Executive Summary

Districts at Work

Eight school systems gaining traction for students by transforming how central office supports schools

School districts across the country struggle with increasingly rigorous academic standards, more varied student needs, and persistent achievement gaps. We visited eight school systems—all serving high populations of low-income, black, and Latinx* students—that are gaining traction and getting results across these systemic challenges. We wanted to understand how they are doing it.

Although these eight school systems range from large, traditional districts, to charter networks, to an "empowerment zone," they wanted the same things for their students as many other school systems—for example, improved early literacy, enhanced social and emotional learning, and more equitable access to rigorous coursework—all in service of preparing every student for college and career, regardless of their race or income. And like many other districts, they set clear strategic priorities *(see examples at right).*

What sets these eight school systems apart is that they didn't stop there.

Think of each of these strategic priorities as a gear—without focusing on what is needed to power it, the gear stays stationary. Just setting the right strategic priorities is not enough to produce or sustain the results district and school leaders hope for. Leaders in the eight school systems we studied rolled up their sleeves to carefully and collaboratively construct *three other gears* that effectively powered their strategic priorities:

Examples of Strategic Priorities

- Getting the right people into the right schools and the right roles.

- Organizing resources for job-embedded, curriculum-connected professional learning.

- Differentiating learning time and teacher attention so that all students engage with rigorous curriculum.

- Leveraging the school system community to support students and families.

"Latinx" is the gender-neutral alternative to "Latino" or "Latina," meaning a person of Latin American origin or descent. Common pronunciation is "lah-TEEN-ex" or "lah-teen-EX." ERS chose to study districts with high populations of black, Latinx, and low-income students to highlight school systems that are actively addressing longstanding inequities.
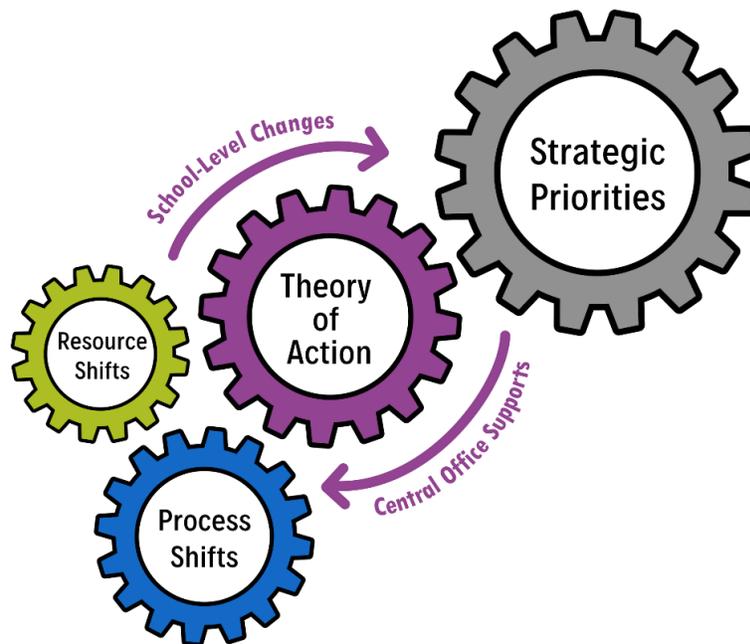
A clear theory of action that included both school-level changes and central office supports

Leaders in these eight school systems identified big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priorities. Then, they identified how the central office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. For example, one district provided teachers with more time for professional learning—but more importantly, provided the tools, training, flexibility, and guidance that teachers needed to meaningfully use the additional time to support their own learning, and therefore student learning.

Tough trade-offs to shift resources

People
Leaders redefined roles to ensure district- and school-level staff had the right expertise, responsibilities, and support. For example, one district hired new staff in the human resources department who supported principals to build great teacher teams; schools in another district repurposed Title I funds to create instructional coach roles.

Time
Leaders revised schedules to make time for teacher collaboration and student support—and for central office staff to focus their time in areas most critical for school success. For example, one district increased teacher compensation to extend learning time in select schools; schools in another district agreed to adopt a bell schedule that enabled cross-school collaboration.

Money
Leaders increased resources for students with greater learning needs and eliminated unaligned or ineffective initiatives. For example, one district chose not to increase central office positions to free funds to invest in an online budgeting tool; another district increased teachers' salaries in the highest-need schools in exchange for an extended school day.

District process shifts to enable schools to implement the changes

Roles
Leaders delineated roles and clarified responsibilities to ensure schools had the flexibilities they needed, and that central office staff understood how their jobs contributed to school and student success.

Mindset
Leaders created a collaborative "can-do" culture organized for cross-functional support of schools, with a focus on learning, data-driven decision-making, and continuous improvement.

Data & Tools
Leaders built (or brought in) skills around analytic problem-solving to drive informed decision-making and ensure that critical data is available to the right people at the right time.

Timelines
Leaders integrated and aligned school support processes (such as budgeting, hiring, and scheduling) to provide schools with enough lead time and support to make changes.

These lessons aren't new; much has been written by ERS and others about the importance of system transformation and coherence to enable schools to improve at scale and sustain progress over time. Yet we know that these concepts can seem abstract and that these actions call for multiple groups of stakeholders to make difficult decisions. Many districts have not yet addressed common system challenges nor achieved meaningful progress toward their strategic priorities because coherently powering all of these gears is *hard* and takes commitment, time, and money. The stories of these eight systems provide concrete examples of exactly how district and school leaders are gaining traction against systemic challenges—and achieving exciting results!

Our Process

First, we reviewed the research literature and talked to experts and district leaders to identify some of the most intractable challenges—and to find districts taking innovative approaches to solving them. Then, we ran our list of potential districts through a set of performance filters, including: performance growth, performance relative to districts with comparable levels of poverty, achievement gaps, and equitable access to rigorous courses. The eight school systems that we selected combined creative approaches with above-average results along one or more of these performance dimensions.

We wrote a detailed case study about each district to highlight the relatable challenge they faced, explore their theory of action, and describe specific examples of the resource and process shifts that district and school leaders made. These challenges span a wide range—from high school scheduling, to data analysis, to budgeting—but what they all share is that they were constraining schools from achieving their goals for all students. These eight school systems designed and implemented efforts that were championed across a variety of departments, including finance, academics, and human resources.

We share the *Districts at Work* series of case studies with the dedicated practitioners working in schools and districts around the country to help every student succeed, regardless of race or income: to inspire you, to embolden you, and to give you detailed descriptions, practical examples, and tangible materials to illustrate how others are tackling this important and difficult work.

Four Next Steps:

1 **Dig deeper.**
Visit bit.ly/districtsatwork to read each case study in the series and access tangible materials—such as templates and tools—that district and school leaders created to guide their work.

2 **Don't beat the odds—*change* them.**
Go to bit.ly/snapshotmini to take our System Snapshot Mini, a brief self-assessment tool designed to help your team explore how to take strategic approaches to the work happening in *your* district.

3 **Get support.**
For more than a decade, Education Resource Strategies has worked with school systems to transform how they use resources. We are ready to partner with your school system or connect you with other service providers. Send an email to contact@erstrategies.org to talk to us directly.

4 **Share these stories.**
Share the *Districts at Work* series with your colleagues and tag @erstrategies on Twitter using #districtsatwork.

Get Started!

Which case studies are right for you?

District Superintendents & Academic Officers

Highline Public Schools:
Leveraging Strategic Planning for School Improvement

Dallas Independent School District:
Advancing Equitable Access to Great Schools

San Diego Unified School District:
Building Paths to Graduation for Every Student

Fresno Unified School District:
Adding Time to Accelerate Student & Teacher Learning

Tulsa Public Schools:
Redesigning Schools for Professional Learning—on a Budget

Instructional Leaders

Fresno Unified School District:
Adding Time to Accelerate Student & Teacher Learning

San Diego Unified School District:
Building Paths to Graduation for Every Student

FirstLine Schools:
Reorganizing Time to Help Teachers Grow

Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership:
Empowering Principals to Successfully Lead School Turnaround

Tulsa Public Schools:
Redesigning Schools for Professional Learning—on a Budget

Finance Professionals

KIPP Bay Area:
Supporting Principals to Manage Budget Uncertainties

Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership:
Empowering Principals to Successfully Lead School Turnaround

Tulsa Public Schools:
Redesigning Schools for Professional Learning—on a Budget

Dallas Independent School District:
Advancing Equitable Access to Great Schools

Highline Public Schools:
Leveraging Strategic Planning for School Improvement

School Leaders

Fresno Unified School District:
Adding Time to Accelerate Student & Teacher Learning

San Diego Unified School District:
Building Paths to Graduation for Every Student

KIPP Bay Area:
Supporting Principals to Manage Budget Uncertainties

Tulsa Public Schools:
Redesigning Schools for Professional Learning—on a Budget

Talent and Human Resource Professionals

FirstLine Schools:
Reorganizing Time to Help Teachers Grow

Highline Public Schools:
Leveraging Strategic Planning for School Improvement

Meet the Eight School Systems

School System	Common Challenge	Their Approach	Highlights of What Sets Them Apart	Results to Date
Dallas, Texas **Dallas Independent School District:** Advancing Equitable Access to Great Schools	The district had significant student performance disparities across its 234 schools. Many low-income students lacked equitable access to high-performing schools, and middle-income students were exiting the district to attend charter and private schools at greater rates than ever before.	District leaders implemented a dual approach to improve both equity and excellence across the city's schools: they combined intensive supports for the city's lowest-performing schools with programmatic transformations in a broader range of schools spread out across the city.	→ **People:** Invested in $5,000-$15,000 dollar stipends to attract and retain highly effective teachers and principals in high-need schools. → **Data & Tools:** Set up enrollment systems to improve access to specialized programming for low-income students and geographically isolated neighborhoods. → **Roles:** Clarified "non-negotiables" for every school and varied flexibilities, supports, and resources based on schools' needs.	Since 2014, the number of "Improvement Required" schools dropped from 43 to 4. Overall proficiency rates in grades 3-8 increased from 27 percent to 40 percent, as measured by the state assessment.
New Orleans, Louisiana **FirstLine Schools:** Reorganizing Time to Help Teachers Grow	School and network leaders all struggled to meet the needs of teachers—many of whom were in their first 2 years in the profession—as the network transitioned to new, more rigorous standards.	Leaders collaborated across schools to dramatically scale up professional learning to support teachers. They increased overall instructional rigor by implementing new standards-aligned curriculum and better differentiating learning for students.	→ **Time:** Reorganized daily schedules to free up teachers for 2 hours per week for cross-school professional learning. → **Timelines:** Began school budgeting and planning earlier in the year to give schools lead-time to organize around new shared schedules. → **Mindset:** Trained all staff on strong feedback practices to enable shared decision-making.	In 4 years, students' average math proficiency increased by 10 percentage points. 3 of the top 5 highest-growth elementary schools in New Orleans are FirstLine Schools.
Fresno, California **Fresno Unified School District:** Adding Time to Accelerate Student & Teacher Learning	The district's highest-poverty schools performed in the bottom 30 percent of all schools in the state. Student performance in these schools lagged behind more affluent schools in the district, but teachers didn't have enough time or support to catch their students up.	District leaders leveraged an infusion of state funding to add job-embedded professional learning for teachers, and differentiated time and teacher attention for students.	→ **Time:** Added 30 minutes per day for student intervention time and 80 hours per year for teachers' professional learning in the 40 highest-need elementary schools. → **People:** Added staff to both schools and the School Leadership Department in the central office to enable principals and supervisors to focus on instructional leadership. → **Roles:** Gave teachers flexibility (paired with concrete tools and supports) over use of their additional professional learning time.	Performance growth among low-income students in the district's highest-poverty schools increased at nearly double the rate of other schools in the district. 93 percent of families believe the additional time is beneficial for their children.
Burien, Washington **Highline Public Schools:** Leveraging Strategic Planning for School Improvement	Student performance was improving overall, but achievement gaps persisted among students of color and students living in poverty. The district brought stakeholders together around an ambitious strategic plan that included bold goals for students to counter the low expectations often placed on students in a diverse, high-poverty school district.	Leaders developed a culture that revolved around the district's strategic plan by enabling everyone in the system—from central office staff, to principals, teachers, and support staff—to see their work as an important contribution toward achieving the bold goals for students that were outlined in the strategic plan.	→ **Time:** Allocated 250+ hours of central office time for cross-functional budget meetings, during which leaders from all departments found ways to support principals' unique plans. → **Roles:** Invested in additional principal supervisors so that each supervisor could spend 70 percent of their time working directly with a fewer number of principals. → **Roles:** Worked closely with schools to understand their staffing needs and reorganized the recruiting process to better attract high-quality, diverse candidates.	Graduation rates increased from 55 percent to 83 percent among black students, and from 53 percent to 70 percent among Latinx students. 45 percent of teachers hired during the 2018-19 school year were people of color, compared to only 14 percent during the 2012-13 school year.

School System	Common Challenge	Their Approach	Highlights of What Sets Them Apart	Results to Date
Oakland, California **KIPP Bay Area:** Supporting Principals to Manage Budget Uncertainties	School leaders had the flexibility to design an instructional vision and strategy for their schools—but short-term budget information, unpredictable enrollment, and funding fluctuations made it challenging for principals to create reliable plans for their schools.	System leaders worked with principals to develop a multi-year planning process that included clear priorities, a financial sustainability framework, a process for adapting their plans, and a suite of data and tools to help inform their thinking.	→ **Data & Tools:** Distilled student registration data so principals could see options for recruiting and retaining students. → **Roles:** Provided specific expectations and areas of flexibility for school-level staffing. → **Timelines:** Sequenced check-ins at key points in the enrollment cycle to help principals adapt plans, as needed.	100 percent of schools have long-term, financially sustainable school design plans. 82 percent of school leaders feel "very supported" by the regional finance team.
San Diego, California **San Diego Unified School District** Building Paths to Graduation for Every Student	Black and Latinx students and English learners were less likely to graduate than their peers, and many students who *did* graduate did not leave the district with a postsecondary plan. Resources were tight due to years of large budget cuts, but district leaders knew they had to do better for their students.	To transform graduation patterns across the district, leaders expanded equitable access to coursework, tackled the long-standing practices and mindsets that limited students' opportunities, and leveraged community resources to help all students develop a meaningful postsecondary plan.	→ **Data & Tools:** Developed a transcript analysis process to regularly identify which students were not on track to graduate and make schedule changes accordingly. → **Time:** Restructured the school day in International Centers to increase the amount of time that students who are new to the country spend learning grade-level content. → **Money:** Partnered with local businesses to offer students opportunities to explore postsecondary options.	In 2016, 9 percent more black 11th graders and 10 percent more Latinx 11th graders were on track to graduate than in 2014. 5,900 more high schoolers earned 6,000 more college credits during the 2017-18 school year than during the 2015-16 school year.
Springfield, Massachusetts **Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP)** Empowering Principals to Successfully Lead School Turnaround	Principals of turnaround middle schools had autonomy to implement the school designs they felt would best meet the needs of their students—but they needed information and support to make the best decisions for their schools.	The SEZP team collaborated with principals to strategically design an integrated system of supports, tools, and processes that armed principals with the information and guidance they needed to use their flexibilities to best support their teachers, students, and school communities.	→ **Timelines:** Collected key data about school culture and student achievement 3 months sooner, so principals could use the information to plan for the next year. → **Data & Tools:** Invested $10 dollars per pupil to switch to new budget tools that helped principals see relationships between budgets and staffing. → **Roles:** Redefined principals' role and provided support to help them evaluate the changes in scheduling and spending necessary to reach academic goals.	3 schools increased their state percentile rank for student growth in ELA by 10 or more percentage points, and 4 schools have accomplished this same feat in math.* *School configurations and tests have changed.
Tulsa, Oklahoma **Tulsa Public Schools:** Redesigning Schools for Professional Learning—on a Budget	Teachers were struggling to meet their students' diverse needs and deliver instruction that met new college- and career-ready standards for academic rigor. This challenge was exacerbated by high teacher turnover across the district, especially among novice teachers.	Leaders in the central office redesigned the ways they supported schools and principals, including: reinventing the school planning timeline, providing intensive training, and introducing tools that helped principals support better professional learning by rethinking teacher teaming and school schedules.	→ **Time:** Shifted school-level schedules to achieve longer blocks of teacher collaboration time each week and more regular opportunities for observation and feedback. → **Timelines:** Released enrollment projections and budgets 2 months sooner and embedded this data in new planning tools for school leaders. → **Roles:** Created Strategic Review Teams to provide coordinated feedback to principals across central office departments.	Teachers in participating pilot schools received an average of 50 additional minutes for collaboration. School leaders reported high satisfaction with new tools and supports.

Every school. Every child. Ready for tomorrow.