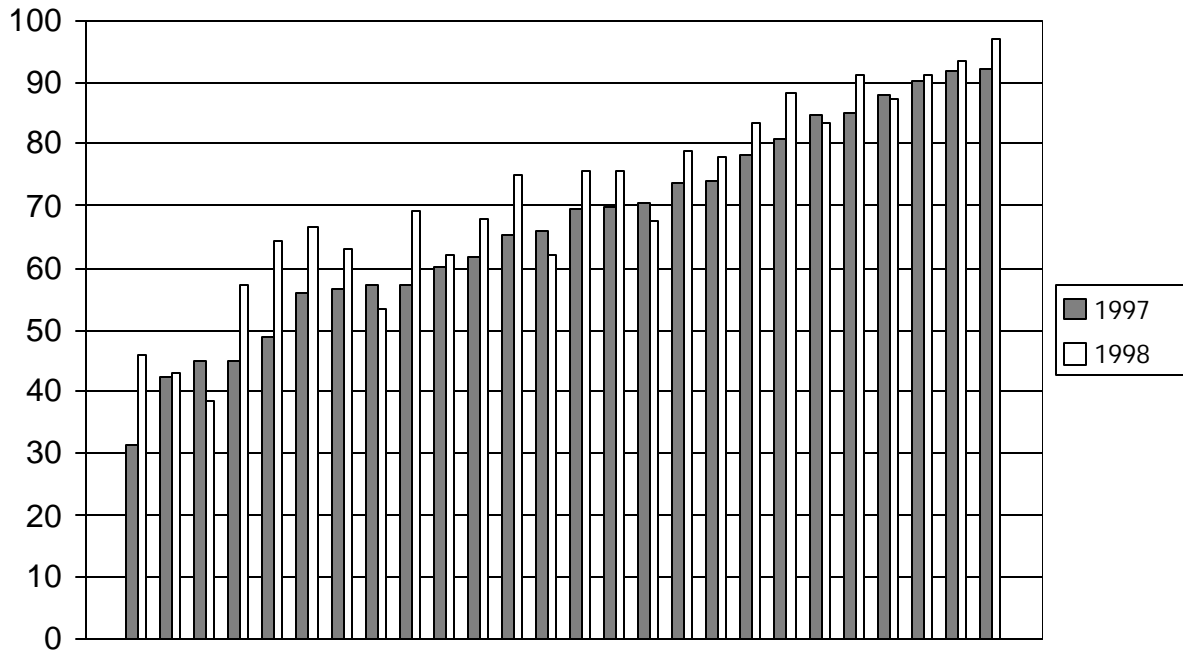
was the NSRE measure of Writing Conventions (mean=46.08% of students met or exceeded the standard, SD=12.78, range=48). The measure exhibiting the widest variation in performance change between 1997 and 1998 was that of Basic Reading (mean=16.91 percentage point increase, SD=12.56, range=64). The least variable measure between 1997 and 1998 was the CTB (mean=4.06 percentage point increase, SD=6.19, range=23.5).

Figures A-1, A-2, A-3, A-4 and A-5 below show this information in a graphical form. Each graph illustrates school performance on one of the five measures of literacy achievement used. In each of these figures, each pair of bars represents the performance of one elementary school. The shaded bar shows the school's performance in 1997 and the white bar, its performance in 1998. The gap between these two bars for each school represents the change from 1997 to 1998.

In each graph the schools are ordered from lowest to highest based on their 1997 performance on that measure. Thus, the first pair of bars in Figure A-1 does not necessarily represent the same school as the first pair of bars in Figure A-2. Nonetheless, the Focused Literacy schools tend to be clustered on the left (low scoring side) for most measures, especially in 1997. The thirteen Focused Literacy schools are the first thirteen bars on Figure A-1, the graph of CTB performance. For the other four graphs, eleven of the first thirteen schools are Focused Literacy schools.

As can be seen by the differences between the gray and the white bars, some Focused Literacy schools improved their performance enough in 1998, that if the graphs were sorted by the 1998 scores, they would not be in the left (low scoring) half. On the CTB, all thirteen schools are among the bottom fourteen scorers in 1998. Ten of the thirteen Focused Literacy schools are among the bottom thirteen scorers on the NSRE measures of reading and eight are among the bottom thirteen scorers on the NSRE measures of writing.

Change in CTB scores from 1997 to 1998 in Elementary Schools of Community School District #2



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Figure A-1: Performance on the CTB; schools sorted by 1997 performance

Change in New Standards Basic Reading scores from 1997 to 1998 in Elementary Schools of Community School District #2

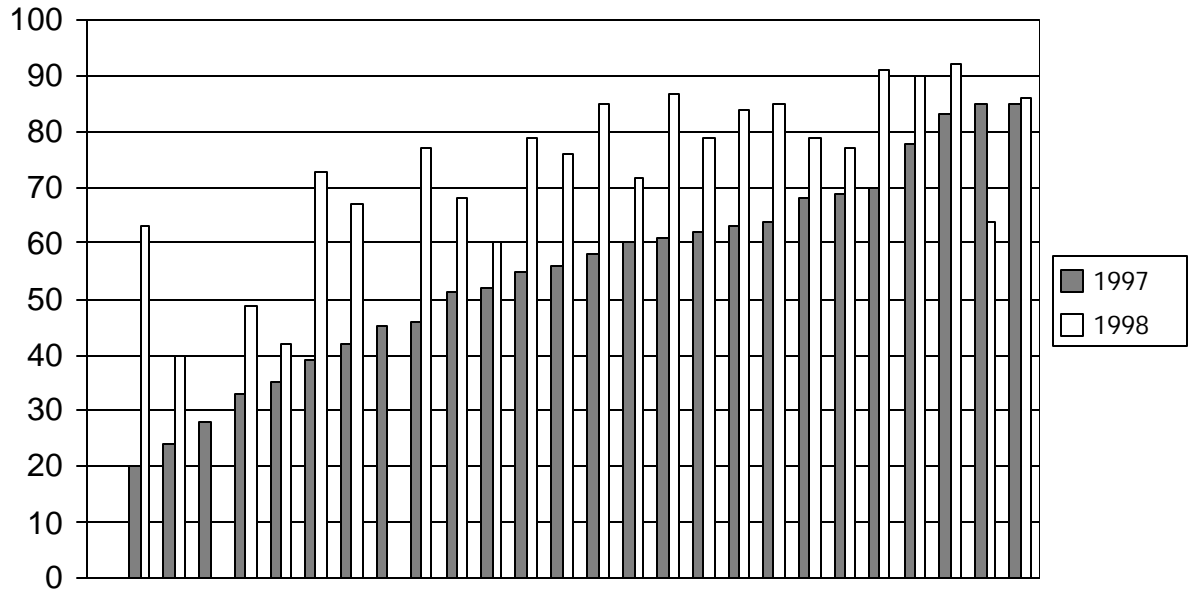


Figure A-2: Performance on the NSRE measure of Basic Reading; schools sorted by 1997 performance

Change in New Standards Reading Interpretation and Analysis Scores from 1997 to 1998 Elementary Schools of Community School District #2

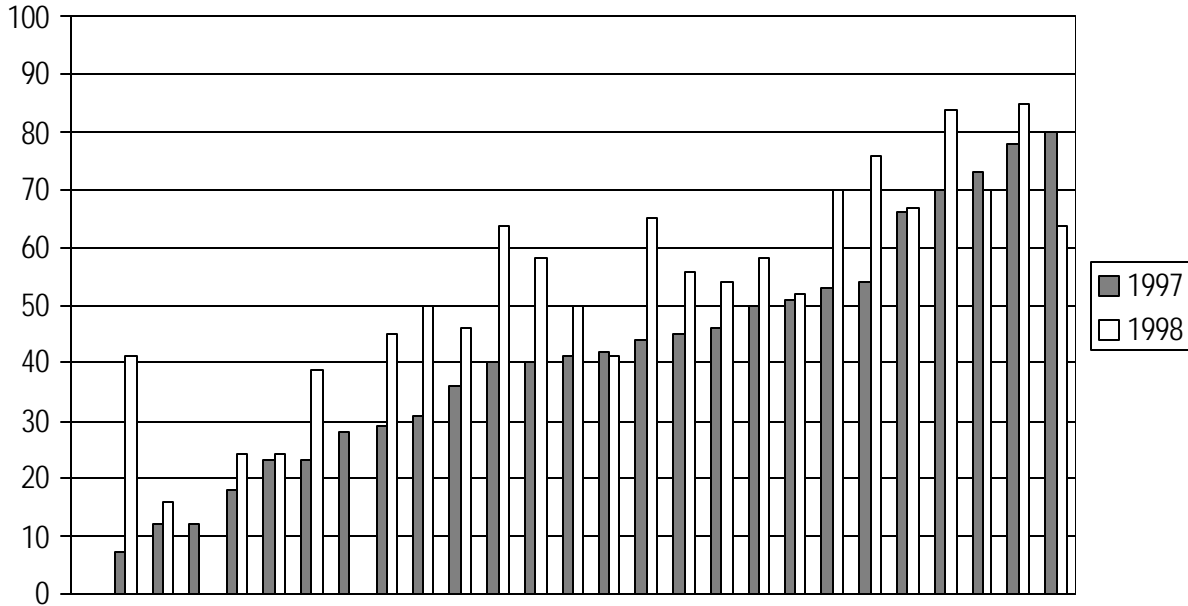
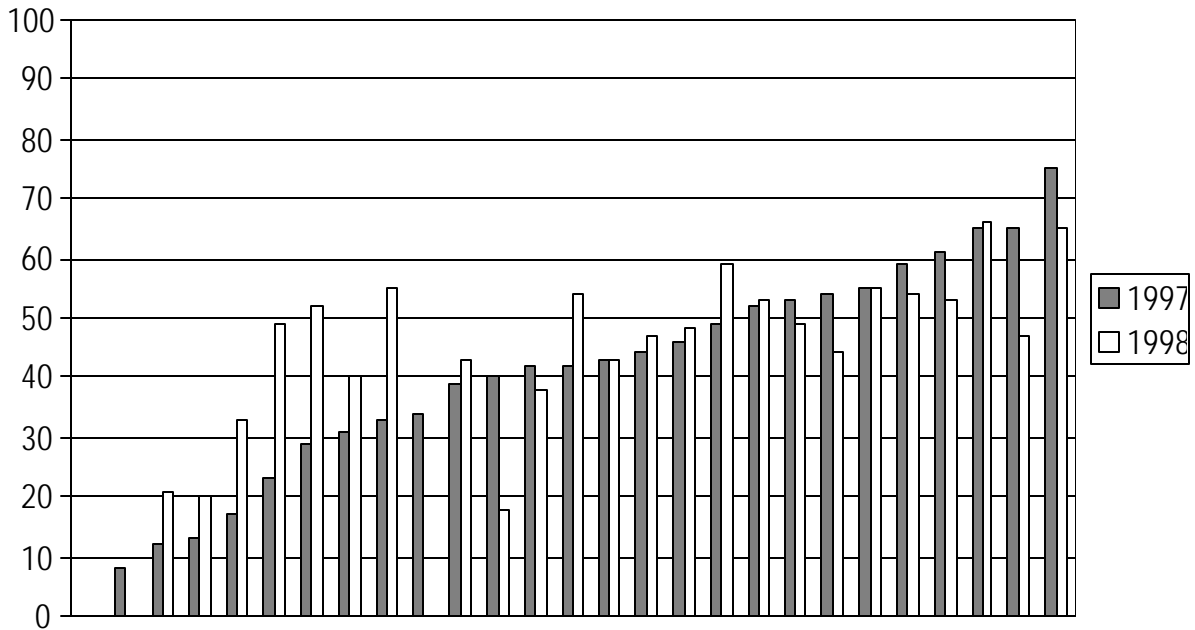


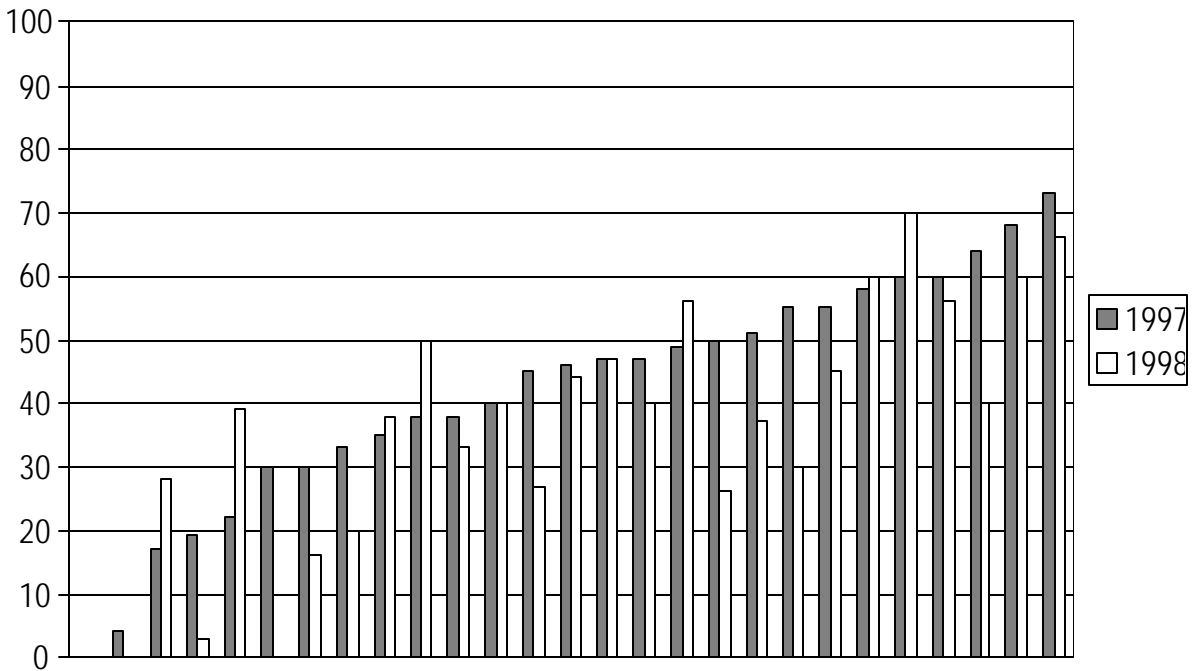
Figure A-3: Performance on the NSRE measure of Reading Analysis and Interpretation; schools sorted by 1997 performance

**Change in New Standards Writing Conventions Scores
from 1997 to 1998 in Elementary Schools of Community
School District #2**



*Figure A-4: Performance on the NSRE measure of Writing Conventions;
schools sorted by 1997 performance*

**Change in Writing Effectiveness Scores from 1997 to 1998 in
Elementary Schools of Community School District #2**



*Figure A-5: Performance on the NSRE measure of Writing Effectiveness;
schools sorted by 1997 performance*