While NAS was busy starting up in July of 1991, the San Antonio school district struggled to raise its students’ achievement levels and meet the challenges it faced. Given its size of 94 schools, 58,000 students, and 3,800 teachers at the time, productive communication proved problematic as did the effective utilization of district staff. Much energy was expended on the management of day-to-day organizational affairs. According to several central office administrators, instructional practice was too often last addressed. In the words of one, “The school district was perceived as backwater, low performing, not doing anything, in decay.”

In November of 1993, the superintendent of San Antonio announced his retirement plans, resulting in an active search for his replacement. The search committee agreed to look for a leader focused on instruction. The academic situation in the district was dire. Forty-six schools within San Antonio were deemed “low performing” according to results on the TAAS, a criterion-referenced test covering different subject areas (particularly reading and mathematics) introduced by the state in the fall of 1990.¹

The search for San Antonio’s new superintendent was narrowed down to a pool of several candidates. The winning candidate was

¹See http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/.
hired by the school board on a vote of 4 to 3. From the start, the new superintendent faced tenuous support.

DISTRICT CONTEXT BEFORE THE NEW, REFORM-MINDED SUPERINTENDENT

In what follows, we describe the district context before the new superintendent’s arrival in terms of instructional leadership, curriculum and development, professional development, and parent and community involvement.

Instructional Leadership

The focus of the administration prior to the new superintendent’s arrival had less to do with issues instructional in nature than managerial and administrational. According to one district administrator, “In previous years, the important thing was, have we got all the kids in place? We’re taking care of our problems, fighting all the fires. Are we spending money the right way? Those were the kinds of things we checked on.”

In the past, the organization of the central office itself in fact took away from staffs’ ability to focus on instructional concerns and to provide schools with necessary assistance.

All the elementary principals, 65 of them, reported to one person. He evaluated every one and listened to the parent complaints from all 65. The other assistant superintendent was in charge of all the middle and high schools, evaluated every principal and listened to all the complaints. And then they had attached to them, elementary curriculum and instruction and secondary curriculum and instruction [respectively]. . . . What took precedence was keeping schools running.

The assignment of responsibilities within the central office was not designed to foster communication among other staff either, thus making it difficult for them to collaborate with one another. Different central office personnel were responsible for the various programs in place at the time (e.g., Cooperative Learning, New Jersey Writing Style, Reading Styles, and Visual Math).
The comments made by several central staff members who worked in the administration prior to the new superintendent’s arrival portrayed the image of a disjointed system, where employees worked hard and did their best in isolation.

The area superintendents were doing everything. They were doing curriculum, instruction, personnel things in the school, I mean, it was crazy.

I think the academic support team members were tremendously underutilized. Instead of working on curriculum, they each had a specialty. Like one did cooperative learning, one did learning styles, one did reading styles. They each had these little areas of specialization. . . . No focus. No direction. Just piecemeal.

The central office people had a frustration about the inability to meet the needs of everybody in the organization in their narrow field that they were working . . .

Within schools, teachers did not necessarily turn to one another for assistance given that they engaged in a variety of programs. The principals, too, were of little help in the area of instruction. Their focus tended to be school operations. According to a central office administrator, the principals pre-1994 were “brought in and bred as managers. The message they heard was manage things well. They were not instructional leaders.”

**Curriculum and Instruction**

Prior to the new superintendent’s arrival there was no sense of a unified curricular vision across the district, let alone among the various feeder schools. Individual schools had in place a wide variety of curricular and instructional programs, with little coherence among them. According to one central staff member, “We had a curriculum that really wasn’t going anywhere. People weren’t using it.” When school staff were asked what instructional strategies were in place, a typical response tended to include 12 to 14 different programs. Classrooms basically functioned in isolation. Though people at the district level were responsible for the various programs, there was no
expectation for entire schools or even a majority of classrooms to adopt them.

This diversity and range of programs across school campuses made it difficult to know what students were being taught and how learning was being assessed within classrooms across the district. Moreover, without a unified curricular trajectory, the same topics were at times observed being taught at a variety of grade levels. According to one central office staff member:

We had a lot of redundancy in the curriculum and we had a total lack of direction, in part because each school in this district very much did its own thing. . . . I walked (through) a third, a fifth, a seventh, and a ninth grade classroom. Within the same ten-day period they were all doing the solar system . . . everybody was doing exactly the same thing. The mobiles were hanging in every room. . . . The test was the same.

Professional Development

In addition to minimal instructional leadership and a weak curricular vision, the professional development prior to the new superintendent’s arrival was limited, according to central staff members who experienced the leadership of both the old and new superintendents. The district did its best to meet the state’s yearly staff development requirements. However, it had no good system of tracking professional development. Moreover, the state did not ask for specific information. Thus, the central office did not develop a coherent strategy for professional development.

Money was spent on upgrading the knowledge and skills of teachers, but “it was the one shot deal with no real follow-up in the classroom or in the school,” according to a district staff member. Central office staff reported that the training they provided tended not to be utilized at the school level: “There was a whole lot of training that was happening that was wasted. People would go off, learn something about something, come back to their schools, and not use it.” Additionally, administrators at the central office recognized that although some of the professional development they provided served to deepen educators’ understanding of specific subjects, they were tied
to larger issues such as state standards or student achievement. In the words of a district administrator:

In 1991, what the central office was about doing was developing teachers’ ability to use a curriculum, rather than actually developing the curriculum itself. So it became a lot of instructional strategy development at that point in time. . . . We started doing some things that were about cooperative learning strategies and learning styles and much more about techniques—how to teach much more than what to teach. And since there was no professional development function other than that, that became really more of a professional development function.

**Parent and Community Involvement**

As for school interaction with parents and the community at large, that too was problematic. According to a central office administrator, “We had a lousy relationship with our parents. It was one of those ‘you just stay outside the door’ things. It was really adversarial. And our schools were not welcoming. . . . We’d done some things around parent involvement and parent education, but it was really lip service.”

**DISTRICT REORGANIZATION**

Upon her arrival, the new superintendent reportedly talked to as many people as she could in San Antonio to gain a deeper understanding of the schools’ needs. Based on conversations with principals and teachers, the experiences of central office staff, and the knowledge she brought with her, the superintendent proceeded to draw up five district goals. The goals were developed to support and realize the mission statement she constructed soon after her arrival:

- to be an urban school district where all students are achieving above state and national standards. Where they exhibit personal growth and where they are of service to others.

The district aimed to:

- Increase student achievement;
Foster collaboration and communication;
Strengthen parent and community involvement;
Build an infrastructure for professional development; and
Provide appropriate school facilities to all students.

With this framework in place, the central office took the first of many steps to move toward its goals. To ensure that the district could effectively support its campuses, the superintendent critically examined its organization as well as the leadership in place at schools.

**Instructional Leadership at the District Level**

To facilitate the realization of the district’s five new goals, the superintendent first set out to build an infrastructure to support instruction. She began by eliminating certain central office positions, creating new ones, and reallocating resources to better serve schools. Her vision was to create a balanced blend of site-based and central operations management. As one central office administrator stated:

> You know, we have to come to terms with what really makes sense to be consistent district wide and what really the schools should be able to decide.

Central office staff were hired or reassigned to provide schools with instructional leadership. At the district level, four people were hired to serve as Instructional Stewards, or area superintendents. The Instructional Stewards were required to report directly to the superintendent. Each was held accountable for his or her own Learning Community, a specified group of elementary, middle, and high schools. The primary responsibility of the Instructional Stewards was to support schools and provide instructional guidance. The Instructional Stewards were expected to provide support by assisting the analysis of school data such as TAAS results and supervising the development of campus improvement plans. They were to study the campus plans of every school in their respective Learning Communities to assess their viability as well as commitment to San Antonio district goals.
In the words of one Instructional Steward, “Curriculum, instruction, assessment is what we’re all about.” Another reported that Instructional Stewards were “responsible for supporting the principals, of evaluating them, of helping them to determine the priority needs within their schools and supporting them in accomplishing whatever it is they needed to accomplish.”

Although the responsibilities of Instructional Stewards did not include dealing with school operations and maintenance, at times they found themselves engaged in such work. As one of the Stewards stated:

We end up dealing with facilities because whatever is of a concern to the principal really becomes a concern for us.

In addition, each Instructional Steward was given other assignments. For example, each was required to sit on task forces (such as the Bilingual Task Force or the Race and Class Task Force), oversee the logistics of professional development, and/or supervise the implementation of particular NAS designs.

Instructional Leadership at the School Level

At the school level, the superintendent reinforced her instructional emphasis by assessing the principals in place and replacing those who tended to neglect instruction. Because the school board chose the principals prior to the superintendent’s arrival, the principal appointments tended to be mired in politics. The superintendent tried to neutralize this by establishing screening committees at the school level that included representatives of different constituencies. The various groups made their recommendations, and the superintendent looked for people who could show her data, interpret the data, and plan a course of action based on collected information. In all, 40 new principals were hired, replacing many who left of their own volition.

The superintendent then created Instructional Guide positions to further facilitate communication and action around instructional practice. The Instructional Guides tended to be master teachers deemed highly competent, knowledgeable of curriculum and instruction, and able to readily communicate and anticipate the needs
of others. They were hired to be their schools’ instructional leaders, managing tasks that principals didn’t have time for. The Instructional Guides also were expected to serve as liaisons between the district and their schools, communicating the central office’s ideas to teachers and learning the various district initiatives to take back to their respective campuses. Furthermore, they were to facilitate the implementation of all new programs and provide teachers with in-house follow-up to professional development.

Instructional Guides received a great deal of credit for enabling the district office to push forward and implement ideas very rapidly. Quarterly meetings attended by Instructional Guides and central office staff served to further the budding lines of communication. During these meetings, the Guides reportedly discussed what was working at their schools, what upset teachers, what needed to be improved upon, and what additional support systems were necessary.

Collaboration and Communication

The superintendent’s attempts to restructure and redefine leadership at both the district and school levels were all part of her plan to build the infrastructure necessary to support instruction and foster collaboration and communication within the district. Meetings were arranged between the central office and principals from particular Learning Communities. Moreover, the same school-level principals regularly met together as well. The superintendent held teacher coffees once a month open to all who wished to communicate with her and with one another. Schools were encouraged to make time for their teachers to sit down together and discuss issues. The central office also created teacher networks to promote communication across school lines. Moreover, plans were made for schools to be connected via the World Wide Web.

Collaboration and communication were further facilitated through district- and school-level leadership committees, established in January of 1994, and referred to as the San Antonio Leadership Team (SALT) and Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs), respectively. Like many other Texas school districts, the San Antonio school district, via ILTs, moved to give its schools the authority to decide how best to improve their respective educational records. The premise behind the district leadership team, or SALT, was to increase the representa-
tion of voices involved in making a variety of school-related decisions.\(^2\)

**Curriculum and Instruction**

In an effort to raise test scores and ensure that all students learn particular skills and increase their knowledge base, the central office set out to develop an instructional framework to guide teachers. Originally, curriculum and instruction were the responsibility of Instructional Stewards. An Office of Curriculum and Instruction, overseen by the Associate Superintendent, was created in 1997 to help establish a coherent academic vision for the district. The central office wanted to make sure that comparable instruction, in line with state-developed academic standards, could be found occurring at the same grade levels across all district campuses. In the words of one central office administrator:

> The whole issue of the standards came about after our reflection that that’s what we needed. We decided we’d go with Texas, essential elements and skills. But we also needed something as a district, because we were just all over the place.

Moreover, it was believed that district-endorsed mathematics and reading initiatives could help alleviate the difficulties stemming from the district’s high rate of student mobility. Additionally, the Office of Curriculum and Instruction could work to ensure that all teachers (particularly those new to the field) know how to teach core subjects. In the words of one Instructional Steward:

> I think the primary reason [the Office of] Curriculum and Instruction was established was we’re a district of teachers who have been

\(^2\)According to the district’s 1998–1999 Resource Guide for School Improvement, “District and campus level planning and decision-making committees were established to provide input and to assist in establishing and reviewing the district’s and campus’s educational plans, goals, performance objectives, and major classroom instructional programs. Both SALT and the ILTs serve exclusively in advisory capacities to the superintendent and principals, respectively, addressing such areas as curriculum, staffing, budgeting, school organization, and staff development.” Each committee’s members consist of a team of selected and appointed teachers, parents, community members, and business representatives. Additionally, paraprofessionals, classified staff members, and students sit on ILTs.
here 25–30 years or very young teachers with very little experience. So they come, especially in this state now, with the inability even to teach reading, because they don’t know how. So by having an Office of Curriculum and Instruction focusing on that and teaching these teachers how to teach, because they really haven’t in their college experience had that, maybe we can create a critical mass of teachers with experience who have good strategies that ultimately with principals and community could get the kinds of learning going on in schools that these kids need.

The Office of Curriculum and Instruction quickly decided to focus its efforts on research-based instructional initiatives targeting the two most basic subjects, mathematics and reading. In mathematics, the staff decided to continue endorsing the Everyday Mathematics program, which the central office had told all schools to adopt in the spring of 1996. Prior to that spring, schools were asked to voluntarily implement the program.

A research-based reading initiative, Balanced Literacy and Widening Parameters, was implemented during the 1996–1997 school year. The initiative served to provide teachers not only with training on literacy instruction (i.e., how to teach reading) but also with the materials necessary to enable students to succeed, such as books and appropriate workbooks. Instructional Guides were made responsible for ensuring that teachers understood the components of the literacy training and the strategies involved in teaching them. During the

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3Everyday Mathematics (EDM) is a K–12 curriculum developed by the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project. The curriculum assumes a spiraling approach to instruction where students are repeatedly exposed to key ideas, in greater depth each time. Key features of the Everyday Mathematics curriculum, described in teachers’ manuals, include: problem solving about common-life situations; sharing ideas through discussions; daily routines; yearly projects; establishing links between past experiences and explanations of new concepts; cooperative learning through small group activities; practice through games; ongoing review throughout the year; informal assessment; and home/school partnership.

4After Everyday Mathematics had been in place for three years, teachers were given the opportunity to vote for or against it. In the spring of 1999, the curriculum was voted out in favor of a more traditional math program.

5Balanced Literacy was the name given the professional development program for pre-K through second grade teachers. Widening Parameters was the analogous training program for grade 3 through high school teachers. The following components were covered during elementary school teachers’ professional development on literacy instruction: assessment procedures, reading instructions, literature studies,
1998–1999 school year, reading instruction became more standardized across the district. The central office asked teachers to engage in specific activities for particular amounts of time.

The district also moved to incorporate technology into instruction. It was not given the same attention by the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, however. Because the district office was eager to see its schools keep pace with technological advancements, it provided teacher training. Teachers were asked to teach their students certain computer skills and utilize computers as much as possible. The district developed a plan to provide Internet access to all schools. Classrooms in every school were provided with several computers.

Professional Development

To fully support its instructional goals, the central office revamped its system of professional development. Instructional Guides were key to this change. As stated, they were seen as the primary source of on-site instructional support. In the words of one district administrator:

One of the things that we tried to do in supporting professional development was to make sure that we had some support right there on campus. So we really restructured Title I in saying, okay, we’re going to put a person on every campus whose major job is to support teachers through providing professional development, doing model teaching, finding the materials or instructional things that teachers need.

Like those in the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, staff involved in designing the district’s professional development looked to research findings to define “good” professional development. Furthermore, they constructed professional development with their instructional vision always in focus: “reforming schools to become
places where things are connected for students.” They also made sure to develop a coherent series of workshops that included follow-up.

The district’s renewed focus on instruction and emphasis on instructional leadership required that principals go through a professional development program customized to meet their individual needs. According to one district office staff member, Instructional Stewards put together a catalogue from which principals could pick and choose training sessions. Additionally, principals were required to attend training in areas where Instructional Stewards noticed weaknesses. At times, stewards strongly advised principals to receive professional development in certain areas, leaving the ultimate decision up to them. In the words of one Instructional Steward:

we ask principals where they want to grow. We interact with all the departments and ask . . . where principal training is needed to address the needs of the department. If it’s finance, . . . a department head may say, half of them turn in their budgets wrong. Then we know they need training in the finance area. Another way is when the Instructional Stewards work with principals [on a specific problem], for example conflict mediation. We may be going to campuses frequently because schools are faced with a number of grievances or they have a lot of parent complaints. Then a steward would say, well I need for my principal to go through this.

Similar opportunities were developed for teachers. Professional development was designed with a heavy emphasis on mathematics and reading. As stated, the curriculum and instruction staff felt it especially important to provide teachers with instructional strategies. Furthermore, they were determined to see the district’s schools meet the state’s standards of instruction. Technology was pushed in part for this reason. In fact, the district stipulated in newer teacher contracts that teachers become skilled in the use of technology within three years.

Parent and Community Involvement

The superintendent’s administration attempted to address parent and community involvement issues as well. A Parent Community Partnership Network was formed with grant money attached to the
Rockefeller Initiative. By creating an office to support parents, the superintendent aimed to further enhance the infrastructure needed to foster high-quality instructional delivery.

NEW AMERICAN SCHOOLS IN SAN ANTONIO

While restructuring instructional leadership, rethinking the delivery and content of professional development, introducing instructional strategies to teachers, pushing state standards, and refocusing the district’s attention on instruction and student achievement, San Antonio district administrators simultaneously reviewed national reform efforts and programs. One idea central office administrators seriously examined and eventually decided to implement was that forwarded by NAS, namely comprehensive school reform.

Initially, the superintendent introduced one NAS design, ELOB. This occurred soon after her arrival. It was a design she had overseen while serving as superintendent in Dubuque, Iowa. In fact, she had been influential in the development of the ELOB design early on in the NAS initiative.

Soon after the superintendent came to San Antonio and encouraged the district schools to implement the ELOB design, NAS invited San Antonio to become one of its jurisdiction sites. The superintendent committed the financial resources necessary to bring the NAS designs to the district.

The superintendent viewed designs as the needed catalyst to force schools to examine change from within. She did not want the piecemeal practice of reform to continue within the district’s schools, where only certain classrooms or subject teachers engaged in new practices. Not only did she view the NAS designs as the outside galvanizing force for change, she also had hopes that the designs would help sustain the district’s efforts to engage in comprehensive school reform. Others in the central office thought, too, that the NAS designs could “provide a wholeness and integration and stimulate teachers to think or rethink what they were doing.” The designs also were seen as one way to help shift teachers’ thinking as isolated agents of instruction to members of a community of learners. “When you’ve got a whole-school design, everybody plays, everybody’s part of the planning process.” In the words of one district staff member:
You’ve really got a nice framework to plan for all the professional development, and how we’re going to deal with curriculum, and where parents fit in, and what kind of support system we need to have and what are the materials. It just really is such a help for any kind of school to really finally get a coherent plan, a framework, to get everybody moving in the same direction. You know, we got everybody working hard but not always moving in the same direction. I think all those designs are a wonderful aid to us.

THE INTRODUCTION OF NAS DESIGNS TO SCHOOLS

Convinced that the designs could play an important role in the district’s efforts to bring about increased student achievement by compelling all staff in a school building to engage in comprehensive reform, the central office approached the schools via the Instructional Stewards. Initially, four designs were selected to be introduced to schools within the district: MRSH, ELOB, Co-Nect, and SFA/RW. Orientations in the form of site visits, design fairs, and design-centered conversations were offered to familiarize school staff and administrators with each design’s philosophy and elements. Design literature was distributed as well. Schools were told that the district would provide the financial resources needed to implement their designs of choice. During the first round of district-wide design push, the schools were not forced to select a design. Teachers were told, however, that within three years, all of the district’s schools would be expected to have one in place.

Before the district actually became a NAS jurisdiction, the central office required that only 60 percent of a school’s staff be in support of the only design introduced at that time, ELOB. During the second phase of introduction, the office raised the support rate to 70 percent. Still the district found that those who opposed adoption were great enough in number to significantly impede design implementation. Thus, upon becoming a NAS jurisdiction and introducing schools to more designs at the end of the 1995–1996 school year, the district required that 80 percent of any school’s staff be in favor of their selected design.

According to the accounts of teachers and other school staff, decisions to adopt particular designs, as well as the reasons for doing so,
tended to vary by school. At some schools, the principals strongly encouraged their teachers to consider a particular design. At other schools, teachers were directed to choose what they thought would work best. Some schools felt more pressure than others to decide upon a design. A number of teachers expressed that they had been told that should they select a design right away, their school would be guaranteed the money needed for implementation. Many teachers said that they felt somewhat rushed to make a decision. After their designs of choice had been implemented and the teachers had had some time to reflect, many came to believe that they did not have sufficient information to make the decisions they had made. Some expressed that they were not aware how involved and labor-intensive design implementation would be. Others remarked that certain aspects of their schools’ designs appealed to them more than others, leading them to make the decisions they made. In some cases, this worked out well. In others, teachers felt that their understanding of designs had been faulty from the start.

The adoption of SFA/RW differed significantly from the other designs. Given the district’s focus on reading (as well as math), the reading component of Roots & Wings known as Success for All drew schools to this design. It’s not clear whether all components of RW were even introduced. None of the SFA/RW schools we visited implemented more than the SFA program. Interviews with teachers suggested that they were not aware if plans were in the works to implement other components of the RW design.

THE DISTRICT’S ROLE IN SUPPORTING COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

Viewing NAS designs as the framework and glue to hold the multiple district initiatives together, the central office expected to monitor the progress of design implementation and support the schools in their efforts. It provided Instructional Guides, professional development, and financial resources. For schools that decided upon MRSH and Co-NECT, the district expended great effort to wire the schools quickly. According to one administrator, “We had always put dollars in to try to cable schools. But what we did was shift them to make sure that our priorities were always project Co-NECT and MRSH.”
As time passed, it became clear to central staff members and design team representatives alike that greater communication was needed between them. The district took the initiative by arranging quarterly meetings to be attended by all design representatives, Instructional Stewards, and several central office staff members. These meetings began in the 1998–1999 academic year.

It was important to all involved to determine how best to align the designs with the district’s plan for professional development and emphasis on state-developed academic standards. There had been confusion regarding this because in some cases the district initiatives unintentionally, but directly, conflicted with the principles of various designs. Moreover, when there was overlap between district and design ideas regarding instructional practice, the teachers often did not know which to follow. In the words of a central office administrator:

I understand schools’ frustration with NAS fitting into the district’s plan of school improvement because it’s hard. It is hard for them. And I’m not sure . . . it’s one of my biggest stresses right now. How do I help them? I’m not sure yet.

It was important to the central office that schools not perceive the designs as “add-ons” to current district initiatives.

At these meetings with design representatives, the central office strived to better define its role in the design implementation process. Discussions revolved around design-generated benchmarks, student achievement, and curriculum, for example. With respect to benchmarks, the central office wished specifically to receive design team assessments regarding their respective views of implementation progress. However, representatives from all designs except SFA/RW (already an exception to the others, given the district’s adoption of SFA only) were reluctant to provide such feedback for fear of jeopardizing their relationships with schools. Eventually, the design teams modified their positions to accommodate the district’s request.

The district sought assessments of implementation progress not only to determine the fruits of its investment in NAS designs, but also to determine areas of weakness in schools’ comprehensive reform efforts.
IMPACT OF INCREASING STATE ACCOUNTABILITY

Clearly, the operating environment into which NAS designs were introduced was in great flux. The district’s efforts to construct an infrastructure for professional development and to foster collaboration and communication among district administrators, principals, teachers, school staff, and parents rattled the status quo, causing many in the schools to react tentatively as they adjusted to the stresses brought about by change.

The emphasis placed by the district on increasing student achievement and aligning curriculum with state-endorsed standards further escalated the pressure that teachers felt in their efforts to make sense of the district restructuring and to learn the information and practices new to them. Compounding this pressure was the increased emphasis on their students’ TAAS performance. Given the low performance of the district’s students on TAAS, and the new administration’s focus on increased student achievement, the push to increase standardized test scores grew ever stronger each year.

Pressure was attached to testing success given the use of TAAS scores to determine school ratings. Each year, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) rates schools as “exemplary,” “recognized,” “academically acceptable,” and “low performing” based on TAAS results, annual dropout rates (not included for elementary schools), and student attendance. These factors are not weighted. To receive a given rating, a school must meet all of the minimum requirements for that rating. For example, a school with a 100 percent TAAS pass rate would still receive a Low rating if the attendance rate were below 94 percent. The following table defines the different ratings.

<p>| Table 3.1 |</p>
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<td>Minimum pass rate (%)</td>
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aMinimum pass rate required not only of students overall, but of each student group on campus as well (African American, Hispanic, white, and economically disadvantaged) in each tested subject area: reading, writing, and mathematics.
The ratings of individual schools annually appeared in the local newspaper, pushing school staff and administrators to achieve student success in the name of pride. Moreover, “low performing” schools faced any of a number of sanctions listed in the Texas Education Code. They ranged from publicly notifying the board of trustees of a campus’s deficiencies to appointing a board of managers comprised of district residents to exercise the powers and duties normally assumed by the district’s board of trustees. In the worst cases, where schools had been found low performing for at least two years, campus closure was threatened.

The district obviously wanted to see its schools succeed and perform well on TAAS. Moreover, for purposes of determining its own accreditation status, the district desired success in its own right.

A financial incentive to demonstrate improvement or sustained success on TAAS was introduced by the state in 1995 under the leadership of the 74th legislature, whereupon the 75th Texas legislature appropriated $5 million for dispersal during the 1997–1998 and 1998–1999 school years. The money was used to fund the Texas Successful Schools Award System (TSSAS). Schools rated as “acceptable,” “recognized,” or “exemplary” were eligible to receive TSSAS awards ranging from $500 to $5,000 if they met specified criteria with respect to attendance, dropout rates, and passing rates of all students and each student group on the various sections of TAAS. An additional criterion that qualified schools for a TSSAS award was their rating in reading and math. Eligible schools had to “be ranked in the top quartile of their unique comparison group” in both reading and math.14

SUMMARY

The multitude of changes initiated by the district in a number of areas, namely school and district leadership, professional development, communication, and curriculum and instruction, propelled teachers and school administrators to critically examine organizational and instructional practices and to engage in steps needed to bring about envisioned change. Simultaneously, the district and

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14See http://www.tea.state.tx.us.
schools felt increasing pressure to improve TAAS performance given renewed focus on instruction, students’ low scores, impending state sanctions for poor performance, and desire for both decent campus accountability ratings and financial rewards for achievement.

This was the context in which NAS designs were introduced. Given the many reform initiatives in place, as well as the speed with which changes were occurring, the dynamic operating environment proved over time to be less supportive than expected. To illustrate some of these changes, the next chapter describes further the school context in which NAS designs were implemented. The findings are based on our analysis of our longitudinal teacher sample (40 teachers), observations, interviews, and district and school documents.