

The Search for Progress
Elementary Student Achievement
and the Bay Area School Reform
Collaborative's Focal Strategy

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Overview

The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC, now called Springboard Schools) in San Francisco, California, is a grant-making organization that supports districts' system-wide efforts to improve the quality and equity of student outcomes. The organization pursues various reform strategies. This report discusses the "focal strategy," which targeted six districts in the Bay Area ("focal districts"), beginning in the 2002-2003 school year. The strategy does not prescribe a particular curriculum or school structure. Instead, it promotes a vision of culture change, relying on three key features: coaching of district and school leaders; evidence-based decision-making at all levels of the system; and networking within and across schools to share experiences and lessons.

With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, MDRC, a nonpartisan, non-profit education and social policy research organization, is conducting an independent evaluation of BASRC's focal strategy. This report, the first of two, analyzes the relationship between the focal strategy and improvements in student achievement. It compares progress in the focal districts in the first two years of the strategy's implementation to progress in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts in the same area over the same period. Though differences in the outcomes cannot necessarily be attributed to the BASRC focal strategy, the comparison illuminates the relationships between student outcomes and the focal strategy.

Key Findings

- In the years following implementation of the focal strategy, achievement among third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts slightly declined, while achievement in the comparison districts showed no change compared with the baseline period.
- On the other hand, fifth-grade students' performance in the focal districts improved over time, slightly outpacing improvements in the comparison districts in Year 2, but the differences were not statistically significant.
- Among blacks and Hispanics, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students, performance in the focal districts appeared to surpass the improvements in the comparison districts. The differences were most evident in reductions in the percentage of fifth-grade students performing below basic levels. However, the differences were modest, generally limited to Year 2, and not statistically significant.

The evident lack of a substantial, pervasive association between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement may not be surprising given that the strategy primarily targets district leadership and does not specify how reform activities may lead to changes in instruction or to instructional supports. The BASRC focal strategy has the potential to strengthen district leadership for supporting school improvement, and it may set the stage for stronger systemic improvements that are designed to change instructional practices. Thus it will be important to continue to look at follow-up data to ascertain whether the differences between the focal districts and the comparison districts — differences that were concentrated in the second year of implementation — persist, grow, or fade over time.

Preface

A number of forces have increased the momentum for school districts to develop district-wide reform strategies as a means of initiating and sustaining school improvement. First, districts have sometimes found it easier to manage and support a single districtwide initiative rather than many different school reform models. Second, they have come to recognize that some educational problems, such as high student mobility, are better addressed above the level of individual schools. Finally, new standards of accountability, including requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, have created an audience for new ideas about the appropriate role of districts in spearheading reform.

The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), located in San Francisco, California (and known now as Springboard Schools), is a grant-making organization that supports districts' efforts to improve the quality and equity of student outcomes. BASRC's "focal strategy" is a district-level reform strategy being implemented in six districts throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Emphasizing process rather than particular approaches, the focal strategy relies on three key features: coaching of district and school leaders; evidence-based decision-making throughout the system; and networking within and across schools to share experiences and lessons.

This report suggests that the BASRC focal strategy is not associated with districtwide improvements in average elementary student achievement. While there is the hint of a relationship between participation in the focal strategy and improved performance among lower-achieving, disadvantaged students, the differences tend to be small and are not statistically significant. Moreover, any relationship that exists appears to be limited to the upper elementary grades.

Given the nature of the BASRC focal reforms, the lack of a strong, pervasive relationship with student achievement may be understandable. In practice, the strategy primarily targets district leadership and does not specify how reform activities might lead to specific changes in instruction or specific instructional supports. Moreover, our implementation research suggests that both the intensity of the intervention and the consistency of focus on improving teaching and learning may not be sufficient. Systemic reforms such as BASRC can take a long time to take root; if they do, the changes in teaching and learning could be profound and more sustainable than other reforms. To determine if this is the case here, the next report from this evaluation will present an additional year of analysis and explore the relationship between schools' implementation of particular BASRC reform concepts and improvements in student achievement.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

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Finally, at MDRC, Rasika Kulkarni and Kathryn Ferreira coordinated production of this report, prepared tables and figures, and helped execute data analyses. James Kemple, Robert Ivry, Fred Doolittle, John Hutchins, Janet Quint, Howard Bloom, Corinne Herlihy, and Christian Geckeler reviewed analysis plans and early drafts. We are grateful to them for their helpful guidance on the content, methodology, and organization of the report. In addition, we would like to thank Dave Nuscher and Amy Rosenberg for their careful editing and Stephanie Cowell for helping to prepare the final text for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

This is the first of two published reports for MDRC's evaluation of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a grant-making organization in San Francisco, California.¹ BASRC is dedicated to improving student achievement in public schools and narrowing achievement gaps between different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. BASRC does not prescribe particular instructional practices, curricula, or school structures as "treatment." Rather, the organization promotes a vision of culture change at every level of the education system, in which teachers and administrators engage in a continuous improvement process driven by collective inquiry into student learning outcomes, school functioning, and teacher practice. This process-oriented reform strategy is designed to build professional knowledge of effective practice, mutual accountability, and collaboration. BASRC hypothesizes that such changes in culture will translate into improved teaching and learning. However, BASRC's reform strategy does not specify the particular changes in teaching practice that should evolve as a result of these processes.

This evaluation centers on a specific BASRC initiative, the "focal strategy," which was implemented in five Bay Area districts (the "focal districts") and two to four selected schools within those districts (the "focal schools") during the 2002-2003 school year. (During the 2003-2004 school year, BASRC added a sixth focal district that is not included in MDRC's study.) Building on earlier phases of BASRC reforms, which began in 1996, the focal strategy is meant to increase the intensity of the core BASRC reforms by creating more opportunities for district and school administrators to interact with BASRC staff. Thus, compared with the earlier reform strategies, the focal strategy serves as a stronger test of BASRC reform ideas in fewer places. Also, in selecting the focal districts, BASRC tended to focus on districts where there already was a strong working relationship developed during earlier BASRC efforts. Therefore, in many cases, focal reforms have essentially been implemented on top of existing BASRC reform work.

The BASRC focal strategy has three main features:

- coaching of superintendents, district and school leaders, and teachers
- evidence-based decision-making at all levels of the system
- networks and collaboration among administrators and teachers, within and across districts and schools

¹After this study was conducted and the report was written, BASRC changed its name to Springboard Schools. For ease of reference, the report uses the former name throughout.

All three features were also part of BASRC’s earlier reform efforts. Once the focal strategy began, school-level coaching by BASRC staff was redirected toward focal districts. In addition, “executive coaches” (former superintendents) were hired to advise and support the leaders in the focal districts. Along with regular meetings on comprehensive needs assessments and to review progress, these efforts were intended to reinforce all elements of the strategy in the focal districts and schools.

The theory of action underlying the BASRC focal reform strategy posits that the implementation of these three design features will yield changes in district, school, and classroom practices that will in turn improve student outcomes. Together, coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration are thought to increase districts’ and schools’ engagement in a continuous improvement process, focused on improving the level and equity of student achievement levels. Because the strategy is process-oriented, it can result in different outcomes within each district, school, and classroom. The outcomes may or may not be policies or practices that are directly linked with specific strategies for improved teaching and learning. They may be incremental improvements in culture that eventually foster better teaching and learning.

The Evaluation of the BASRC Focal Strategy

The independent evaluation of BASRC is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and includes studies by both MDRC and the Stanford University Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC).² The CRC studies focus on the process of reform as it relates to BASRC in general and the relationship between various BASRC reform efforts and changes at the district, school, and classroom levels. MDRC’s study attempts to shed light on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in student achievement by investigating the following:

1. The relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement.
2. The relationship between implementation of specific BASRC reform practices and changes in student achievement.

This report focuses on the first of these issues, that is, documenting the empirical relationship between BASRC participation and changes in student achievement. As such, it addresses three questions:

- What is the BASRC focal strategy reform model/theory of action?

²CRC also conducted an evaluation of BASRC’s first phase of reform work (1995-2001).

- To what extent was this model implemented at the districts involved in this evaluation?
- What is the association between districts' participation in BASRC focal reforms and measured changes in average student achievement?

While MDRC's study will reflect on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement, it cannot identify a *causal* relationship. Due to the nature of the BASRC focal strategy, and the selection process for districts' participation in the strategy, it is not feasible to render a reliable, unbiased single "net impact" estimate summarizing BASRC's effect on student learning. The analysis presented in this report compares progress in the focal districts in the first two years of the focal reforms to progress in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area over the same period of time. BASRC selected districts based on a variety of immeasurable factors, including the extent to which the superintendent was reform-minded. Therefore, any differences in progress in the focal districts versus that in other districts cannot necessarily be attributed to the BASRC focal strategy.

The BASRC focal reforms tended to be focused on literacy instruction and concentrated at the elementary level. As such, all analyses are focused at the elementary school level and emphasize district performance on measures of student literacy.

MDRC's next report, scheduled for later in 2006, will explore BASRC's theory of action by examining the relationship between changes in student achievement and schools' implementation of the practices the reform strategy was designed to encourage. In other words, regardless of *why* schools experience changes in reform practices, MDRC's next report will attempt to ascertain whether those reform practices are correlated with differences in students' learning.

Key Findings

Implementation Findings

- By Year 2, the school-level aspect of the focal strategy faded. Thus, the model evolved to be almost entirely a district strategy in which focal districts received district-level coaching from an executive coach, some additional coaching, and review meetings with BASRC staff.

In theory, coaching by BASRC staff was to be a primary feature of the *school-level* focal strategy. This "external" coaching effort was distinct from the other "internal" coaching efforts in place in non-focal schools (including school-level literacy coaches and coaches employed by the district to support reform work). However, in the first year of implementation, BASRC encountered several complications, including resistance to the BASRC coaches from school-level staff.

By the end of the first year, BASRC coaches did not have a significant coaching role in most of the focal schools. At the *district level*, on the other hand, the key components of the focal strategy were in place by Year 2. BASRC executive coaches met with district leaders on a regular basis, and district staff attended networking and review meetings led by BASRC staff.

- The extent to which the BASRC focal strategy at the district level translated into specific reform activities in these districts is not yet clear.

The coaching delivered by BASRC executive coaches and other BASRC staff was not necessarily focused on implementation of the core BASRC concepts. Instead, in practice, coaching often revolved around a variety of needs of the superintendent or other district staff. This varied from improving the superintendent's communication skills to advising on the implementation of a new districtwide curriculum. The extent to which coaching or meetings with BASRC staff translated into specific reform activities in these districts is not yet clear. Gathering evidence on activities resulting from participation in the BASRC focal strategy is a priority for future MDRC field work.

- Although there was evidence of all three key features of the BASRC focal strategy in schools in the BASRC districts, these instances of the key features were likely vestiges of *earlier* BASRC reform phases. In addition, it was difficult to detect meaningful differences in the types of BASRC supports and reform activities in place in focal schools compared with non-focal schools.

MDRC found evidence of all three of the key features of the BASRC focal reform strategy — coaching by district or school staff, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration — in place at the schools in the focal districts. However, field research data indicate that these were typically implemented as a result of participation in earlier BASRC reform efforts rather than in the BASRC focal strategy itself. Moreover, it is also possible that these reform practices were in place before *any* participation in BASRC reform efforts. In general, in the schools visited by MDRC, it was difficult to detect meaningful differences in the types of BASRC supports and reform activities in place in focal schools compared with non-focal schools.

Student Achievement Outcomes

In order to explore the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement, MDRC's analysis of student achievement compares progress in the BASRC focal districts in the first two years of the BASRC focal reforms to progress in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area over the same period.

- In the years following implementation of the BASRC focal strategy, third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts and in similar districts

throughout the Bay Area showed no progress in student achievement compared with the baseline period. In fact, average proficiency rates declined during this timeframe.

Neither BASRC focal districts nor their comparison counterparts experienced progress in third-grade proficiency rates on the California Standards Tests (CSTs). As shown in the top panel of Figure ES.1, in the two years preceding the BASRC focal strategy, an average of 43 percent of third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts scored proficient or above on the language arts portion of the CST. By the end of the second year of implementation, this dropped to 37 percent. Over the same period, average proficiency rates in similar districts throughout the Bay Area and across the state dropped slightly as well. Also, as shown in the lower panel of Figure ES.1, the percentage of third-grade students scoring below basic remained relatively constant in the comparison districts and increased slightly in the focal districts.

- On the other hand, fifth-grade students' performance in the focal districts improved over time, slightly outpacing improvements in the comparison districts, but the differences were not statistically significant.

As shown in the top panel of Figure ES.2, in the years immediately preceding implementation of the focal strategy, proficiency rates on the CST language arts test averaged 38 percent among fifth-graders in BASRC focal districts. This rate increased to 51 percent by the end of the second year of focal strategy implementation. At the same time, proficiency levels in the comparison districts increased from 39 percent to 50 percent. Although the increases were slightly larger in the BASRC focal districts, these differences were modest in size and not statistically significant. As shown in the lower panel of Figure ES.2, there was also a reduction in the percentage of fifth-grade students performing below basic. Again, although these reductions were slightly larger in the BASRC focal districts, the differences were not statistically significant. Rather than reflecting systematic differences between progress in the focal districts and progress in the non-focal districts, they may reflect chance or "random" fluctuations in student outcomes.

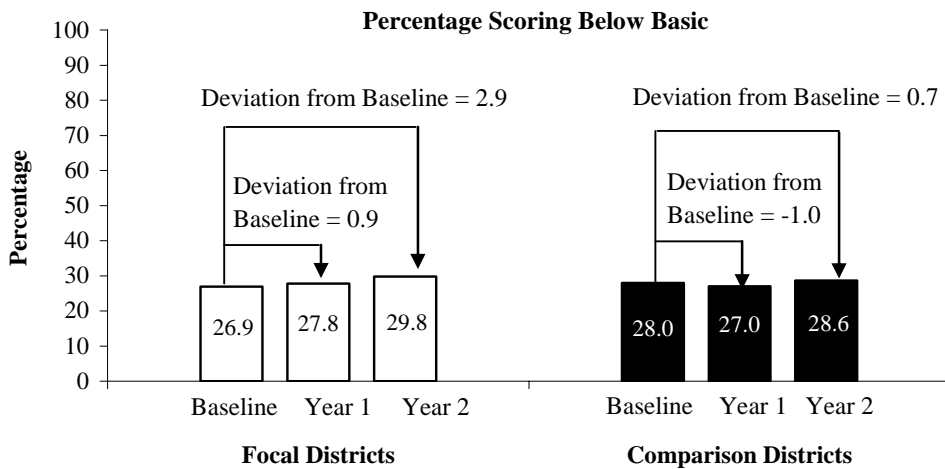
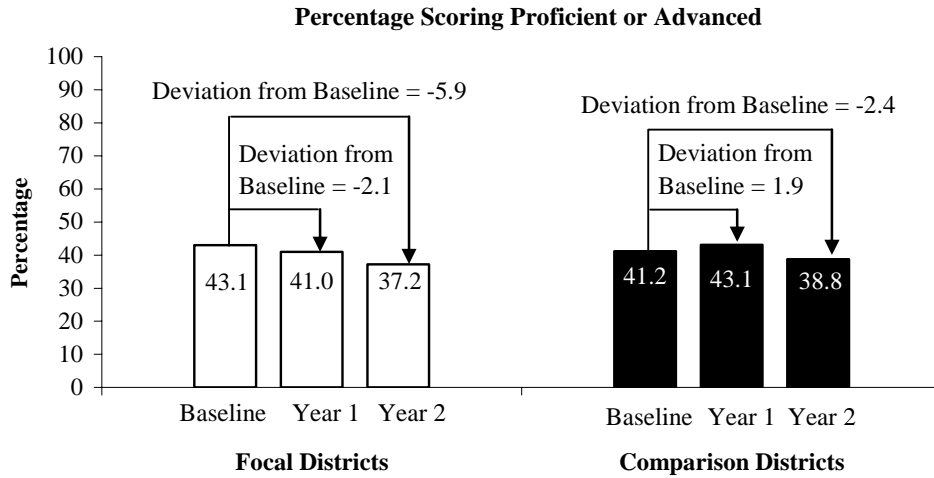
- Among blacks and Hispanics, English Language Learners (ELL), and economically disadvantaged students, reductions in the percent of fifth-grade students performing below basic levels in the BASRC focal districts in Year 2 outpaced the reductions in low-performing fifth-graders at the comparison districts. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Across the BASRC focal districts, for each of these subgroups, there was a reduction in the percentage of fifth-grade students scoring below basic that outpaced the average reduction in the comparison districts. These differences were not statistically significant and were generally

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure ES.1

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts



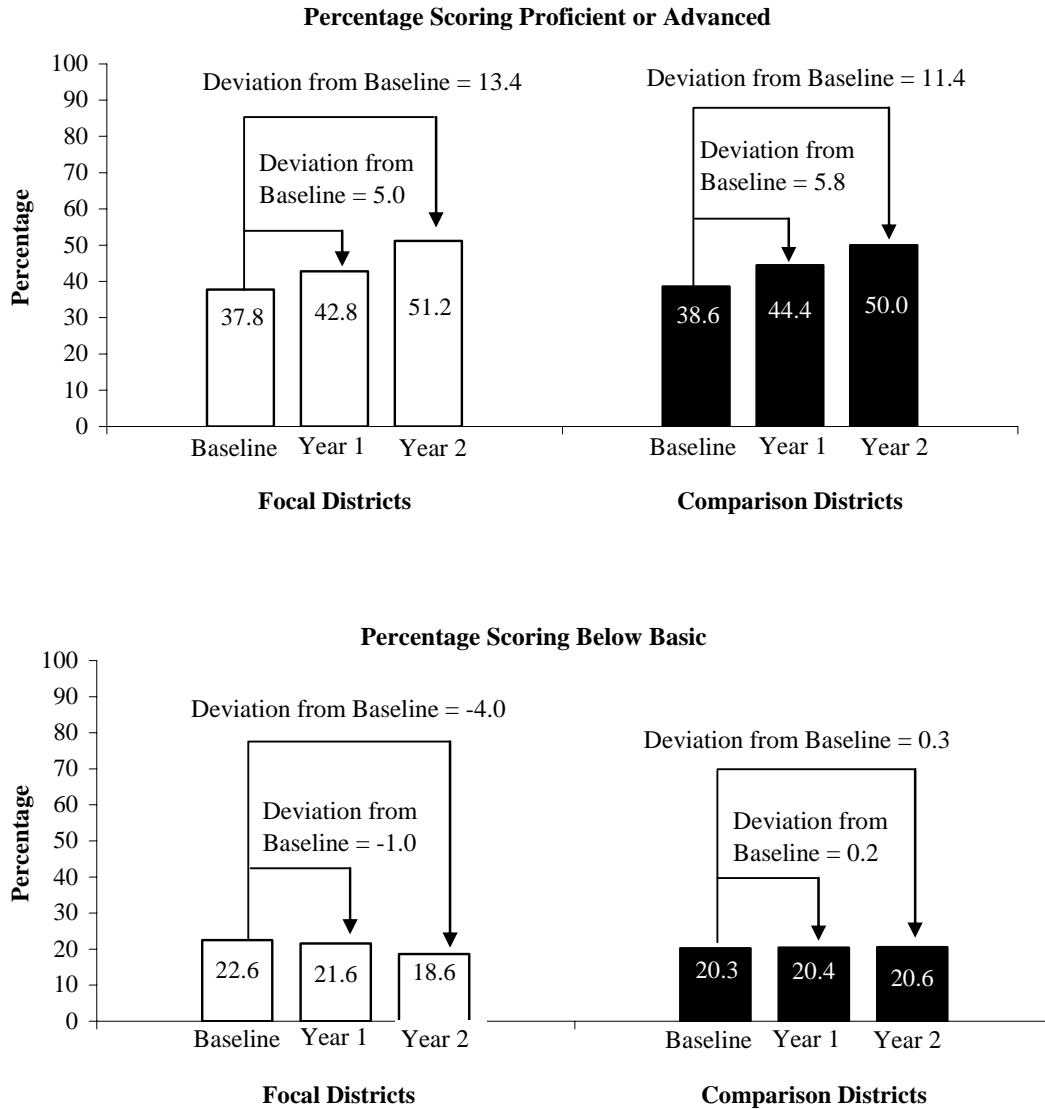
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure ES.2

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2003-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

limited to Year 2 of the intervention. However, the fact that the pattern repeats itself across several subgroups suggests the possibility that the BASRC focal districts may have made progress in improving the performance of their lowest-performing fifth-graders. The improvements were largest among ELL students (not shown in the figures). For example, during the baseline period, 55 percent of fifth-grade ELL students scored below basic in the focal districts. By the second year of follow-up, only 41 percent scored below basic, a reduction of 14 percentage points. The comparison districts, in contrast, experienced less improvement, reducing the proportion of students scoring below basic by 5 percentage points.

Interpreting the Findings

The evidence presented in this report suggests that the BASRC focal strategy is not associated with improvements in achievement among third-graders. However, with respect to fifth-graders, the progress of the BASRC focal districts tended to outpace that of the comparison groups, particularly among lower-performing disadvantaged, minority, and ELL students.

It is important to note that these differences tended to be small, and were not statistically significant. As such, it may be that there are no true differences between the progress in the focal and non-focal districts. Moreover, the design of the study does not prove a causal relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and improved student outcomes for lower-performing students. However, it is possible that focal reforms had a modest effect on student performance by lower-achieving fifth-graders. Since this relationship existed primarily in the second year of implementation, it will be important to examine follow-up data to ascertain whether these differences persist, grow, or fade over time.

What explains the evident lack of a substantial, pervasive association between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement? The implementation and outcome findings suggest several possible interpretations:

Hypothesis 1: The BASRC focal reforms are not intense enough to affect students' academic performance.

While the core components of BASRC focal reforms may be potential drivers of improved teaching and learning, the implementation of the focal reform strategy may simply not have been intense enough to change student achievement in a pervasive manner. For example, there may not have been a sufficient number of interactions between BASRC staff and district and school leaders, or these interactions may not have been sufficiently focused on implementation of the BASRC reform strategies. The fact that the school-level strategy faded away may have limited the intensity of the reform activities. A lack of intensity could also be the result of a lack of focus, which could lead to not spending very much time on any particular effort. To the extent that this is

true, it might suggest that, for the focal reforms to have an effect, BASRC must increase the intensity of its district-reform efforts and imbue those efforts with a consistent focus.

Hypothesis 2: BASRC focal reforms are not reaching the classroom.

It is also possible that the BASRC focal strategy, regardless of intensity (that is, regardless of frequent and focused coaching sessions with the superintendent), would not lead to improvements in teaching and learning because the intervention is not close enough to the classroom. This might suggest that, in order to affect teaching and learning, the focal strategy must intervene in ways that ensure reforms reach the classroom level. This could include sustaining school-level coaching efforts or providing other supports designed to increase the effectiveness of school- or classroom-level BASRC reforms. It is also possible that, by their nature, district reforms can be effective but simply require more time to take root at the school level.

Hypothesis 3: Core BASRC reforms are not sufficiently powerful drivers of improved teaching and learning.

On the other hand, even if the focal strategy did increase the intensity of reform efforts at the school and classroom levels, it is possible that the reforms themselves are not strongly related to improved student achievement. In particular, it is possible that the BASRC reform activities supported by the focal strategy, even when effectively implemented, do not result in measurable improvements in teaching and learning. This would suggest that the BASRC focal districts and schools would make more progress by implementing reforms focused more directly on refining classroom practice or by implementing particular pedagogical approaches. MDRC's next report will explore this hypothesis by examining the relationship between school-level implementation of particular BASRC reforms and changes in student achievement.

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Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

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- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.