

# **The Challenge of Supporting Change**

## **Elementary Student Achievement and the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative's Focal Strategy**

### **Final Report**

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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 districtwide efforts to improve the quality and equity of student outcomes. The organization pursues various reform strategies. This report discusses the “focal strategy,” which targeted selected “focal districts” in the Bay Area, beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, and was designed to increase the intensity of earlier BASRC reforms by creating more opportunities for district and school administrators to interact with BASRC staff. The focal 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, nonprofit education and social policy research organization, conducted an independent evaluation of BASRC’s focal strategy. This report, the second of two, analyzes the relationship between the focal strategy and improvements in student reading achievement. It compares progress in the focal districts during the three 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. The key findings are:

- In the districts that participated in the focal strategy, there were improvements in reading achievement during the years of the focal strategy, but these improvements were either similar to or only slightly greater than improvements in similar districts in the Bay Area.
- 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 targeted district leadership, was not sustained at the school level, and did not specify particular instructional practices or supports at the school or classroom level.
- Overall, the implementation research suggests that, in practice, the intensity of the intervention, the consistency of focus on improving teaching and learning, and the connection between the district-level focal reforms and changes in daily school life were not sufficiently realized.

BASRC faced a variety of challenges in translating district-level coaching, evidenced-based decision-making, and networking and collaboration into changes in teaching and learning. Findings from this report indicate that the BASRC focal strategy had limited capacity to improve student performance and close achievement gaps beyond trends that were already in motion.



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## Preface

More and more school districts are developing reform strategies to enhance leadership at all levels, improve student achievement, and close achievement gaps. Many use the services of external support organizations like the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC, now known as Springboard Schools) to create plans for making change. BASRC's "focal strategy," the subject of this report, is a reform effort that was implemented in several districts throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, beginning in 2002. Emphasizing process rather than particular curricula, teaching strategies, or accountability systems, the focal strategy relied on three key features: coaching of district and school leaders, using evidence to inform decisions about strategies for improving achievement.

But is the BASRC focal strategy associated with districtwide improvements in average elementary student achievement? This report builds on earlier findings, released in February 2006, which found no strong association between the focal strategy and changes in average student proficiency rates on state-mandated literacy tests. The findings presented in this report, with an additional year of follow-up, point to the same conclusion: In the districts that participated in the focal strategy, there were improvements in achievement during the years of the focal strategy, but these improvements were either similar to or only slightly greater than those in similar districts in the Bay Area.

Nevertheless, MDRC's evaluation of the BASRC focal strategy expands knowledge about how districts approach systemic reform. In addition, it sheds light on how difficult it is for external support organizations to partner with districts to help initiate and sustain systemic reform. What difficulties do external support organizations like BASRC face in their efforts to forge effective coaching relationships, influence norms and cultures, introduce new processes, create coherence, and build knowledge? How do the organizations meet those challenges? This report speaks to those questions, outlining the challenge of translating systemic changes into reforms that reach the classroom, improve instruction, and raise student achievement.

If system-level changes are to result in improvements in student achievement, this study suggests that external support organizations like BASRC might be more successful if they support both district offices and schools and help them identify instructional strategies that reach the classroom.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President



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Finally, at MDRC, Christian Geckeler, Derek Chan, Kathryn Ferreira, and Vivian Mateo coordinated production of this report, prepared tables and figures, and helped execute data analyses. Andrea Dyrness conducted interviews and focus groups in the school districts and schools. James Kemple, Robert Ivry, Fred Doolittle, John Hutchins, Margaret Bald, Janet Quint, and Howard Bloom reviewed analysis plans and early drafts of the report. 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 Amy Rosenberg for her careful editing and Stephanie Cowell for helping to prepare the final text for publication.

The Authors



## Executive Summary

This is the second and final report for MDRC’s evaluation of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a grant-making and support organization in San Francisco, California.<sup>1</sup> BASRC is dedicated to improving student achievement in public schools and narrowing achievement gaps among different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. BASRC reforms are designed as continuous improvement processes driven by collective inquiry into student learning outcomes, school functioning, and teacher practice. This process-oriented reform strategy is designed to build professional knowledge about effective practice, promote mutual accountability, and facilitate collaboration. BASRC hypothesizes that making changes along these lines will result in improved teaching and learning, but the organization does not prescribe particular instructional practices, curricula, or school structures that should evolve as a result of its reform processes.

This evaluation centers on a specific BASRC initiative, the “focal strategy,” as it was implemented during the 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005 school years in five Bay Area districts (the “focal districts”),<sup>2</sup> and two to four selected schools within those districts (the “focal schools”).<sup>3</sup> Building on earlier phases of BASRC reforms, which began in 1996, the focal strategy was meant to increase the intensity of the core BASRC reforms by creating more opportunities for district and school administrators to interact with BASRC staff. In selecting the focal districts, BASRC tended to focus on districts where a strong working relationship had developed during earlier BASRC efforts, and the focal reforms were implemented on top of existing BASRC reform work in these places. In short, compared with the earlier reform strategies, the focal strategy served as a stronger test of BASRC reform ideas in fewer places.

While the first report on the evaluation explored the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and student reading achievement for third- and fifth-graders in the first two years of implementation in the focal districts, this report focuses only on fifth-graders and provides an additional year of follow-up data.

The key findings of MDRC’s evaluation of the BASRC focal strategy are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>During this study, BASRC changed its name to Springboard Schools and became a nonprofit, fee-for-service organization that offers its clients — urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout California — professional development services, on-site district coaching, access to research, and a variety of tools and services for improving schools. For ease of reference, the report uses the former name throughout.

<sup>2</sup>While the BASRC focal strategy continued during the 2004-2005 school year, it began to wind down during that period, as BASRC focused on developing new professional development services and strategies for a broader set of districts in California. See [www.springboardschools.org](http://www.springboardschools.org).

<sup>3</sup>During the 2003-2004 school year, BASRC added a sixth focal district that is not included in MDRC’s study.

- In the districts that participated in the focal strategy, there were improvements in achievement during the years of the initiative, but these improvements were either similar to or only slightly greater than improvements in similar districts in the Bay Area that were not part of the focal strategy.
- The evidence suggests that the BASRC focal strategy is not associated with substantial districtwide improvements in average elementary student achievement on state standards tests of reading.
- Although BASRC originally intended to support both districts and schools in a “bottom-up and top-down” approach, in practice the focal strategy primarily served *district* leadership, was not sustained at the school level, and, thus, typically did not lead to specific changes in instruction or specific instructional supports at the school and classroom levels.

MDRC’s evaluation of the BASRC focal strategy expands knowledge about how districts approach systemic reform. BASRC’s focal strategy is an example of how external support organizations are increasingly partnering with districts to help initiate and sustain systemic reform. This report provides new knowledge about the difficulties external support organizations like BASRC face in their efforts to forge effective coaching relationships, influence norms and cultures, introduce new processes, create coherence, and build knowledge. Moreover, the report demonstrates the challenge of translating systemic changes into reforms that actually reach the classroom, improve instruction, and raise student achievement.

## The BASRC Focal Strategy

The BASRC focal strategy centered on three core features:

- coaching of superintendents, district and school leaders, and teachers
- evidence-based decision-making at all levels of the system (for instance, using student achievement data to inform decisions about policy and practice)
- networks and collaboration among administrators and teachers and within and across districts and schools

All three features were also part of BASRC’s earlier reform efforts. Once the focal strategy began, however, school-level coaching by BASRC staff was redirected toward focal schools within the 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 reviews of 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 yields changes in district, school, and classroom practices that in turn improve student outcomes. When instituted together, coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration are thought to increase districts' and schools' engagement in a continuous improvement process that is directed at improving the degree and equity of student achievement levels. Because the strategy is process-oriented, it can result in different policies or practices that may or may not be linked with specific approaches to 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).<sup>4</sup> 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.

It is important to note that MDRC's study is limited in its capacity to establish a rigorous causal relationship between implementation of BASRC focal reforms and changes in student achievement that may have occurred after the focal strategy was introduced. BASRC selected districts where it already had a strong working relationship and where the superintendent was reform-minded and focused on achievement gaps. Therefore, the BASRC focal districts may have differed from comparison districts with similar demographic and achievement characteristics in unmeasured and meaningful ways. Consequently, subsequent differences between the progress made in the focal districts and progress made in comparison districts could be due to the fact that the BASRC focal districts had particularly entrepreneurial leaders rather than to additional contributions made by the BASRC focal strategy. Thus, the analyses undertaken for this evaluation are intended to be suggestive and descriptive of the potential relationship (or lack of relationship) between implementation of the BASRC focal strategy and trends in student achievement, rather than definitive estimates of the causal effect of the BASRC focal strategy on student achievement.

The BASRC focal reforms tended to center on literacy instruction and were concentrated at the elementary level. Therefore, all analyses of the focal strategy are confined to the elementary school level and emphasize district performance on measures of student literacy. The analyses of student achievement examine outcomes particularly for fifth-grade students, who have been in the

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<sup>4</sup>CRC also conducted an evaluation of BASRC's first phase of reform work (1995-2001).

schools longer than other students at the elementary school level and whose scores reflect a more cumulative effect of the quality of education across the elementary grades.

## Key Findings

### Implementation Findings

MDRC's implementation findings are based primarily on interviews and focus groups conducted in four of the five focal districts during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years — the second and third years of the BASRC focal strategy.

- At the *district* level, the BASRC focal strategy resulted in coaching of superintendents and other district administrators, professional networking opportunities for district and school leaders, and needs assessment and review meetings with BASRC staff. However, the strategy did not typically translate into specific reforms aimed at improving teaching and learning.

Executive coaches were charged with helping superintendents identify, implement, and support system-wide efforts to raise student achievement and narrow achievement gaps. In practice, the work between the executive coaches and superintendents tended to center on *building capacity* for these efforts — such as strengthening leadership, becoming more focused on reform work, and improving communication — rather than on actually implementing reforms. The executive coaches, along with BASRC staff coaches, also began meeting with other district leaders who had a more direct role in affecting teaching and learning. This coaching often revolved around a variety of district needs related to *readiness* for education reforms, such as building support for district reform goals and mending communication difficulties within and across departments. In interviews, executive coaches said they made progress in these areas and putting instructional reforms in place was “the next step.” All together, the coaching, network meetings, and meetings with BASRC staff led to the establishment of *goals* for improving student achievement and reducing achievement gaps and to enhanced capacity for working toward the goals. However, they did not typically translate into *specific reforms* aimed at improving teaching and learning.

- By the 2004-2005 school year (the third year of the initiative), the focal district strategy had ended early, either formally or informally, in three of the five focal districts.

In three of the five original focal districts, BASRC staff encountered difficulties that led to an early conclusion of the BASRC focal reform efforts. According to BASRC staff, they never fully gained traction in one of the focal districts and officially ended the partnership before the



start of the third year of the strategy. In another focal district, although the executive coach maintained a mentoring role with the superintendent, the coaching role as BASRC envisioned it ended in September 2004. And, in a third focal district, staff turnover, both at the district office and among the BASRC staff working with the particular district, led to a disruption in the work.

- By the 2003-2004 school years (the second year of the initiative), the school-level aspect of the focal strategy faded. Thus, the model evolved to be almost entirely a district strategy.

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. In the third year of the strategy, school-level coaches began to develop more prominent roles at elementary schools in two of the focal districts, but this coaching was not generally focused on delivery, support, or implementation of the BASRC focal reforms.

- At the schools within the focal districts, there was evidence of all three key features of the BASRC focal strategy; however, the instances of the key features were likely vestiges of *earlier* BASRC reform phases.

MDRC found evidence that 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 — were 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 participation in the BASRC focal strategy itself. It is also possible that these reform practices were in place before *any* participation in BASRC reform efforts. Moreover, 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.

- The extent to which teachers engaged in BASRC practices — coaching by district or school staff, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration — did not increase during the years of the focal strategy.

In investigating implementation of the focal strategy at the *school* level, the evaluation also included an annual teacher survey developed by MDRC and CRC. The survey was administered in BASRC elementary schools each spring in the same four focal districts in which field research was conducted. Among other things, the survey posed a variety of questions regarding the extent, nature, and frequency of teacher participation in school reform practices related to

BASRC's three key features. The survey does not capture all activities related to the focal strategy, but it does provide information on some key activities. Overall, the survey data revealed little change in the key reform activities during the years of the focal strategy.

### **Student Achievement Outcomes**

In order to explore the relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and changes in student achievement, MDRC's analysis of student achievement compared progress in the BASRC focal districts in the three 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.

- Fifth-grade students' achievement in reading improved over time in the focal districts, in terms of both an increase in the percentage of students scoring proficient or above and a decrease in the percentage of students scoring below the basic level. There were similar improvements in the comparison districts.

Both the focal districts and the Bay Area comparison districts saw improvements in fifth-grade language arts achievement at both the top and bottom of the achievement scale. In terms of proficiency rates, the average percentage of focal district students scoring at or above proficient increased from 38 percent to 54 percent by the end of follow-up Year 3. A similar change, from 39 percent to 52 percent, occurred in the comparison districts. (These patterns are in line with upward trends across the Bay Area and across the state as well.) Both the BASRC focal districts and the comparison districts reduced the number of students performing below basic. In Years 2 and 3, the improvements in the focal districts may have outpaced those that occurred in the comparison districts. For example, the percentage of students scoring below basic dropped by about 5 percentage points in the focal districts compared with a drop of about 2 percentage points in the comparison districts, suggesting a net difference of 3.2 percentage points. However, the difference between progress in the focal and comparison districts is relatively small and not statistically significant. As such, the possibility that the difference is simply the result of chance cannot be ruled out. In short, it is not possible to conclude that there is actually a systematic association between implementation of the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement on California's state standards. Moreover, any association that does exist appears to be very modest in size.

- Among blacks and Hispanics, English Language Learners (ELL), and economically disadvantaged fifth-grade students, the improvements in reading achievement in the BASRC focal districts outpaced the improvements in the comparison districts later in the follow-up period. However, the differences

in the improvements in the focal districts and those in the comparison districts are small and generally not statistically significant.

When focusing on fifth-grade achievement among economically disadvantaged students, black and Hispanic students, and English Language Learners, performance in the focal districts appeared to surpass the improvements in the comparison districts in the second and third years of follow-up. The differences MDRC observed could suggest a positive association between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in reading scores on the California Standards Tests (CSTs) among disadvantaged subgroups of students. However, the size of the differences is small and the differences are generally not statistically significant, meaning that the differences could have occurred by chance.

The findings are not surprising given that implementation of the strategy did not translate into instructional reforms or increased use of BASRC-related practices in the schools. Moreover, even if the small difference between the focal and non-focal districts points to an association, MDRC cannot make causal inferences. The selection of “reform-minded” districts as participants in the focal strategy could mean that the BASRC focal districts were more likely than districts with similar student populations and achievement track records to implement reforms and improve student performance.

- Schools with higher levels of BASRC-related practices did not have higher levels of achievement.

Using survey measures of reform practices related to BASRC’s three key features, MDRC examined the relationship between schools’ average levels of BASRC-related practices during Years 1, 2, and 3 of the focal strategy and proficiency levels in reading in Year 3, controlling for differences in the demographic characteristics of the students these schools served and for achievement levels prior to the start of the focal strategy. This analysis did not reveal relationships between the BASRC-related practices measured on the survey and fifth-grade reading achievement. The absence of such relationships may have several explanations. First, the measures may not have sufficiently captured enough variation across schools. For example, all schools had high average ratings for their tendency to examine achievement data, which may or may not be because they were all BASRC grantees. Therefore, the analysis assesses only whether improving from a *high level to a higher level* of examining achievement data is related to better achievement outcomes; it does not assess whether improving from a *low level to a high level* of examining achievement data is related to better achievement. The absence of a relationship could also reflect limitations of the survey measures to sufficiently capture teachers’ practices. However, it could also indicate that the BASRC-related practices are not associated with improved proficiency in reading.

## Interpreting the Findings

This report builds on an earlier report, released in February 2006, which found no strong association between the BASRC focal strategy and changes in average student proficiency rates on state-mandated literacy tests. In this report, with an additional year of follow-up, the evaluation points to the same conclusion. In the districts that participated in the focal strategy, there were improvements in achievement during the years of the focal strategy, but these improvements were either similar to or only slightly greater than improvements in similar districts in the Bay Area.

Given the nature of the reforms and the implementation patterns, the findings may be understandable. By design, the model did not focus on implementing particular classroom instructional strategies; rather, it emphasized a process through which districts, schools, and teachers could come to learn how they can best support improved teaching and learning. In practice, the BASRC focal strategy primarily targeted district leadership and focused primarily on building *capacity* for reform efforts rather than on actually implementing reforms directed at teaching and learning. Also, at the school-level, coaching by BASRC staff fell by the wayside, and, although a goal of the focal strategy was to intensify the core BASRC reforms, it was unclear whether the BASRC-related practices at the school level resulted from the focal strategy. In addition, the teacher survey data indicated little change in BASRC-related practices during the years of the focal strategy.

Systemic reforms such as BASRC can take a long time to take root. If they do, and if they are translated into effective instructional improvements, the changes in teaching and learning could be substantial and more sustainable than those evoked by other reforms. This evaluation suggests that external support organizations like BASRC might be more successful in helping districts achieve successful systemic reforms if they can simultaneously support both district offices and schools, if they can move beyond building capacity, and if they can help district offices and schools identify and implement effective instructional changes.

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

This is the second and final report for MDRC's evaluation of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a grant-making and support organization in San Francisco, California.<sup>1</sup> Although BASRC has launched several reform efforts since its inception, this evaluation is focused on a particular initiative, the "focal strategy," which was implemented in Bay Area districts starting in the 2002-2003 school year. The focal strategy is a reform effort aimed at building capacity across entire school districts and at all levels of the system for a systematic and continuous improvement process. The strategy also concentrates BASRC staff resources in a small number of districts (the "focal districts"), and in schools within those districts (the "focal schools"), in order to provide intensive and responsive coaching support to teachers.

This report builds on an earlier report, released in February 2006, which found no strong association between the BASRC focal strategy and districtwide improvements in average elementary student reading achievement. In this report, with an additional year of follow-up, MDRC reaches the same conclusion. While the first report explored the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement for third- and fifth-graders in the focal districts, this report considers only fifth-graders in the focal districts.

In the districts that participated in the focal strategy, there were improvements in achievement during the years of the focal strategy, but these improvements were either similar to or only slightly greater than improvements in similar districts in the Bay Area. 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 may lead to specific changes in instruction or specific instructional supports. Moreover, the research suggests that the intensity of the intervention, the consistency of focus on improving teaching and learning, and the connection between the district-level focal reforms and changes in daily school life were not sufficiently realized. While some key BASRC reform practices were prevalent in schools within the focal districts, they were likely vestiges of earlier BASRC reform phases. In this report, MDRC's study attempts to assess the relationship among some of these core BASRC reforms, but it does not evaluate the effect of earlier BASRC reform phases. Rather, the study concludes that the focal strategy, which was designed to increase the intensity of the core BASRC reforms by creating

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<sup>1</sup>While the study was being conducted, BASRC changed its name to Springboard Schools. For ease of reference, the report uses the former name throughout.

more opportunities for district and school administrators to interact with BASRC staff, is not associated with changes in student achievement.

## **Overview of BASRC Reforms**

BASRC is dedicated to improving student achievement in public schools and narrowing achievement gaps among different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. BASRC promotes a vision of culture change in which teachers and administrators engage in a collaborative and ongoing reform process at every level of the education system. BASRC's reforms do not prescribe predetermined instructional practices, curricula, or school structures as a "treatment." Rather, they are designed as continuous improvement processes driven by collective inquiry into student learning outcomes, school functioning, and teaching practices. According to BASRC, its process-oriented reform strategy builds professional knowledge of effective practice, mutual accountability and collaboration, and continuous improvement of the quality and equity of student outcomes. Importantly, while BASRC hypothesizes that these changes in culture will translate into improved student learning, the organization does not specify the particular mechanisms or pathways through which they translate into district changes in teaching.

At the district level, BASRC focal reforms provide an example of a role that community organizations, external to school districts, may play in helping districts initiate and sustain improvement efforts. Such organizations, often referred to as "district support organizations" or "intermediaries," typically provide a reform vision and assistance for bringing about systematic changes, but they can vary widely in their missions and approaches.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the focal strategy, BASRC's vision was a systematic and continuous improvement process for raising achievement and closing achievement gaps, and it provided assistance primarily in the form of coaching, as well as professional development for district and school leaders, networking opportunities, and materials. In terms of both the vision and the approach, BASRC's focal strategy may be comparable with the efforts of the Institute for Leadership (IFL) and the Stupski Foundation. Both of these intermediary organizations also seek cultural changes and new processes focused on improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps, and both organizations provide technical assistance to district leaders in the form of coaching or advising, as well as networking opportunities and materials.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The term "district support organization" was introduced by Kronley and Handley (2003). Their term, as well as the term "intermediary," typically refers to a wide range of "outside organizations — public, quasi-public, private for-profit, and private nonprofit — that seek to engage or are engaged by school districts and efforts at systematic reform" (Kronley and Handley, 2003, p. 4).

<sup>3</sup>Stupski Foundation Web site (2006); Marsh et al. (2005).

BASRC focal reforms are distinct from prescriptive classroom-level reforms, such as “Success for All,” which aim to implement particular classroom-level instructional reforms designed to create *specific* changes in classroom instructional practice in order to improve student achievement and reduce racial and economic achievement gaps.<sup>4</sup> Although BASRC reforms are implemented at both the school and the district levels, they are conceptually closer in approach to the initial idea of the “Accelerated Schools” model, in that that model is not necessarily built around a single definition of effective teaching practice but instead draws on external and internal coaches to facilitate a process for school improvement that is intended to improve teaching.<sup>5</sup>

BASRC reforms have been implemented in Bay Area schools and districts in several phases over the past nine years (see Figure 1.1). Initially incorporated in early 1995, BASRC received \$50 million in matched grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Annenberg Foundation. During Phase I (1996-2001), BASRC awarded grants to 87 schools over three to five years. At this stage, BASRC reforms focused on school-level change and centered on inquiry as the “engine” for improving school practice and student achievement.<sup>6</sup> In 2001, the organization received an additional \$40 million (\$25 million and \$15 million from the two foundations, respectively) to embark on its second phase of reform work in the Bay Area. In Phase II (2001-2005), BASRC began to focus more on the district as an agent for change and for scaling up reform. BASRC expanded its focus into a coordinated school- and district-level reform model in response to feedback from the Phase I evaluation that suggested schools could not sustain improvement without active district support.<sup>7</sup> As part of Phase II, BASRC awarded grants to 18 districts to support 23 clusters of schools within those districts (a total of 91 schools) in working together on reform efforts. These districts, selected from a pool of Bay Area grant applicants, received annual, renewable, multiyear improvement grants, which ranged from \$125,000 to \$500,000 depending on the number of BASRC schools in the BASRC district grant.<sup>8</sup>

While Phase II was under way, during the 2002-2003 school year, BASRC also embarked on a focal strategy. This strategy directed BASRC staff resources to six “focal districts” and 19 “focal schools” within those districts.<sup>9</sup> While the focal districts and schools did not receive any additional BASRC funding, they did, with the introduction of the focal strategy,

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<sup>4</sup>Slavin, Madden, Dolan, and Wasik (1993).

<sup>5</sup>Bloom (2002).

<sup>6</sup>Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (2002).

<sup>7</sup>Masten and Rendel (2002).

<sup>8</sup>BASRC also awarded grants of \$2.1 million over three years to another nine school districts to support them in research and development efforts aimed at discovering how to change their own policies and practices to better support school improvement.

<sup>9</sup>Phase II schools may or may not have been funded in Phase I. Likewise, focal schools may or may not have been funded at the start of Phase II. MDRC’s study includes five of the six focal districts.

## Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

**Figure 1.1**

**Timeline of BASRC Reform Efforts**

	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
Phase I									
Phase II									
Focal Strategy									

receive increased staff coaching time. (BASRC decreased individualized support of its broader pool sample of BASRC grantees in order to reallocate more staff time to the focal sites.) Table 1.1 summarizes the key dimensions of BASRC Phase I, Phase II, and the focal strategy.

While the initiatives were in operation, BASRC maintained a consistent vision of raising overall achievement and closing achievement gaps; however, the strategy for attaining this goal changed over time. BASRC’s focus, or unit of change, shifted from individual schools to groups of schools (referred to as Local Collaboratives) to districts (and schools within those districts). The reforms developed over these phases, but remained centered on pursuing evidence-based decision-making (BASRC’s Cycle of Inquiry) and building collaboration. During Phase I, BASRC encouraged schools to employ outside support providers but did not initially engage in direct technical assistance. After acknowledging that some schools needed assistance to achieve their goals, BASRC started offering school-level coaching toward the end of Phase I.<sup>10</sup> The coaching component became an integral part of BASRC’s delivery strategy in Year 1 of Phase II and, in turn, in the focal strategy. In fact, BASRC developed the focal strategy to offer more support to districts and schools than had been offered in earlier phases of reform. In this way, BASRC concentrated and expanded many of the ideas developed for Phase II. The focal strategy was designed to increase the extent to which BASRC reform ideas would be carried out by increasing contact with BASRC staff, particularly at the district level. Thus, the focal strategy serves as a stronger test of BASRC reform ideas in fewer places.

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<sup>10</sup>Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (2002).



## Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

**Table 1.1**

### Comparison of BASRC Reform Efforts

	Phase I	Phase II	
		Ongoing Phase II	Focal Strategy
<b>Years</b>	(1996-1997 to 2000-2001)	(2001-2002 to 2004-2005)	(2002-2003 to 2004-2005)
<b>Vision</b>	Raise achievement and close achievement gaps	Raise achievement and close achievement gaps	Raise achievement and close achievement gaps
<b>Unit of Change</b>	Schools	Local collaboratives (clusters of schools within district and district office)	Districts
<b>Breadth</b>	87 schools	23 local collaboratives (91 schools in 18 districts)	6 focal districts and 19 focal schools within them
<b>Key Dimensions of Reform</b>	Evidence-based decision-making Distributed leadership Professional community	Coaching Evidence-based decision-making Networks and collaboration	Coaching Evidence-based decision-making Networks and collaboration
<b>Delivery System</b>			
BASRC Staff Coaching	Direct assistance to leadership schools not achieving review-of-progress (ROP) goals	Available to all grantee schools (2001-2002 only)	Executive coaching and BASRC staff coaching of district leaders. BASRC staff coaching of all focal schools within focal districts <sup>a</sup>
Meetings	Summer institutes Network meetings by topic (for example, data, assessment, literacy)	Summer institutes Network meetings by roles (for example, district administrators, principals, and coaches)	Summer institutes Focal district network meetings Network meetings by roles
<b>Accountability</b>	Portfolio review Review of progress (annual review meetings)	Review of progress	Quarterly reviews Review of progress

NOTE: <sup>a</sup>School-level coaching by BASRC staff was scaled back or discontinued early in the process of implementing the BASRC focal strategy. As such, most of the coaching in the focal strategy occurred at the district level.

In selecting the focal districts, BASRC tended to look to districts where there was already a strong working relationship from Phase I and/or Phase II efforts. (As a result, four of the six focal districts were part of earlier BASRC efforts.) Districts with achievement gaps and with a reform-minded superintendent were also high priorities. The focal schools were then selected through negotiations between BASRC and district administrators.

Like the original Phase II reform model, the BASRC focal strategy emphasized system-level reform and was built on three primary design features:

1. coaching
2. evidence-based decision-making
3. professional networks and collaboration

However, by 2002-2003 (Year 2 of Phase II and the first year of the focal strategy), coaching by BASRC staff or individuals who were selected and trained by BASRC was unique to the focal strategy, above and beyond BASRC's broader Phase II reform efforts. Coaching directly by BASRC staff was dedicated predominantly to focal districts and focal schools. Coaching by district or school staff, evidence-based decision-making, and networks are each elements of BASRC's original Phase II reform model. However, in focal districts and schools these efforts were supposed to be reinforced by interactions with BASRC staff. All of these features will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

## **The Evaluation of the BASRC Focal Strategy**

The independent evaluation of BASRC is a collaborative effort of MDRC and the Stanford University Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC).<sup>11</sup> MDRC's study sheds light on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in student achievement. This report presents the degree of academic progress in BASRC focal districts, and whether or not it outpaces progress in similar districts that were not participating in the BASRC focal strategy. BASRC focal reforms focused on literacy instruction and were concentrated at the elementary level. As such, all analyses are focused at the elementary-school level (in particular, the fifth grade) and emphasize district performance on measures of student literacy.

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<sup>11</sup>CRC also conducted an evaluation of BASRC's first phase of reform work (1995-2001). (See Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, 2002.)

MDRC's study does not isolate the *effect* of the BASRC focal strategy on student achievement. Because of the nature of the focal strategy, and the nature of districts' participation in the intervention, it is not feasible to render a single, reliable, unbiased "net impact" estimate summarizing BASRC's effect on student learning. Assessing the net impact of any educational reform requires a reliable estimate of outcome levels that would have occurred in the absence of the reform. As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 4, because focal districts were not selected at random, this is simply not possible in the case of the BASRC focal strategy. Nevertheless, MDRC's study reflects on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in student achievement. The study also presents an analysis of the implementation challenges associated with the focal strategy and the difficulties BASRC faced as an external reform organization adjusting to the changing district needs and context and maintaining a focus on both "top-down" and "bottom-up" reforms.

This study informs and is informed by the CRC studies. The CRC studies focus in more detail on the process of reform and the relationship between BASRC reform efforts and changes at the district, school, and classroom levels. CRC's studies are generating detailed information about the implementation of particular design features, the school and district contexts in which reforms take place, and how both the reform efforts and the reform contexts evolve over time. Moreover, the CRC studies are providing important information for the interpretation of the findings of the MDRC study (for example, descriptions of the factors driving the changes in particular reform practices or of the dynamics limiting or enhancing the connections between particular reform practices and improved student achievement). Together, the MDRC and CRC studies yield an evaluation that contributes to the knowledge base about local system reform by exploring both the process of system reform and the relationship between particular reform practices and changes in student achievement.

## **Overview of This Report**

The remainder of this report is organized as follows: Chapter 2 explains the theory of action behind the BASRC focal strategy. Chapter 3 presents characteristics of BASRC focal districts before they started participating in the focal strategy and provides a summary of implementation issues. Chapter 4 documents the relationship between the BASRC focal district strategy and trends in student achievement, focusing on fifth-grade students. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses hypotheses for explaining the findings.



## Chapter 2

# The BASRC Focal Strategy

### Theory of Action

Since the inception of its focal strategy in fall 2002, the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) has continuously refined the theory of action underlying the focal strategy in order to be responsive to changing local needs and priorities. However, three key features have remained central:

- coaching
- evidence-based decision-making
- professional networks and collaboration

This section describes these core features, the way they were originally intended to be put into practice in focal districts and schools, and the underlying theory linking them to improved achievement and accelerated learning among the lowest-performing students. This section also includes a description of BASRC's "blueprint" for the focal strategy and what might be observed if the strategy were implemented as planned.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 3 offers observations based on actual implementation of the focal strategy.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to note that the focal strategy is very similar to the Phase II strategy in terms of the key components. What sets the theory for the focal strategy apart from the theory for the Phase II strategy is that BASRC provides districts and schools with more intensive support for reform, primarily in the form of coaching by BASRC staff and by experienced coaches hired by BASRC to support district reform. To support the work of the coaches, BASRC also conducts comprehensive needs assessments in the focal districts and quarterly meetings to review progress. Coaching (from within the school system), evidence-based decision-making, and networks, established as the key components for reform in Phase II, are also the key components of the focal strategy.

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<sup>1</sup>The ongoing changes in BASRC's model and implementation make such a description challenging, but this evaluation focuses on the basic features that appear to remain stable in BASRC's design over time.

## Coaching

BASRC has based its underlying theory of coaching on the idea that educators “need help finding, prioritizing, and implementing the many good ideas available [in the field].”<sup>2</sup> Coaching was intended to be the primary delivery system for BASRC focal reforms. BASRC’s original focal strategy included coaching at both the district and school levels. At the outset of their participation in the focal strategy, both districts and schools set measurable goals for raising student achievement and narrowing the performance gaps among different groups of students. BASRC coaches were supposed to work with leaders at both levels to keep them focused on these goals and to help them develop and implement strategies for achieving the goals.

The BASRC theory is that, by providing “practical, useful, and effective support,” its coaching will lead to better teaching and improved student achievement.<sup>3</sup> According to BASRC, by “diagnosing problems, identifying organizational areas of need, setting goals and agreeing on a focus, establishing an instructional plan based on research and best practices in high-performing schools and districts, and putting in place a rigorous and thoughtful continuous improvement process,” coaching can lead to improved teaching and learning.<sup>4</sup> The coaching model does not, however, call for any specific activities designed to ensure particular changes in teaching practice, nor does it stipulate how these changes are to occur.

At the district level, BASRC hired executive coaches with district leadership experience to work with superintendents and/or other central office administrators. Their coaching was intended to address the district’s capacity with respect to five core elements defined by BASRC:<sup>5</sup>

- *Leadership:* The superintendent and other district leaders should provide and articulate a vision for a districtwide focus. They should support that vision by allocating resources, providing schools with flexibility, and making sure all school staff members have the instructional materials, technology, and tools they need to achieve agreed-upon organizational goals.
- *Culture:* Teachers and administrators throughout the district should believe that every student in the district, regardless of gender, race, primary language, or socioeconomic status, is capable of meeting district standards when provided with effective instruction. Teachers and administrators should strive for and reward

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<sup>2</sup>BASRC Web site (2003).

<sup>3</sup>Springboard Schools Web site (2005).

<sup>4</sup>BASRC Web site (2003).

<sup>5</sup>These terms and their definitions summarize the BASRC document entitled “District Critical Elements” (2002).

excellence, make the best use of time during the school day, ensure safe and clean environments, and involve the community in the life of the school.

- *Infrastructure:* The board of trustees and district leaders should adopt reform policies that work, properly distribute authority and resources, and regularly evaluate progress toward goals. These leaders should also build strong professional learning communities, establish effective two-way communications systems, and provide well-structured professional development programs.
- *Educational Program:* District leaders should define content standards for what students should know and performance standards for how students should demonstrate their achievement. They should also adopt or develop a comprehensive K-12 curriculum aligned with state and national standards and reinforced by evidence-based practice, define standards for effective implementation of programs and practices, and regularly examine data to determine program effectiveness.
- *Professional Development:* District leaders should design professional development that is aligned with the district focus and targeted to improving instruction and accelerating the achievement of low-performing students. These professional development opportunities should be regularly evaluated and adjusted to better meet the needs of teachers, and they should focus on helping teachers and administrators understand the implementation of new programs and strategies and use data to inform instruction.

Executive coaches plan their activities by first leading a needs assessment of the district's capacity in each of these areas, and then helping district leaders formulate goals based on the results. An important aim of the executive coaching model is to help district leaders become reflective and outcome-oriented. Executive coaches, along with BASRC staff, also participated in quarterly meetings to discuss district reform progress. This model assumes that the district's organizational culture and the behavior of its leaders can be leveraged in order to put effective reform practices into place in schools. BASRC does not, however, prescribe the specific pathways or mechanisms that will translate these behaviors into actual school-level changes in teaching and learning.

Executive coaches were hired to work with superintendents and other leaders at the district level. At the school level, the original design was that BASRC staff would deliver coaching to support schools' efforts to achieve their reform goals. In collaboration with the executive coaches, BASRC school coaches were to address any number of school organizational issues related to district initiatives, from leadership to performance monitoring. For example, if a district embarks on an initiative to implement a new assessment program, BASRC's school-level

coaching might focus on helping a school use that assessment data in an analysis of student achievement. BASRC school-level coaches work with principals, school- and district-based coaches, grade-level teams, and/or other leadership teams. (As Chapter 3 discusses, because of implementation challenges, school-level coaching faded from the focal model in many schools relatively early in the implementation process.)

BASRC coaches provide focal districts and schools with specific tools and supports developed by BASRC. An example of one such tool is a database developed by Just for the Kids – California (JFTK-CA). The database provides districts and schools with state standards assessment results by grade and includes average results for all students as well as for students who have been in the school for at least three years. For any school in the system, JFTK-CA also provides the names of the top 10 performing schools in California with comparable student demographics. The vision for this system is that a district’s leaders and teachers will communicate with these highest-performing schools in order to learn about practices that drive their success. Another example of a tool coaches may use is a worksheet that walks leaders and teachers through a Cycle of Inquiry process. The worksheet includes questions for educators to answer, allowing them to identify a problem, diagnose it, and develop a practice to address it.

Coaching by the BASRC staff is a delivery system for the BASRC focal reforms. At the same time, coaching by staff within the school system is also a key feature of the BASRC focal reforms and of the earlier phases of BASRC.

Three types of coaching roles were originally specified as part of the broader Phase II strategy. These remain as part of the focal strategy as well. First, Local Collaborative coaches grew out of the focus on groups of schools working together on reform issues (Local Collaboratives) in Phase II. These coaches, based either in the district office or at a school site, bridge BASRC schools with one another and the district office, promoting both bottom-up and top-down reform work. They may be district administrators, principals, school-based coaches, or individuals hired by the district specifically for the role. Second, reform coordinators are based on-site at BASRC schools and are often teachers or other school staff who are released from their regular duties on a part-time basis to help advance BASRC reforms. Third, literacy coaches are typically part of a district strategy not necessarily related to BASRC. Literacy coaches help with the adoption of new curriculum or provide intervention work for struggling students. Table 2.1 lists the various coaching roles, their organizational affiliations, and their relationship to the different phases of BASRC.

## **Evidence-Based Decision-Making**

Evidence-based decision-making is the second key design feature of the BASRC focal strategy. BASRC promotes this component through coaching as well as through a variety of



**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Table 2.1**

**Coaching Roles in the BASRC Focal Strategy**

	<b>Unique to focal strategy?</b>	<b>Who are the coaches?</b>	<b>Relation to BASRC phases?</b>	<b>Where do they work and whom do they coach?</b>	<b>Are they trained by BASRC?</b>
<b>Executive Coaches</b>	Yes	Former superintendents hired by BASRC	Element of focal strategy	Work in district office. Coach superintendents and other district leaders.	Yes
<b>BASRC School Coaches</b>	Yes	BASRC staff	Element of focal strategy	Work in schools. Coach principals, local collaborative coaches, school leadership team; also work with executive coaches.	Yes
<b>Local Collaborative Coaches</b>	No	District or school personnel (administrators, coaches, principals, or teachers)	Initiated in Phase II; still in place during focal strategy.	Work in and/or across schools. Coach principals, literacy coaches, school or grade leadership teams, district leaders.	Yes
<b>Reform Coordinators</b>	No	School personnel (coaches or teachers)	Initiated in Phase I or II; still in place during focal strategy.	Work in schools. Coach principals, literacy coaches, school or grade leadership teams.	May attend some BASRC meetings.
<b>Literacy Coaches</b>	No	Existing school or district personnel (sometimes hired or supported using BASRC grants)	Not part of BASRC model but often involved in BASRC reforms.	Work in schools (sometimes several schools). Coach teachers.	May attend some BASRC meetings.

tools and processes. Instead of prescribing a set of specific classroom practices, this component articulates a general process for reform of instructional practice. One of the key tools in this process is the Cycle of Inquiry, which is a method of identifying, understanding, and meeting the needs of struggling students. Educators begin this process by examining student achievement data, including diagnostic assessments, to identify problems and determine which students are struggling in which areas. BASRC also encourages schools to adopt and give more frequent assessments. At the school level, this cycle is designed to enable teachers to better diagnose students' needs and fine-tune classroom strategies before students move on to the next grade. BASRC encourages districts and schools to implement the Cycle of Inquiry at all levels in the system (school, grade, and classroom) to identify achievement gaps, and to focus on a specific academic area across all levels (typically, literacy). The inquiry model assumes that districts, schools, and teachers will work to identify teaching practices that will boost student achievement, particularly among the lowest-performing students.

With the goal of building districts' and schools' capacity to engage in evidence-based decision-making, BASRC uses a variety of other tools, including annual Reviews of Progress (in which districts and schools present evidence about progress in improving performance and closing achievement gaps) and the JFTK-CA database. In addition, BASRC encourages districts to develop systems for providing schools and teachers with useful and accessible data, and for linking the data to systemwide assessment programs.

## **Professional Networks and Collaboration**

Professional networks and collaboration make up the third primary design feature of the BASRC focal strategy. This feature consists of a variety of opportunities for school leaders to convene and share knowledge with each other. For example, BASRC organizes professional development services in four different professional networks for focal district and school leaders:

1. the Principals' Network for principals in all BASRC schools
2. the Local Collaborative Coaches' Network for school- and district-based coaches in all BASRC districts
3. the District Leaders' Network for district leaders in all BASRC districts
4. the Focal Superintendents' Network for the superintendents in the focal districts only

BASRC's goal for these networks is to build educators' capacity to address student and school performance. Examples of topics include leadership, the Cycle of Inquiry, and equity. Other collaboration opportunities are BASRC-organized Summer Institutes for school and dis-

trict leadership teams, as well as meetings organized around particular themes, such as literacy and the use of data. In all of these meetings, BASRC encourages participants to continue sharing knowledge and to develop school-level networks at their sites, often providing them with tools to pass on what they have learned.

In addition to the collaboration opportunities BASRC provides at network meetings, the organization encourages districts and schools to create collaboration opportunities at their district offices and school sites. BASRC advocates for collaboration that supports what the organization refers to as “bottom-up and top-down” reform, in which both schools and districts share reform ideas and influence one another. BASRC also promotes collaboration across and within schools. The theory is that such collaboration builds knowledge and creates mutual accountability, leading to improved practice.

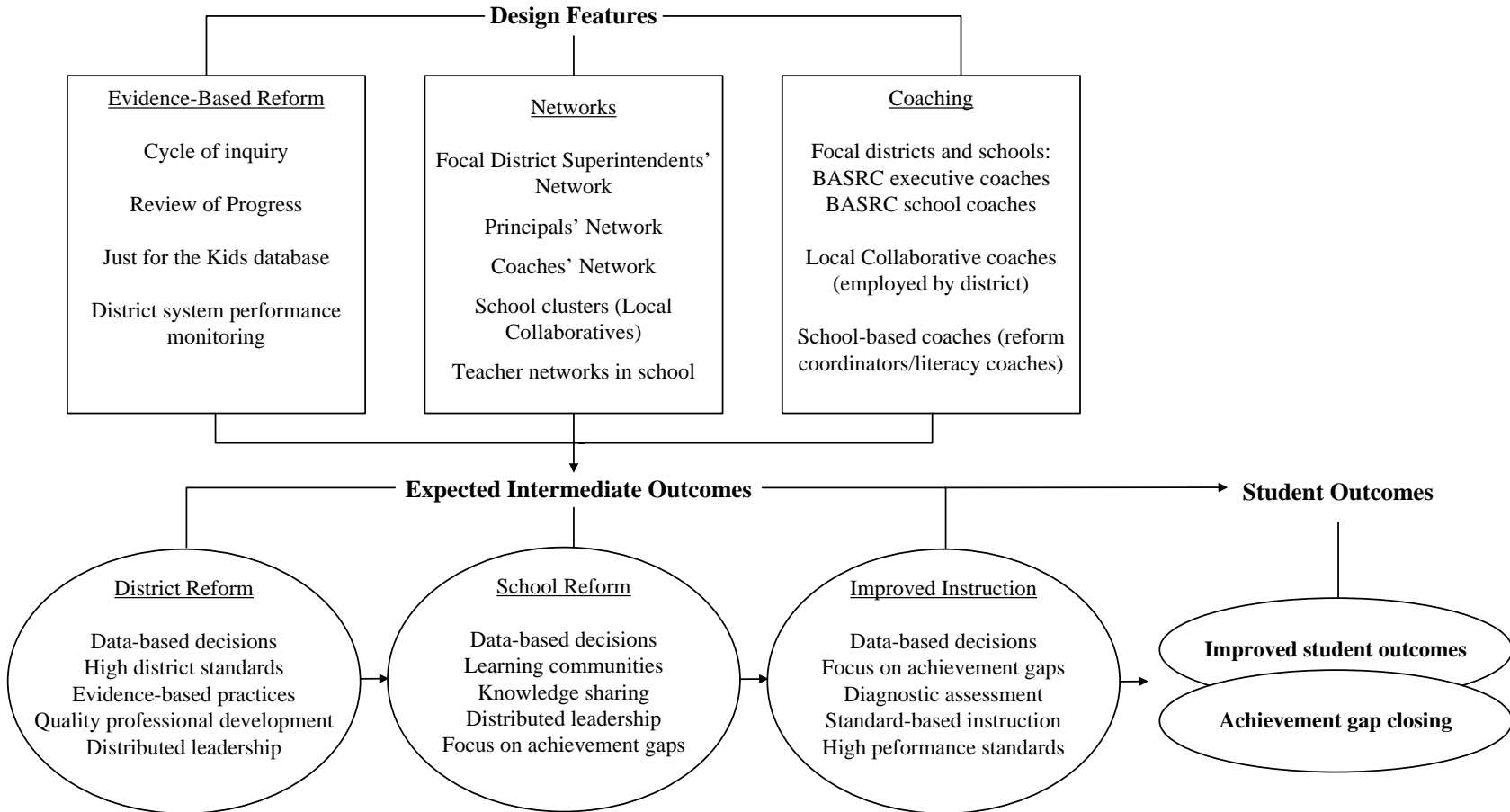
## **Summary**

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, the theory of action underlying the BASRC focal strategy suggests that the implementation of the three key design features would yield changes in district, school, and classroom practices hypothesized to improve student outcomes. Taken together, coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration are thought to lead to districts and schools becoming more engaged in a continuous improvement process that is reflective, evidence-based, and collaborative. This process is supposed to help educators find effective ways to improve instruction for all students, and for low-performing students in particular, leading to improved and more equitable student outcomes. Because the focal reforms are process-oriented, they can result in different outcomes within each district, school, and classroom. The outcomes may be or may not be policies or practices that are directly linked with improved teaching and learning, or they may be incremental improvements in culture that eventually foster better teaching and learning.

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Figure 2.1**

**BASRC Focal Strategy Theory of Action**



## Chapter 3

# Implementation of the BASRC Focal Strategy

Chapter 2 described the theory of action behind the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) focal strategy and how the strategy was intended to unfold if put into practice as planned. This chapter describes the places in which the focal strategy was implemented and summarizes key implementation challenges.

Overall, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that:

- BASRC implemented the focal strategy in a set of districts that were similar to, though slightly more disadvantaged than, the Bay Area as a whole.
- At the district level, the focal strategy was characterized by coaching by an executive coach, some additional coaching or support from other BASRC staff, a separate BASRC-led Focal Superintendents' Network, and review meetings with BASRC staff. These activities led to goals for improving student achievement and reducing achievement gaps. However, they did not typically translate into specific reforms aimed at improving teaching and learning.
- Although the BASRC focal strategy originally included a model aimed at a set of “focal schools” within the focal districts, this school-level component was not implemented as planned. As a result, there was no meaningful distinction between focal and non-focal schools in program resources or implementation.
- There was evidence of all three key features of the focal strategy in schools in the BASRC focal districts. However, these were likely vestiges of earlier BASRC reform efforts. Also, the extent to which teachers engaged in these BASRC practices did not increase during the years of the focal strategy.

The findings described in this chapter add to general knowledge about implementing districtwide reforms and about the role external support organizations play in supporting districtwide reforms, particularly those that emphasize coaching as a primary means of support. The findings illustrate how hard it can be for external organizations to develop lasting coaching relationships, to effectively influence processes and culture, to simultaneously prioritize both district- and school-level reform efforts, and to effectively translate their efforts into reforms that improve teaching and learning.

## The BASRC Focal Districts

This report focuses on five of the six BASRC focal districts.<sup>1</sup> All five districts are in the San Francisco Bay Area. As mentioned earlier, BASRC selected the focal districts, looking in particular to districts where there was already a strong working relationship from Phase I and/or Phase II efforts. As a result, four of the six focal districts were part of earlier BASRC efforts. Achievement gaps and a reform-minded superintendent were also important criteria in the selection of focal districts. Within each focal district, two to five focal schools were selected through negotiations between BASRC and each superintendent. The schools selected may have been elementary, middle, or high schools. As explained earlier, MDRC's research efforts in regard to BASRC have focused solely on elementary schools. There were a total of 12 focal schools at the elementary level. Table 3.1 lists the five focal districts and the elementary-level focal schools within them.

Looking at the five BASRC focal districts in this evaluation, Table 3.2 compares the districts' fifth-grade demographic characteristics and achievement levels before implementation of the BASRC focal strategy with those of other districts in the San Francisco Bay Area and throughout California.<sup>2</sup> Achievement levels are measured by performance on both the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9), a nationally norm-referenced test, and the California Standards Tests (CSTs), which measure student performance relative to California state standards. The baseline, or preimplementation, period for the BASRC focal strategy for which MDRC has data includes the 1999-2000, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002 school years.<sup>3</sup> The baseline demographic characteristics and student achievement levels for fifth-grade students, shown in Table 3.2, represent averages over these three years. Note, however, that CST scores for reading were available only for 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 (except for the below- or far-below-basic average, which is based on one baseline year, 2001-2002) and, for math, only for 2001-2002.

Table 3.2 shows that, relative to Bay Area districts,<sup>4</sup> BASRC focal districts served a smaller proportion of white students and a slightly larger proportion of Hispanic and Asian students, but similar proportions of black students.<sup>5</sup> For example, on average, 43 percent of the

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<sup>1</sup>Because BASRC's sixth focal district, Oak Grove, joined the initiative one year after the start of the focal strategy and is following an action plan different from that of the original five districts, MDRC is not including it in the evaluation sample.

<sup>2</sup>Bay Area districts are defined as those districts in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties. All districts and schools with students in the fifth grade were included in the samples.

<sup>3</sup>Data for these analyses are from the California Department of Education. For more information on the tests, see Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup>This includes focal districts and districts that participated in earlier phases of BASRC reforms.

<sup>5</sup>The "Other" category includes Native American students and students of multiple ethnicities. The "Asian" category includes Pacific Islander and Filipino students.

## Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

**Table 3.1**

**BASRC Focal Districts and Their Focal Schools**

Focal District	Focal Schools
Newark Unified School District	Snow Elementary Musick Elementary Milani Elementary
Alameda Unified School District	Paden Elementary Woodstock Elementary
Pacifica School District	Linda Mar Elementary Vallemar Elementary
San Rafael City Elementary and High School Districts	Bahia Vista Elementary San Pedro Elementary Laurel Dell Elementary
San Bruno Park Elementary School District	El Crystal Elementary John Muir Elementary

SOURCE: MDRC field research data.

NOTE: Focal districts are districts participating in the BASRC focal strategy. Focal schools are schools participating in the BASRC focal strategy.

fifth-grade students served by BASRC focal districts were white, compared with 53 percent in the Bay Area districts. At the same time, 26 percent of the fifth-graders in BASRC focal districts were Hispanic, compared with 22 percent of those in the other Bay Area districts. Table 3.2 also shows that BASRC focal districts had slightly higher percentages of English Language Learners and students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch (a common proxy for economic disadvantage). During the baseline period, an average of 16 percent of fifth-grade students in

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Table 3.2**

**Characteristics of BASRC Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts, Fifth-Grade  
Averages for School Years 1999-2000 Through 2001-2002**

Characteristic	BASRC Focal Districts	All Bay Area Districts <sup>a</sup>	All California Districts
<b><u>Demographic characteristics</u></b>			
Race/Ethnicity (%)			
White	43.1	52.7	55.4
Hispanic	26.2	21.6	30.6
Asian	21.9	16.3	5.7
Black	6.2	7.6	3.9
Other	2.5	1.9	3.8
English language learners (%)	15.5	14.0	17.7
Eligible for free or reduced priced lunch <sup>b</sup> (%)	29.8	22.4	44.6
<b><u>Achievement levels</u></b>			
California Standards Tests (CSTs)			
Language arts <sup>c</sup>			
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.8	47.0	33.0
Basic (%)	39.8	33.4	38.9
Below or far below basic (%)	22.6	19.6	28.0
Mean scale score	338.4	348.4	332.0
Math <sup>d</sup>			
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.2	44.0	31.2
Basic (%)	32.6	27.6	31.4
Below or far below basic (%)	30.4	28.3	37.4
Mean scale score	335.6	347.2	325.5
Stanford-9 (SAT-9) tests			
Reading			
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	56.0	63.9	51.2
25th-49th National Percentile Rank (%)	23.4	18.3	22.6
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	20.6	17.7	26.2
Mean scale score	659.1	667.2	654.2
Math			
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	63.5	68.0	58.0
25th-49th National Percentile Rank (%)	17.7	14.7	18.6
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.7	17.3	23.5
Mean scale score	659.6	666.9	654.7
Sample size	5	106	944

(continued)



**Table 3.2 (continued)**

SOURCE: Publicly available district- and school-level data files from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100 percent. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of district size.

<sup>a</sup>Bay Area districts include all districts with students in grade 5 (including BASRC focal districts) in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties.

<sup>b</sup>Averages for free or reduced-price lunch are presented at the school level only.

<sup>c</sup>Due to availability of test scores, California Standards Tests averages in language arts are based on just two baseline years, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, except for the "Below or far below basic" average, which is based on one baseline year, 2001-2002.

<sup>d</sup>Due to availability of test scores, California Standards Tests averages in math are based on just one baseline year, 2001-2002.

the focal districts were English Language Learners, compared with 14 percent of students in Bay Area districts as a whole. Also, 30 percent of students in focal districts were eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program, compared with 22 percent in the rest of the Bay Area.<sup>6</sup>

This table also compares characteristics of fifth-grade students in the BASRC focal districts with students in all districts in the State of California. Contrary to the comparison with Bay Area districts, the BASRC focal districts included a smaller proportion of Hispanic students and more Asian students relative to the whole state. BASRC focal districts also served a similar proportion of students who were English Language Learners. Lastly, both the focal districts and the Bay Area districts served much lower proportions of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than the state average.

Students in the focal districts generally demonstrated lower levels of reading achievement and math achievement on the CST compared with students in the Bay Area as a whole. This is consistent with BASRC's efforts to target its interventions toward relatively low-performing districts, particularly with respect to literacy. However, the extent to which the achievement levels differ varies by subject. In particular, differences are larger for reading scores than they are for math. The patterns of test scores on the SAT-9, also presented in Table 3.2, seem to show similar trends. In contrast, compared with all districts in the state of California, students in the BASRC focal districts have higher levels of achievement in both reading and math.

In sum, while not all the differences are large, fifth-grade achievement levels in BASRC focal districts are lower than in other Bay Area districts for both the CST and SAT-9.

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<sup>6</sup>Note that the figures for eligibility for a free or reduced-price lunch represent school-level percentages rather than grade-level percentages.

While lower-achieving districts than these exist within the Bay Area, the focal districts do appear to be below average.

## Implementation of the BASRC Focal Strategy

The findings in this section are based primarily on field research conducted during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years — the second and third years of the BASRC focal strategy. Each year MDRC visited seven of the nine focal elementary schools<sup>7</sup> in four focal districts to interview principals, coaches, and teachers.<sup>8</sup> In the first year, the researchers also visited four non-focal BASRC schools in the same districts. In the second year, MDRC met with superintendents and other district-level administrators and with executive coaches. Throughout the evaluation, researchers also met with key BASRC staff and reviewed notes from interviews conducted by CRC at district offices. MDRC also reviewed transcripts from interviews CRC researchers conducted with school, district, and BASRC staff. Through these efforts, the authors gathered evidence regarding the reform activities along the key dimensions of the BASRC focal strategy: coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration.

In investigating implementation of the focal strategy at the school level, the authors also analyzed responses to an annual teacher survey developed by MDRC and CRC. The survey was administered in BASRC elementary schools each spring in the same four focal districts in which field research was conducted.<sup>9</sup> Among other things, the survey posed a variety of questions regarding the extent, nature, and frequency of teacher participation in school reform practices related to BASRC's three key features. The survey does not capture all activities related to the focal strategy, but it does provide information on some key activities. From the relevant survey questions, MDRC developed composite measures of school reform practices by combining survey items that were both conceptually related and highly correlated with one another.<sup>10</sup> Table 3.3 describes the seven composite measures that were developed and shows how each is related to one of the three key features of the BASRC focal strategy. (Appendix B provides a complete

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<sup>7</sup>In 2004-2005, two of the focal schools combined into one school; therefore, in 2004-2005, MDRC's school visits totaled six.

<sup>8</sup>Findings are limited to four of the five BASRC focal districts; due to implementation difficulties at one of the focal districts, researchers did not have access to staff in that district.

<sup>9</sup>The researchers were able to survey only schools that received BASRC Phase II funding rather than all elementary schools in the districts. The researchers were unable to collect survey data for all years of strategy implementation for one district.

<sup>10</sup>Survey measures were tested using "Cronbach's alpha" — a statistical measure of the correlation for a set of items. Survey measures were generally considered viable when the calculation of Cronbach's Alpha for a group of scaled survey measures exceeded 0.7.

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Table 3.3**

**Key Composite Survey Measures**

Measure	Description
Coaching	
Involvement in coaching by Local Collaborative coach	Measures the percentage of teachers who were involved in coaching by a Local Collaborative coach.
Perceived value of a Local Collaborative coach	Summarizes questions to teachers about how useful coaching by their Local Collaborative coach or reform coordinator was in practicing inquiry and in building networks/collaboration.
Evidenced-Based Decision-Making	
Culture of examining achievement data	Measures teachers' access to and systematic analysis of various student performance data to improve their teaching.
Extent of individualized assessment and instruction	Assesses the extent to which teachers individually set benchmarks for assessing achievement, follow progress of individual students, and include specific strategies targeting different students in their instruction.
Inquiry into teacher practices	Summarizes teachers' perceptions of their schools' plans and teacher practices centered around pursuing inquiry into and possibly adjusting their instructional practice.
Networks/Collaboration	
Teacher knowledge-sharing within schools	Assesses the extent to which teachers share or discuss ideas, lesson plans, student work, and research.
Teacher knowledge-sharing within the Local Collaborative	Measures the extent to which teachers have worked jointly with teachers at other BASRC schools in their district on a variety of professional development, inquiry, and reform activities.

listing of the survey items comprising each of these seven measures.) For each measure, the authors created school averages across all full-time teachers in the school.

Below is a summary of implementation findings at the district-office level and at the school level. The findings are based primarily on field research, but school-level findings also incorporate findings from the available survey measures.

### **Implementation of the Focal Strategy at the District Level**

- At the district level of the BASRC focal strategy, executive coaches assigned by BASRC to each of the focal districts originally worked with the superintendents as planned. However, the coaches often gravitated towards working with other district leaders either instead of or in addition to working with the superintendents.

During the 2002-2003 school year, BASRC assigned an executive coach to the superintendent in each BASRC focal district. BASRC's goals for executive coaching were decided upon during an assessment of the districts' needs and often centered on issues such as promoting academic coherence (for example, alignment between the reading curricula and teacher professional development), creating accountability structures, and advocating for the implementation of data reporting systems. These goals were aligned with the ultimate goal of the BASRC focal strategy: to raise student achievement of all students and narrow the achievement gap. However, in practice, the work between the executive coaches and superintendents tended to focus on *building capacity* for reforms — such as strengthening leadership, becoming more focused on reform work, and improving communication — rather than on actually implementing reforms. Therefore, the executive coaches also began meeting with other district leaders who were more directly involved in teaching and learning. In all four focal districts in which MDRC conducted interviews, the executive coaches met regularly with staff from departments of educational services or curriculum and instruction. BASRC staff coaches, who originally planned to focus their time at focal schools, often collaborated with the executive coaches in these efforts.

- The BASRC focal strategy did not typically translate into specific reforms aimed at improving teaching and learning.

In addition to coaching by executive coaches and BASRC staff, implementation of the district-level focal strategy included a BASRC-led Focal Superintendents' Network and review meetings with BASRC staff. These aspects of the strategy led to the creation of goals for improving student achievement and reducing achievement gaps. Coaching efforts centered on strategies for achieving these goals. However, the goals did not typically translate into specific reforms aimed at improving teaching and learning. The coaching delivered by BASRC executive coaches and other BASRC staff was not necessarily focused on implementation of the core BASRC con-

cepts. Instead, even when working with staff in educational services, coaching often revolved around a variety of district needs related to *readiness* for focusing on education reforms. For example, in one district, the coaching focused on building support among the school principals in the district for the district's goals of narrowing achievement gaps. In another district, the coaching concentrated on mending communication difficulties within the educational services group department. In a third district, coaching focused on the superintendent building consensus within the school board and on the educational services department developing a reform vision, achieving commitment to the vision and goals, and deciding on next steps. In these three districts, the coaches and the district administrators said that putting instructional reforms in place was "the next step," but none made progress on this front during the focal strategy.

In one district, however, coaching by the executive coach and by the BASRC staff coach did seem to help the district progress in developing policies in line with BASRC's key elements and therefore aimed at improving teaching and learning. In this district, the executive coach and BASRC staff coach helped the district put in place policies for administering formative assessments (linked with their newly adopted reading curriculum), create a data management system, review the data in quarterly review meetings attended by district and school leaders, and use the data to establish goals. The coaches in this district helped district officials initiate the quarterly review meetings, attended these meetings as well as monthly management meetings, and helped the superintendent communicate the importance of these new structures to the schools.

- By the 2004-2005 school year (Year 3 of the focal strategy), the focal district strategy had ended early, either formally or informally, in three of the five focal districts.

According to BASRC staff, they never fully gained traction in one of the focal districts and officially ended the partnership there by September 2004 (before the start of the third year of the strategy). In another focal district, the executive coaching veered off path. According to BASRC, although the *relationship* continued, the *coaching*, as BASRC envisioned it, ended in September 2004. The executive coach continued to meet with the superintendent twice a month and occasionally attended cabinet meetings as an advisor. In a third focal district, staff turnover, both at the district office and among the BASRC staff working with the particular district, led to a disruption in the work. The new district staff felt that the BASRC strategy was not something for which they signed up and were resistant to BASRC's guidance. They participated in some parts of the previously agreed-upon activities of the focal strategy by attending BASRC meetings but used the time to work on their own priorities. Some district staff were willing to meet with the executive coach, but the relationship was described as a "thinking partnership" rather than as coaching, and there was no strategic focus.

## Implementation of the Focal Strategy at the School Level

In this section, school-level implementation of the focal strategy is described along each dimension of the focal strategy.

### Coaching

- By the second year of the focal strategy, there was very little coaching by BASRC staff at the focal schools.

Initially, the *school-level* focal strategy, defined by coaching from BASRC staff, was implemented in a selected group of schools within each focal district. However, BASRC encountered complications, including resistance to the BASRC coaches from school-level staff at some schools, and, by the end of the first year of the focal strategy, BASRC coaches did not have a significant coaching role in most of the focal schools. In the third year of the focal strategy, some school-level coaches began to develop more prominent roles at elementary schools in two of the focal districts. Nevertheless, this coaching was not generally focused on delivery, support, or implementation of the BASRC reform strategies. In one of these districts, the BASRC coach aided communication between the district office and school leaders. The extent to which the coach actually “coached” teachers in working toward school-level reform goals seems to have been limited. In the other district, a BASRC staff coach who was new to the district initiated new coaching relationships with two elementary schools in the third year of the strategy. The coach described his role in these schools as providing general, individual school-based support, which, in his words, was “not part of [BASRC’s] bigger strategy.” MDRC’s teacher survey does not have reliable survey data related to BASRC staff coaching.<sup>11</sup>

- In the first two years of the focal strategy, Local Collaborative (LC) coaches promoted “bottom-up and top-down” reform work, engaging with district staff, principals, and literacy coaches at the school or cross-school level. In the third year of the focal strategy, there was no longer BASRC funding; therefore, most LC coaching ended.

Local Collaborative coaches worked within Local Collaboratives — structures that included groups of BASRC Phase II-funded schools and the district office that governed those

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<sup>11</sup>The survey instrument did include a question about coaching by BASRC staff. However, an examination of the responses showed that the responses were unreliable. In schools that had not worked with BASRC coaches, teachers indicated that they received coaching by BASRC staff. Moreover, the survey asked teachers to write in the name of their BASRC coaches. The names teachers filled in often did not match with the names of any of the coaches BASRC employed. It appeared that teachers confused other external coaches with coaches on BASRC staff.

schools. The structure was intended to promote collaboration and both bottom-up and top-down spread of reform ideas. Local Collaborative coaches were district or school employees who supported BASRC reforms within these structures. In Year 2, three of the four focal districts visited by MDRC had one or more Local Collaborative coaches working within or across schools. Though these efforts were ongoing in the BASRC focal districts, they were not a part of the focal strategy per se, but a continuation of earlier BASRC reform efforts. The LC coaches were chosen from among individuals playing a variety of roles in their districts. They were teachers, existing school- or district-based coaches, principals, or district administrators. BASRC grants were used to give educators some release time to serve as LC coaches. The responsibilities of the LC coaches varied, but they generally worked with school-based literacy coaches and/or leadership teams to guide reform efforts. In some schools, they worked with teachers more broadly.

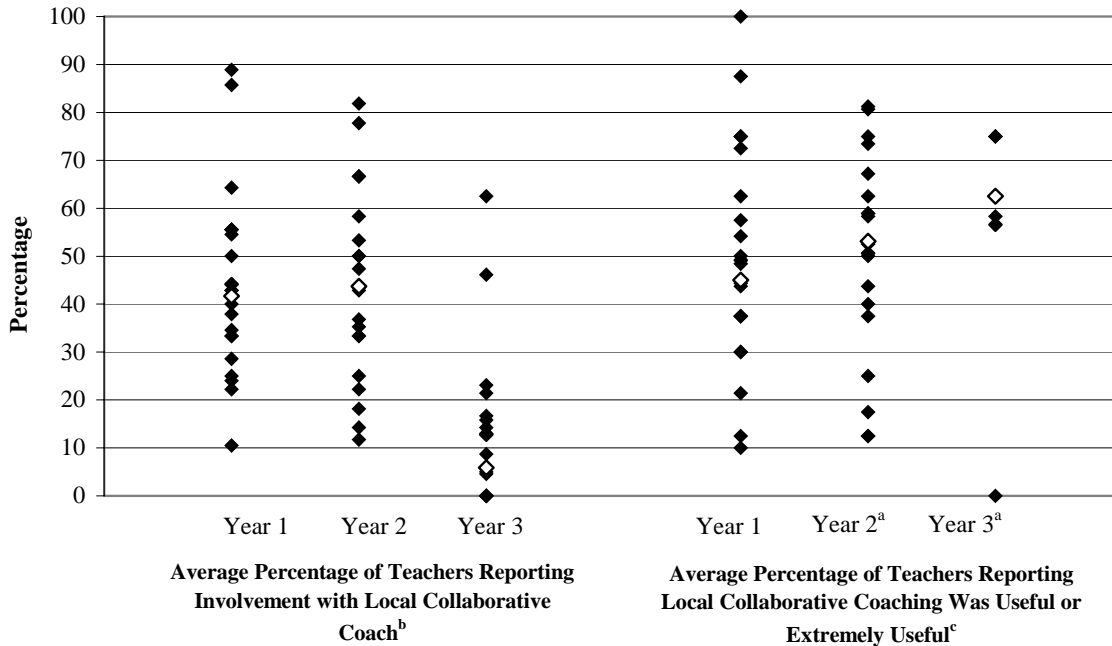
The teacher survey measures teacher involvement in LC coaching. The survey data show that involvement varied by school, but in most cases less than half the teachers were involved at all. Figure 3.1 illustrates the range of teacher involvement across schools in the first year of the focal strategy, 2002-2003 (which is the second year of Phase II in which LC coaching was introduced). Each diamond-shaped point on the figure represents the average of teachers' responses at an individual school for each survey measure related to coaching. The figure shows that as few as 11 percent of teachers participated in some schools and that as many as 89 percent of teachers were involved in coaching at one school. It also shows that in half of the schools, 44 percent of teachers or fewer were involved. This does not necessarily reflect poor implementation of the LC coaching model. As mentioned above, in many places, the LC coaching was intended to work only with school administrators, coaches, and teacher leaders. Figure 3.1 also shows that the extent of teacher involvement in LC coaching remained relatively constant, on average, from Year 1 to Year 2, but declined significantly in Year 3 of the focal strategy (2004-2005), with just 13 percent of teachers reported having any involvement. By the third year, Phase II funding for BASRC districts and schools had ended. Because this funding was used to support the LC coach positions, the LC coach positions were, in most cases, eliminated in Year 3 of the focal strategy. Only one district continued to fund one of their LC coaches. In this case, however, the coach focused her efforts on a different set of schools that had no previous involvement in BASRC reforms.

Through field research, the authors learned that, during the years in which LC coaches were in place, they helped facilitate grade-level or school-level meetings and they often conveyed information from the district office and spread ideas from other schools in the district. For the most part, BASRC trained these coaches through the Local Collaborative Coaches' Network (a feature of the Phase II strategy), or during Phase I activities. By Year 2, most of these coaches were already working either within or across schools, regardless of their focal or non-focal status, and were attending the network meetings, picking up new tools and activities from

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 3.1

Local Collaborative Coaching Survey Measures:  
Average of Teacher Responses, by School



SOURCE: Data are derived from surveys administered by MDRC and CRC to teachers at Bay Area Schools from 2002-2003 to 2004-2005.

NOTES: Each black diamond represents one school. The white diamonds show the median, or the midpoint of the distribution of schools' average teacher responses.

Year 1 (2002-2003), Year 2 (2003-2004), and Year 3 (2004-2005) refer to the first, second, and third school years of the focal strategy.

For Year 1 and Year 2, the sample consists of 21 schools in four BASRC focal districts. For Year 3, the sample consists of 19 schools because of the closure of 2 schools in that school year.

<sup>a</sup>For this measure, the number of schools included in Year 2 and Year 3 is 19 and 7, respectively. This is because, in some schools, either no teachers were involved with Local Collaborative coaches and thus did not report on the usefulness of these coaches, or some teachers were involved with a Local Collaborative coach but did not report on their usefulness.

<sup>b</sup>Unlike other survey measures that are composites of multiple survey items, involvement with Local Collaborative coaching is based on teacher responses to a single survey item and measures the percentage of teachers who, on average, responded with a 2 or higher on a 4-point scale ranging from "not involved" to "very involved."

<sup>c</sup>This measure shows the percentage of teachers who, on average, responded with a 4 or higher on a 5-point scale to a group of individual survey items ranging from "not useful" to "extremely useful."



BASRC staff. They met with schools across the collaborative or district, setting up monthly meetings that included some of the following activities: sharing BASRC tools and rubrics; preparing and discussing assessment data; and facilitating discussions around a particular school, strategic plan, or other facet of the reform effort.

In interviews, principals of the schools MDRC visited generally valued the contribution their LC coaches made. The teacher survey showed, however, that among the teachers who were involved in the LC coaching, the perceived value of the coaching was mixed. On the survey, teachers who were involved in coaching were asked to rate, on a scale of one (not useful) to five (extremely useful), whether LC coaching was useful for a variety of activities, including “determining how to use assessments effectively to measure change of student achievement,” “developing measurable goals for evaluating teacher practices,” and “building teacher collaboration” in the schools.<sup>12</sup> The researchers considered a teacher to have found a given coaching activity useful if the teacher gave that activity a four or five rating. The researchers then developed an index that averaged teachers’ ratings across the activities. At the average school, 49 percent of teachers found the LC coaching useful in Year 1 of the focal strategy, and this percentage fluctuated slightly in Years 2 and 3, to 51 percent and 57 percent, respectively (not shown).

Underlying these averages, the range across schools, in Year 2 for example, varied from as low as 13 percent of teachers finding LC coaching useful to 81 percent finding it useful. The schools involved are small, however, so it is important to point out that the wide variation could be equivalent to a difference of just a few teachers finding the LC coaching useful. At the same time, the variation in the value teachers place on LC coaching could reflect the variety of ways LC coaches worked with schools. Some teachers may have been minimally involved and therefore did not find it very useful, but the coaches may still have assisted school leaders in ways in which teachers were not aware.

- At both focal and non-focal schools, literacy coaches, reform coordinators, and other school leaders served as school-level coaches in the first two years of the focal strategy, supporting the curriculum adoptions and reform work of the school and district. In Year 3, with the loss of BASRC funding, some of these coaches discontinued their work.

Again as part of earlier BASRC reforms, in all four focal districts, most of the focal and non-focal schools MDRC visited had either a part-time or full-time literacy coach. These positions were often funded by BASRC grants, but sometimes funding came from other resources. These coaches helped teachers review assessment data and led discussions around curriculum

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<sup>12</sup>See Appendix B for a complete list of all survey items included in this composite survey measure.

implementation at the grade, school, or classroom level. In the second year of implementation, in schools that had already adopted the state-required literacy programs, the literacy coaches and mentor teachers focused much of their attention on the implementation of the programs. They worked with teachers on lesson planning and pacing guides, occasionally modeling instruction and pulling out struggling students. Often these school-based coaches collaborated with their Local Collaborative coaches and with coaches from other schools, and they tended to work more closely with teachers than LC coaches did. Unfortunately, the teacher survey did not measure the extent of involvement in or usefulness of these coaches.

In Year 3, only one district kept literacy coaches (these coaches were not also teachers) or reform coordinators they had put in place with BASRC Phase II funding. In another district, only coaches that were funded by other sources, such as Title I, continued in the third year of the focal strategy. Another district, which filled the coaching role with “teacher leaders” who did not receive release time for their coaching, also continued the coaching in the third year of the focal strategy. One district had relied solely on BASRC funding for literacy coaches and therefore eliminated all literacy coaching in Year 3 of the strategy.

- BASRC supplied tools and resources to coaches.

Within the focal districts, coaches used BASRC tools in several ways. In at least one district, the BASRC school coaches along with the principals reviewed Just for the Kids – California reports of CST data in order to set targets for student achievement. In several focal and non-focal schools, the Local Collaborative coach or school leaders learned about activities and collected meeting ideas from BASRC networks or coaches, bringing those ideas back to use in meetings in their district. Likewise, these coaches used Cycle of Inquiry worksheets and diagrams that they received to explain inquiry and also supply a way for teachers to record and track information. In some instances, coaches recreated the documents, changing some of the language and removing the BASRC logo, in order to make teachers feel that the process was more a part of their own work. Use of these tools declined in the third year of the focal strategy because of a decrease in coaching.

### Evidence-Based Decision-Making

- At least three of the four focal districts required assessments measuring progress in language arts and/or math several times during the school year, but several obstacles impeded the extent to which these assessments were systematically made available and used in district- or school-level decision-making.

During both the second and third years of the BASRC focal reform strategy, at least three of the four districts administered districtwide assessments and collected test score data several times a year. MDRC is uncertain about the extent to which BASRC influenced focal

districts in how they chose or used assessments. With the adoption of state-required literacy curricula (Houghton-Mifflin or Open Court), which include frequent assessments, the number of measures districts collect has been growing. Each of the districts had a vision for how the required assessments could inform practice at various levels in the system. However, a variety of obstacles seemed to have impeded implementation. For example, one district's assessments were frequently changed, making it difficult to track trends over time. In another district, teachers reported a lack of adequate professional development to help them analyze assessment data or realize the value of the analysis. Moreover, limited access by schools and teachers to assessment data was an ongoing obstacle in all districts. This is discussed further below.

The teacher survey provides more information about the extent to which teachers used assessment data to improve their teaching. On the survey, teachers were asked to rate, on a scale of one to five, the extent to which they agreed with a set of positive statements about their access to and systematic analysis of student performance data to improve their teaching. For example, teachers were asked about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "Teachers collect and use data to improve their teaching," or "Useful information to make informed decisions is readily available to teachers (for example, about student performance, resources, community satisfaction)." MDRC refers to this measure as a "Culture of Examining Achievement Data."

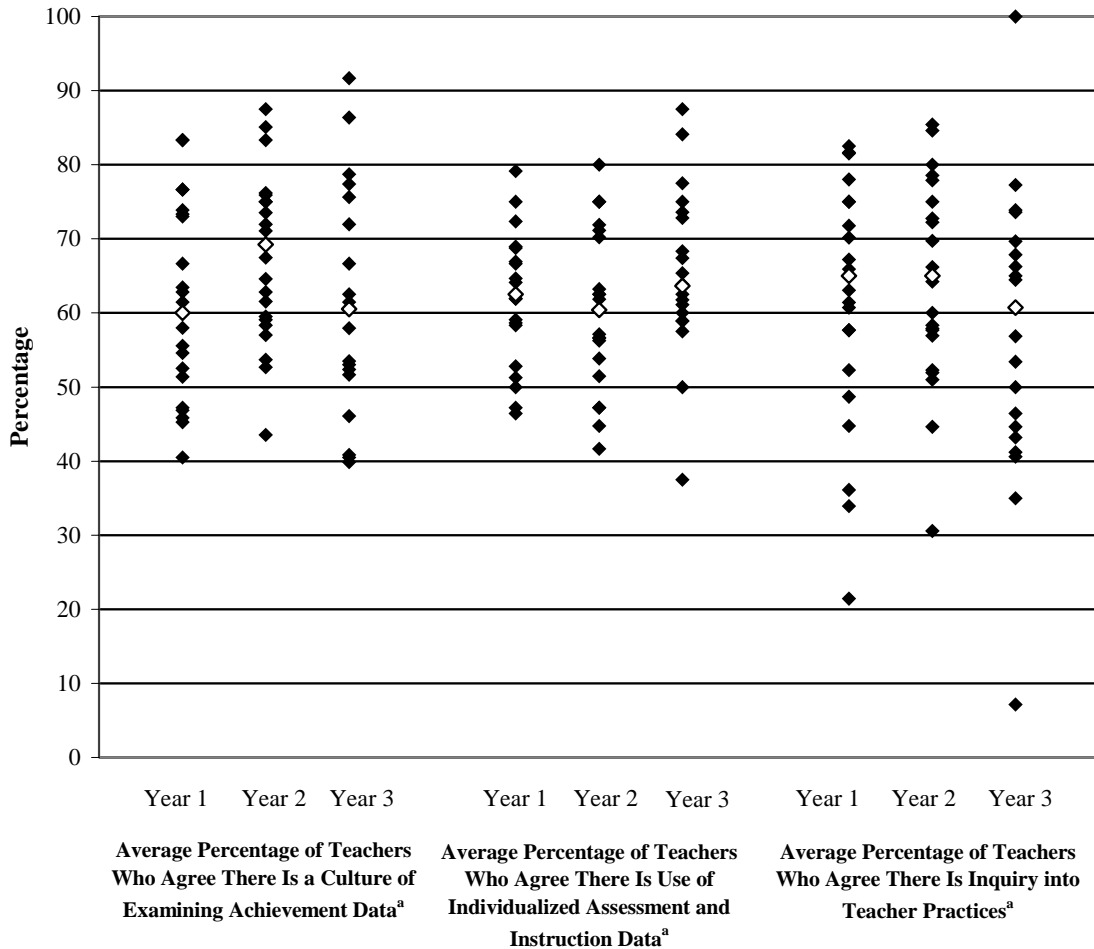
In the first section of Figure 3.2, each diamond-shaped point shows the average percentage of teachers at an individual school who agreed or strongly agreed that there is a culture of examining achievement data at their schools. For the first year of the focal strategy, the figure shows that at half of the schools, 60 percent or more of teachers gave a rating of four (agree) or five (strongly agree), indicating that the majority of teachers analyzed assessment data to improve their instruction. Over time, the extent to which teachers used assessment data remained relatively constant, but the levels revealed by the survey seem high in light of the implementation findings, which suggested limited access. This may suggest that teachers used assessment data they collected themselves rather than data their schools or districts provided for them. It may also reflect different interpretations of what comprise "data." Some teachers may consider student work (for example, homework assignments and class quizzes) data, and in fact, MDRC found this to be the case, as is discussed later in teachers' use of BASRC's "Cycle of Inquiry."

- During Years 2 and 3 of the BASRC focal reforms, at least two of the four focal districts aimed to make assessment data more readily accessible to schools and teachers; the efforts looked promising but the systems were still in development.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 3.2

Evidence-Based Decision-Making Survey Measures:  
Average of Teacher Responses, by School



SOURCE: Data are derived from surveys administered by MDRC and CRC to teachers at Bay Area Schools from 2002-2003 to 2004-2005.

NOTES: Each black diamond represents one school. The white diamonds show the median, or the midpoint of the distribution of schools' average teacher responses.

Year 1 (2002-2003), Year 2 (2003-2004), and Year 3 (2004-2005) refer to the first, second, and third school years of the focal strategy.

For Year 1 and Year 2, the sample consists of 21 schools in four BASRC focal districts. For Year 3, the sample consists of 19 schools because of the closure of 2 schools in that school year.

<sup>a</sup>These measures report the percentage of teachers who, on average, responded with a 4 or higher on a 5-point scale to a group of individual survey items ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Two of the focal districts were developing data systems that would make classroom- and school-level data accessible to teachers and principals. In one district, the system is comprehensive and customized to the districts' instructional goals. It contains, for example, all of the Houghton-Mifflin assessments, with the test questions mapped to the state standards. Teachers will ultimately have the ability to compile information on a student across assessments according to a particular standard. (For example, teachers might identify students who consistently have difficulties with vocabulary.) As of Year 3, this district was still in the process of implementation; some principals and teachers had received training, but the data systems were not yet in widespread use. A second district also had plans to make assessment data available to teachers through a networked system but had not yet specified an actual plan. The other two districts relied on district staff to produce hard copy charts for school site leaders. In one of the districts, MDRC heard that the district received assessment analysis results so slowly that the usefulness of the results was often impeded, and because the assessments measured different outcomes over the course of a year, it was difficult to track students' progress. The focus on improving data systems may have been aided by the support of an executive coach at the district level, but these efforts typically began before the focal strategy was implemented.

- Among both the focal and non-focal school sites, the most widely mentioned BASRC concept for evidenced-based decision-making was a focus on “target students.”

The strategy of selecting in each classroom a few “target students” to whom teachers pay particular attention in order to evaluate the effects of their practice was an idea proposed by BASRC and disseminated through network meetings and coaching. It seems to have been a popular idea that was readily adopted at most BASRC schools that MDRC visited. In two of the districts, the target-student strategy was supported or required by the district central office. However, all of the schools MDRC visited referred to the selection of and attention to target students. Typically, every teacher in a school using the strategy was encouraged or required to select two to four target students each fall, based on report cards, CSTs, other assessments, or anecdotal data. Most schools focused on the lowest-performing students; at least one school advised teachers to choose a mix of levels; and others chose low-performing students whom they thought had the best chance of advancing. Throughout the year, teachers discussed target students in grade- or school-level meetings or in meetings with the principal. Also, teachers were often encouraged by school leaders to individually consider the needs of their target students, to consider interventions or changes in practice appropriate for them, and to assess the results of their changes. The practice of identifying and working with target students originated in earlier BASRC work and precedes the BASRC focal strategy. Also, even with the decline in coaching, a focus on target students was sustained at most schools in Year 3 of the strategy.

Following target students is one approach teachers may take in order to facilitate individualized assessment and instruction (that is, to consider the needs of individual students in designing lesson plans and assessments.) One of the survey measures captures teachers' perspectives on individualized assessment and instruction. Although none of the items in the measures specifically ask teachers about target students, instead asking about a broad set of activities, the teachers' support for individualized practices is interesting to examine in light of their strong support of the target student strategy. The middle section of Figure 3.2 shows the percentage of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with a set of positive statements regarding the extent of their use of data in developing individualized assessment and instructional practices. While the survey items making up this measure did not capture target students specifically, they include related statements, such as "I consistently set benchmarks for assessing student achievement" or "I closely follow the progress of individual students performing at different levels of academic achievement." It shows that in Year 1 of the focal strategy, in half of the BASRC elementary schools in four focal districts, at least 63 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statements related to individualized assessment and instruction. This level remained relatively constant over all years of the strategy. The findings from this measure may suggest that reported individualized assessment and instruction, as measured by a broad set of related practices, may not be as popular as teachers' use of the target student strategy.

- Across all four districts, most of the schools reported conducting BASRC's Cycle of Inquiry or practicing "inquiry," but "inquiry" represented a different set of activities at each school.

For all the schools, inquiry seemed to be interpreted broadly as analysis and reflection. The activities school leaders and teachers described to illustrate their inquiry practices ranged from informal conversations about student work to filling out detailed worksheets with questions about student assessment data. They typically cited collaborative situations when describing inquiry, either regular grade-level meetings or casual conversations with colleagues. Teachers said they also practiced inquiry at the classroom level, which usually seemed to be equated with attention to target students. The teachers seemed supportive of inquiry practices as long as those practices remained informal, but they resisted when they were asked to fill out forms. In addition, inquiry at the school level was strongly encouraged by one of the focal districts. Inquiry was often supported by the district, through efforts to provide more data to schools and by asking principals to continue inquiry meetings when coaches declined in Year 3. Also, by Year 3, three of the focal districts required that schools follow a Cycle of Inquiry protocol when developing their annual school improvement plans for the district.

Teachers' use of assessment data as well as their particular attention to individual students are important components of inquiry, and the survey findings about teachers' reported use of these practices were summarized above. The survey also provides information on another

aspect of BASRC's Cycle of Inquiry: inquiry into teacher practices. It captures this notion in items such as "This school encourages teachers to pursue inquiry into their classroom practice," "Teachers in this school are engaged in systematic analysis of their teaching practices," and "Teachers meet regularly to review student performance to adjust practices." While the measure encompassing these items may include looking at student data, the focus is on evidence-based decision-making based on teachers' reflections about how they teach. Looking across teachers' average ratings of whether they agreed or strongly agreed with the items in this measure, MDRC found that, at most schools, teachers gave high ratings to their schools' engagement in inquiry into teaching practice. At half of the schools in 2003, 65 percent of teachers or more reported high levels of agreement, but the range across schools varied from as low as 21 percent to as high as 83 percent. These levels are similar to those reported for other inquiry measures that focused more on data. And, like the other measures, although there were some fluctuations over time, the levels remained at a relatively consistent level throughout the focal strategy.

- The adoption of the Houghton-Mifflin or Open Court reading programs was often seen to conflict with target student and inquiry practices.

During the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years, Years 2 and 3 of the focal strategy, schools were implementing or preparing to implement the state-required reading program selected by their district. All four of the districts were requiring high fidelity in the adoption of the reading program. Typically, this meant that teachers (at least most teachers) were expected to use the program's teaching materials in their lessons, administer the program's assessments selected by their district, and stick to a schedule planned by their district. Many school leaders, coaches, and teachers viewed the strict implementation of the new reading program as an obstacle to conducting inquiry. They said that this structure did not allow for analysis or reflection and that the complexity of learning a new program took over all collaboration and professional development time.

### Networks and Collaboration

As mentioned in Chapter 2, BASRC organized and led regular meetings for principals, Local Collaborative coaches, and district administrators to provide networking opportunities and share ideas. BASRC also promoted networking and collaboration as a key to sharing reform ideas within and across schools. This section summarizes key observations regarding networks and collaboration in Years 2 and 3 of the focal strategy.

- Coaches and principals in the focal districts had the opportunity to attend meetings of networks organized by BASRC for them: the Local Collaborative Coaches' Network and the Principals' Network. The extent of participation in these meetings varied.

When interviewing coaches and principals, MDRC asked whether they attended the BASRC network meetings, and if so, what they got out of the meetings. In Year 2, Local Collaborative coaches, and sometimes other school coaches (reform coordinators or literacy coaches), attended the BASRC Local Collaborative Coaches' Network meetings pretty consistently. They reported that they came away with tools and activities that they could use at their schools. In both Years 2 and 3, some principals attended every Principals' Network meeting, while others attended sporadically or not at all, citing scheduling difficulties. Those who attended said they welcomed the opportunity to talk with other principals, especially those from other districts, and occasionally were motivated by guest speakers. However, the principals interviewed did not provide any examples of specific benefits, particularly pertaining to instructional reform at their schools. As with the other BASRC components, participation in these coach and principal networks did not seem to vary by focal school status.

- In the focal districts, it was common for school leaders (principals and/or teacher leaders and coaches) at both focal and non-focal BASRC schools to meet with each other on a regular basis to share ideas and advance reform goals.

These meetings were part of the “Local Collaborative” structure (introduced, as described earlier, as part of the larger Phase II work.) Local Collaboratives were groups of BASRC Phase II-funded schools and the district office that governed the schools. In one focal district, the BASRC schools were grouped into three Local Collaboratives, but more typically, each district had one Local Collaborative composed of all the BASRC grantees. The structure was intended to promote collaboration and both bottom-up and top-down spread of reform ideas. The frequency, attendance, and content of LC meetings varied by Local Collaborative. Some groups convened monthly; others struggled with poor attendance and met only sporadically. Some teams discussed current reform issues — often related to the new or impending adoption of one of the state-required reading programs. Some teams planned joint professional development activities or shared guest speakers for staff or parents. In one district, the team developed a district-wide survey regarding target students. In three of the districts, these across-school collaborative meetings were organized by the district, and in these cases the collaboration continued throughout all three years of the focal strategy. In the fourth district, where school leaders organized themselves, their collaboration waned in Years 2 and 3.

- Other than districtwide professional development sessions, there were few opportunities for teachers to collaborate across schools.

There were a few examples of cross-site collaboration, but, for the most part, collaboration across schools was typically limited to school leaders. In one district, teachers in both focal and non-focal schools had the opportunity to attend collaborative professional development workshops on cultural awareness and English language development (ELD) strategies. In an-



other district, teachers from one school modeled a lesson from a new writing curriculum for teachers at another school that was gearing up to implement the same program.

On the survey, teachers reported a higher level of participation in cross-site collaboration than expected based on the field research findings. In the second section of Figure 3.3, each diamond-shaped point represents the average teacher response at an individual school to questions about knowledge sharing at their school. The figure shows that, across all three years of the focal strategy, between 22 percent and 87 percent of teachers reported participating in “knowledge sharing” activities with teachers in other schools at least a few times over the course of the school year. However, in focus groups, teachers who were asked about opportunities they had to work with other teachers often mentioned districtwide professional development sessions. Therefore, when answering survey questions, it is possible that teachers thought of these district professional development meetings rather than cross-school collaboration activities.

- At schools in the focal districts, both planned and informal collaboration was widespread.

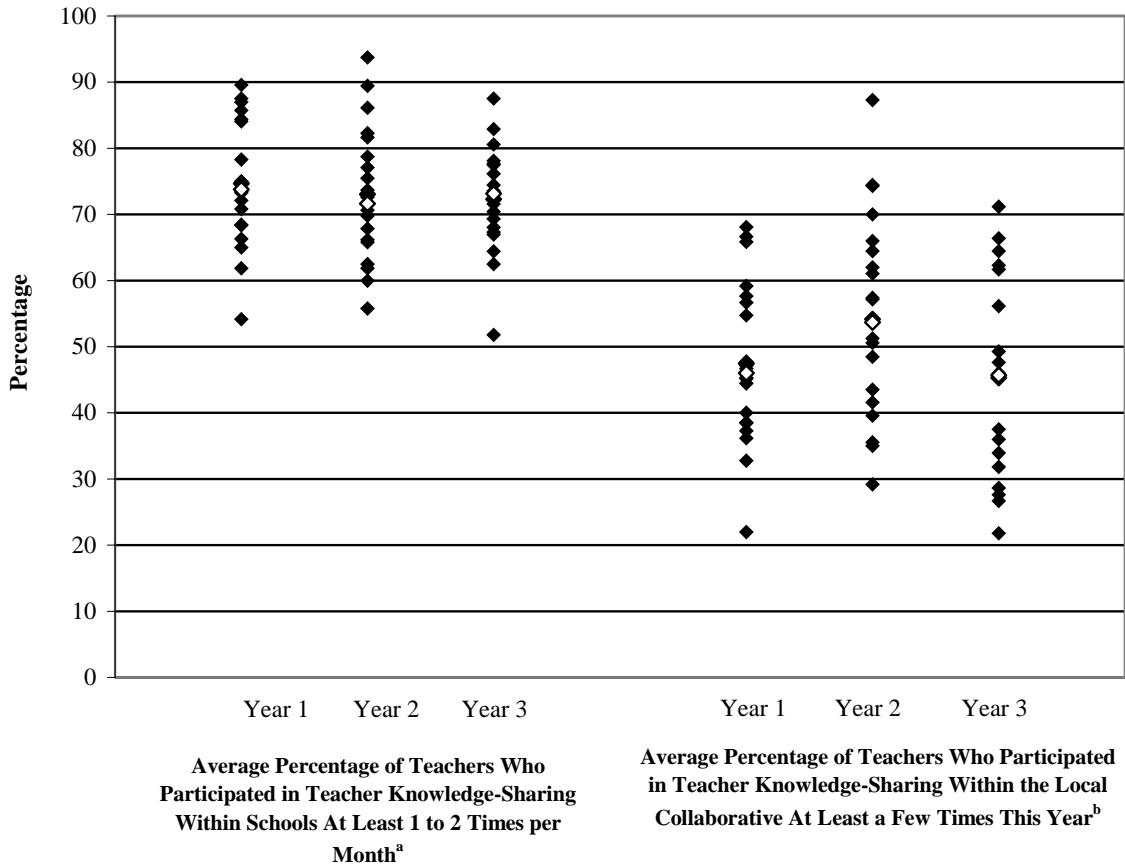
Most BASRC schools had time for grade-level collaboration built into their schedules, often paid for with BASRC grants, typically on a monthly or biweekly basis. Teachers used the time to discuss concerns about students, offer ideas for teaching strategies, and go over student assessment data or student work. In some meetings, teachers participated in inquiry practices as described above, with guidance from a coach or reform coordinator. However, at schools in the first year of adopting one of the state-required reading programs, teachers most often used the time to share challenges and ideas related to the reading program. Collaboration in the form of shared teaching or teaching observations was much less common. While there were a few attempts in a handful of schools, teachers in these schools resisted such collaboration, primarily because they were reluctant to leave their classrooms and were uncomfortable with peer evaluations.

Teachers’ responses on the teacher survey also show that collaboration within the schools was widespread. On the survey, teachers were asked to report how often they participated in “knowledge sharing” or collaboration activities within their school. For example, teachers were asked how frequently they “discuss particular lessons that were not very successful” or “share and discuss research on effective teaching methods.” Averaging across teachers’ responses, more than half of the teachers reported participating in collaboration activities at least once or twice a month. Also, in half of the schools, for any of the three focal strategy years, 72 percent of teachers or more reported participating in collaboration activities at least once or twice a month. The high levels of within-school collaboration remained at a similar level in all years of the focal strategy.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 3.3

Networking and Collaboration Survey Measures:  
Average of Teacher Responses, by School



SOURCE: Data are derived from surveys administered by MDRC and CRC to teachers at Bay Area Schools from 2002-2003 to 2004-2005.

NOTES: Each black diamond represent one school. The white diamonds show the median, or the midpoint of the distribution of schools' average teacher responses.

Year 1 (2002-2003), Year 2 (2003-2004), and Year 3 (2004-2005) refer to the first, second, and third school years of the focal strategy.

For Year 1 and Year 2, the sample consists of 21 schools in four BASRC focal districts. For Year 3, the sample consists of 19 schools because of the closure of 2 schools in that school year.

<sup>a</sup>This measure shows the percentage of teachers who, on average, responded with a 3 or higher on a 5-point scale to a group of individual survey items ranging from "never" to "almost daily."

<sup>b</sup>This measure shows the percentage of teachers who, on average, responded with a 3 or higher on a 4-point scale to a group of individual survey items ranging from "never" to "many times."

## Summary

Beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, the BASRC focal strategy was put in place in several districts that were relatively similar to districts in the rest of the San Francisco Bay Area; they differed slightly in that they served somewhat larger proportions of Hispanic and Asian students and demonstrated lower average achievement levels.

At the district level, the primary features that distinguished BASRC focal districts from non-focal districts were coaching of superintendents and other high-level administrators by an executive coach, sometimes additional coaching or support from other BASRC staff, a separate BASRC-led Focal Superintendents' Network, and more frequent review meetings with BASRC staff. District leaders and coaches with whom MDRC spoke attributed their participation in the focal strategy to ambitious goals for improving the achievement of all students and narrowing achievement gaps. However, the coaching centered primarily on readiness for reform — communication skills, leadership, or focus — rather than on putting in place reforms that could directly affect teaching and learning.

MDRC's implementation findings demonstrate the challenge of supporting both district- and school-level reform efforts simultaneously. As described in Chapter 1 of this report, BASRC originally focused its Phase I reform efforts at the school level. In Phase II and even more so in the focal strategy, BASRC expanded its focus into a coordinated school- and district-level reform model in response to feedback from the Phase I evaluation that schools could not sustain improvement without active district support.<sup>13</sup> However, as BASRC and district administrators prioritized district-level reform, the school-level reforms faded. Coaching by BASRC staff, which was originally planned to distinguish focal schools from non-focal schools, did not take place on a regular basis in most of the focal schools visited by MDRC. While some focal schools did interact with BASRC staff coaches, the interactions were limited and not necessarily connected to the district reform goals.

At both focal and non-focal schools, MDRC did observe 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/collaboration). However, given that these features are also central to BASRC's Phase I and Phase II strategies, it is possible that these were implemented as a result of participation in earlier BASRC reform efforts rather than the BASRC focal strategy. Moreover, it is also possible that these reform practices were in place before any par-

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<sup>13</sup>Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (2002).

ticipation in BASRC reform efforts. Survey data also revealed little change in these reform practices during the years of the focal strategy.

### **Context for the Implementation Findings**

MDRC's implementation findings contribute to a small but growing body of research on the role of external organizations ("district support organizations" or "intermediaries," as they are often called in the literature<sup>14</sup>) in helping districts initiate and sustain systemic reforms aimed at raising achievement and closing achievement gaps. In particular, the implementation findings provide lessons about external organizations' use of coaching as an approach for supporting district reform efforts. The findings described in this chapter are valuable because they illustrate how hard it can be for external organizations to develop lasting coaching relationships, to effectively influence processes and culture, and to translate reforms into instructional improvements and higher achievement.

Coaching as an approach for supporting districtwide reform, which has been integrated into other reform efforts, such as those of the Stupski Foundation and the Institute for Leadership (IFL), is a recent development, and therefore evidence of its success is limited.<sup>15</sup> However, CRC's research<sup>16</sup> on coaching suggests that one of the key limitations for BASRC and for other district coaching models was an insufficient definition of the coaching role.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, CRC's research points out the importance of both interpersonal relationships and district conditions that enable a successful coaching relationship. Coggins, at CRC, concludes, "Appropriate coach skill and knowledge combined with a reform-ready district that sees coaches as facilitating district goals are the conditions that allow the coach role to be integrated as a legitimate part of the system."<sup>18</sup> A successful and lasting coaching relationship requires many conditions to be in place. Agreement on well-defined roles and objectives at the onset are critical factors for success.

Previous research has provided examples of external organizations having success in influencing the culture and reform processes of districts. For example, a recent RAND study of three districts that partnered with the Institute for Learning (IFL) pointed to three key factors: "buy-in and support from top-level leaders; capacity of the intermediary organization and its

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<sup>14</sup>For example, see Kronley and Handley (2003), in which the term "district support organization" was introduced, and Marsh et al. (2005).

<sup>15</sup>Stupski Foundation Web site (2006).

<sup>16</sup>As mentioned in Chapter 1, the evaluation of BASRC is a collaborative effort of MDRC and the Stanford University Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC). CRC's studies are generating detailed information about the implementation of particular design features, the school and district contexts in which these reforms take place, and how both the reform efforts and the reform contexts evolve over time.

<sup>17</sup>Coggins (2004).

<sup>18</sup>Coggins (2004, p. 212).

alignment with district needs and existing reform efforts; and ability to provide practical tools tailored to the district context.”<sup>19</sup> Although these factors may have existed at the start of the BASRC focal strategy, they were not static. Staff turnover and changing priorities both at the district offices and within BASRC altered expectations and interrupted progress. As Kronley and Handley concluded in an Annenberg study of what it calls “reform support organizations (RSOs),” “local RSOs are continually challenged to develop new capacities to meet changing district needs.”<sup>20</sup> BASRC, which often refers to itself as a “learning organization” is keenly aware of this, but this study of the focal strategy shows how difficult it can be for such an organization to adapt to the evolving needs of schools and districts while simultaneously staying on the intended/original path of reform.

Finally, the implementation findings in this study that may add the greatest value to the field are those that demonstrate the challenges of translating district systemic reform efforts into improved instructional practices and better student outcomes. Research on the success of external support organizations at this level, particularly those relying on district coaching, is thin. This study shows that where BASRC was most successful was in building capacity to focus on instructional reforms, and other studies of external support organizations have observed similar outcomes.<sup>21</sup> But this study also demonstrates that getting to what, in MDRC’s interviews, coaches called the next step — actually initiating and implementing reforms focused directly on teaching and learning — is a critical and challenging milestone for systemic reforms, as well as for coaches and external organizations supporting reforms. Maintaining a focus on supporting schools while supporting district-level reforms, as BASRC intended in a “bottom-up and top-down” approach, may be the key to translating district reforms into instructional reforms; however, as this report found, it may also be hard to accomplish.

Given the manner in which implementation of the BASRC focal strategy unfolded, large changes in student achievement patterns associated with the BASRC focal strategy might not be expected. On the other hand, the investments in district capacity described in this chapter could have unanticipated or unobserved connections to improvements in teaching and learning. In order to further discussion of this possibility, Chapter 4 examines the relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and districtwide changes in student achievement.

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<sup>19</sup>Marsh et al. (2005).

<sup>20</sup>Kronley and Handley (2003).

<sup>21</sup>For example, Marsh et al. (2005) found that IFL affected “organizational culture, norms, and beliefs about instruction” as well as the “knowledge and skills of central office and school administrators.”



## Chapter 4

# The Relationship Between Participation in the BASRC Focal Strategy and Trends in Student Achievement

The ultimate aim of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) focal strategy is to raise achievement among all students and accelerate achievement gains among the lowest-performing students. As described in the previous chapter, however, the focal strategy did not lead to district-level reforms focused on teaching and learning, and schools did not change their levels of key BASRC-related practices — coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration — during the years of the focal strategy. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the focal strategy is not associated with improvements in student achievement. This chapter assesses whether this is the case. The chapter analyzes the degree of academic progress in the BASRC focal districts, examining whether or not it outpaces progress in similar districts that did not participate in the BASRC focal strategy. In particular, the chapter answers the following questions:

- How does student performance in the five BASRC focal districts compare with student performance in those districts prior to the implementation of the focal strategy?
- How do changes in student performance in the BASRC focal districts compare with the changes in student performance in similar districts in the San Francisco Bay Area?

MDRC's first report on the BASRC focal strategy, released in February 2006, offered analyses of reading achievement in both third- and fifth-graders. This report provides an additional year of follow-up data but focuses solely on fifth-grade students, for two reasons. First, looking at fifth-graders allows for an analysis of a group of students who have been in school longer than younger students and are learning more advanced reading skills, and who reflect a cumulative effect of the quality of education across the elementary grades. Second, achievement gaps tend to be wider in later grades, so the fifth grade provides a good opportunity to see if efforts to support lower achievers narrow the performance gap.<sup>1</sup>

Below is a brief overview of the findings, discussed in detail later in the chapter.

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<sup>1</sup>Appendix C presents an updated version of the analyses of third-graders offered in MDRC's first BASRC report, with an additional year of follow-up data.

- Fifth-grade students' achievement in reading, both in terms of the percentage of students scoring proficient or above, and in terms of the percentage of students scoring below the basic level, improved over time. There were similar improvements in the comparison districts.
- Among blacks and Hispanics, English Language Learners (ELL), and economically disadvantaged fifth-grade students, the improvements in reading achievement in the BASRC focal districts outpaced the improvements in the comparison districts later in the follow-up. However, the differences between improvements in the focal districts and improvements in the comparison districts were small and generally not statistically significant.

The section below provides a description of MDRC's analytic approach, followed by an explanation of the baseline characteristics and performance levels in the BASRC focal districts and their comparison counterparts. Finally, the findings are discussed in detail, presenting preliminary results for the three years of implementation of the BASRC focal strategy.

## The Analytic Approach

To evaluate the relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and trends in student achievement, MDRC used what is referred to as an “interrupted time series” (ITS) approach with comparison groups. The ITS approach posits that, absent any change in student population, the best predictor of future educational outcomes in a given district or school is past educational outcomes for the same entity.<sup>2</sup> However, a simple comparison over time does not account for the possibility that local events (for example, changes in state policy) not related to the implementation of the reforms in question are driving any observed progress. In order to account for this “local history” as much as possible, MDRC compared changes over time in the set of BASRC focal district with changes over time in a set of similar districts from the same local context. This analysis relies on three basic comparisons:

- The difference between the preimplementation (baseline) average of student outcomes in BASRC focal districts and actual student outcomes in the years after implementation of the BASRC focal reform strategy (that is, the deviation from baseline).

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<sup>2</sup>In other studies, this logic has been applied to schools. Examples of those studies include Bloom (1999 and 2003), Bloom, Ham, Melton, and O'Brien (2001), Snipes (2003), and Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith (2005). In the case of BASRC, similar logic is applied to districts.



- The difference between average baseline achievement and actual student achievement over the same period of time in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts.
- The difference between changes over time in achievement at the BASRC focal districts and changes over the same period of time in their comparison counterparts (that is, the difference in the deviation from baseline).

If appropriate comparisons are available and a clear baseline pattern can be established, applying the comparative ITS approach can provide a reliable estimate of the net effect of a reform. In previous evaluations, MDRC has used comparative ITS methods to distinguish the effects of particular programs by estimating the progress that would have been observed without the reforms in question.<sup>3</sup> The evaluation of BASRC differs from these other studies in that, due to the nature of the BASRC focal strategy and the manner in which it evolved, it is difficult to develop a reliable estimate of the outcomes that would have been observed in the absence of the strategy. Therefore, in this particular case, while the results of the analysis can indicate whether there is an association or correlation between the BASRC focal strategy and changes in student achievement, they do not provide a sufficient basis for ascertaining whether there is, in fact, a causal relationship between the two.

In particular, BASRC staff tried to select “reform-minded” districts for participation in the focal strategy. These districts may differ from the comparison districts in ways that are neither quantifiable nor observable. It is therefore possible that — even in the absence of the BASRC focal reforms — these districts were more likely than districts with similar student populations and achievement track records to implement reforms and improve student performance. This possible predisposition is exacerbated by the presence of earlier phases of BASRC reforms not only in the BASRC focal reform districts, but also in some of the comparison districts.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the contrast between the focal reform and comparison districts is more difficult to interpret than in other evaluations. Finally, the fact that the focal strategy (and therefore the analysis) is implemented at the district level as opposed to the school level limits the sample size and reduces the power of any statistical inferences.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith (2005); Snipes (2003); and Bloom (1999, 2003); Quint et al. (2005); Snipes, Holton, and Doolittle (2006).

<sup>4</sup>Unfortunately, it is not possible to relate BASRC’s focal strategy to student achievement by comparing it to typical non-BASRC district reform activities because BASRC reforms occurred during the baseline period in both the focal and comparison districts.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that the district-level analysis might limit statistical power in two ways. First, focusing on districts limits the number of observations that can be included in the study. Second, most variation in

(continued)

It is important to note that MDRC's evaluation assesses the relationship between the focal strategy and student achievement above and beyond the two earlier phases of BASRC reform efforts (Phase I and Phase II). In other words, the analyses compare achievement outcomes during the focal strategy to achievement outcomes during Phase I and Phase II efforts, because these phases were being implemented in many of the schools in the focal districts and comparison districts during the baseline period. Essentially, MDRC's study does not provide evidence about the effectiveness of BASRC core components that are part of the focal strategy and of earlier reform phases. Rather, it examines whether intensifying core BASRC reforms by providing more support in the form of coaching and meetings with BASRC staff is associated with greater improvements in student achievement outcomes.

## **Comparison Districts for the BASRC Focal Districts**

As discussed above, including comparison districts in the analysis helps provide an estimate of the progress that would have occurred in the BASRC focal districts in the absence of the BASRC focal reforms. The approach helps account for local or regional factors above the district level that may influence student performance, such as a change in state policy or state tests. To execute this strategy, each BASRC focal district was matched with a set of similar non-focal Bay Area districts.<sup>6</sup>

Logic suggests that the most accurate predictor of future performance on a particular outcome is past performance on that same outcome. Since the focus of this analysis is BASRC's relationship to elementary-student achievement, prior academic achievement among elementary students in these districts was the primary criterion upon which comparison districts were selected. Given BASRC's focus on literacy, MDRC considered student performance on reading or language arts assessments. It is possible that, even among districts with similar prior achievement, districts that serve different student populations might be expected to evolve differently over time. Therefore, MDRC also matched districts in terms of racial/ethnic composition. Finally, districts were also matched according to their size.<sup>7</sup> Again, in order to capture schools' and districts' influence on students by the end of elementary school, the analysis in this report focuses on fifth-grade achievement outcomes. As such, all matching was done based on average achievement at the fifth-grade level; however, MDRC also examined similarities at the third-grade level.

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achievement occurs within rather than across districts, which drives up the standard errors and reduces the precision of the estimates.

<sup>6</sup>The San Francisco Bay Area was defined to include six counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara.

<sup>7</sup>Size-matching was achieved based on the number of fifth-grade students in each district.

The BASRC focal strategy was implemented in the five focal districts in this study during the 2002-2003 school year. Therefore, the baseline period for this analysis is the three years immediately preceding this point, the 1999-2000 through 2001-2002 school years. Comparison districts were chosen on the basis of their similarities throughout this baseline period.<sup>8</sup>

The matching process resulted in a set of comparison districts with similar baseline achievement patterns and student populations. The five focal districts were matched with a total of 15 non-focal districts, with some comparison districts matching with more than one focal district. Of the 15 matched districts, 7 had schools that participated in either Phase I or Phase II of BASRC.<sup>9</sup> Overall, as shown in Table 4.1, the two sets of districts look very similar, particularly in terms of the characteristics used for matching. For example, across all baseline years, the focal and comparison districts matched within 2 percentage points on proficiency rates for the California Standards Tests (CST). The focal districts and the comparison districts also look similar in terms of students' race/ethnicity. For example, in the focal districts, 26 percent of fifth-grade students were Hispanic, compared with 27 percent in the comparison districts; 22 percent of the students in the focal districts were Asian, compared with 17 percent in the comparisons; and 6 percent of the students in the focal districts were black, compared with approximately 5 percent in the comparisons.

The two sets of districts are also comparable in characteristics that were not the basis for matching. Table 4.1 also shows that the comparison districts are within 5 percentage points of the focal districts in the percentage of English Language Learners (approximately 16 percent versus 14 percent) and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (30 percent versus approximately 25 percent), and on performance levels on the math portions of the CST and Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9) for fifth-grade students.

The most apparent difference between the focal districts and comparison districts is in the average number of fifth-grade students enrolled in each district. The comparison districts are

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<sup>8</sup>The preimplementation, or baseline, period from which MDRC determines the historical patterns varies for different outcomes due to data availability. When assessing baseline patterns on the nationally norm-referenced test, the SAT-9, this study relies on three years of baseline data: 1999-2000 through 2001-2002. When assessing baseline patterns on the newer test in California, the California Standards Tests (CST), the study relies on just two years of baseline data to project future trends: 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Appendix D contains a more detailed description of the comparison-district selection process.

<sup>9</sup>As noted earlier, MDRC's evaluation assesses the relationship between the focal strategy and achievement *above and beyond* earlier phases of BASRC reform efforts (Phase I and Phase II). The analyses compare achievement outcomes during the focal strategy to achievement outcomes during Phase I and Phase II efforts, because these phases were being implemented in many of the schools in the focal districts and comparison districts during the baseline period. Therefore, having districts with earlier exposure to BASRC in both the focal group and the comparison group provides an appropriate comparison for MDRC's research question.

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Table 4.1**

**Characteristics of BASRC Focal and Comparison Districts, Fifth-Grade  
Averages for School Years 1999-2000 Through 2001-2002**

Characteristic	BASRC Focal Districts	Comparison Districts
<b><u>Demographic characteristics</u></b>		
Average number of fifth-grade students	499	599
Average number of elementary schools <sup>a</sup>	8	6
Race/Ethnicity (%)		
White	43.1	49.2
Hispanic	26.2	26.8
Asian	21.9	17.4
Black	6.2	5.3
Other	2.5	1.3
English language learners (%)	15.5	14.0
Eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch <sup>b</sup> (%)	29.8	24.7
<b><u>Achievement levels</u></b>		
California Standards Tests (CST)		
Language arts <sup>c</sup>		
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.8	38.6
Basic (%)	39.8	41.1
Below or far below basic (%)	22.6	20.3
Mean scale score	338.4	341.1
Math <sup>d</sup>		
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.2	36.9
Basic (%)	32.6	33.5
Below or far below basic (%)	30.4	29.6
Mean scale score	335.6	335.7
Stanford-9 tests		
Reading		
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	56.0	57.9
25th National Percentile Rank (%)	23.4	23.1
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	20.6	19.0
Mean scale score	659.1	659.7
Math		
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	63.5	63.5
25th National Percentile Rank (%)	17.7	17.9
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.7	18.6
Mean scale score	659.6	659.4
<b>Total number of districts</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>

(continued)

### Table 4.1 (continued)

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

NOTES: Comparison district columns represent the average of the average across each comparison district cluster. Note that some comparison districts match with more than one focal district. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of district size.

<sup>a</sup>Elementary schools include any school with a fifth-grade class, given that comparison districts were selected from fifth-grade outcomes.

<sup>b</sup>Averages for free or reduced-price lunch are presented at the school level only.

<sup>c</sup>Due to availability of test scores, California Standards Tests averages in language arts are based on just two baseline years, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, except for the "Below or far below basic" average, which is based on one baseline year, 2001-2002.

<sup>d</sup>Due to availability of test scores, California Standards Tests averages in math are based on just one baseline year, 2001-2002.

on average larger than the focal districts (599 fifth-grade students in the comparison districts compared with 499 in the focal districts), but had fewer schools (six elementary schools per district compared with eight in the focal districts). Together, these two indicators suggest that the comparison districts had more classes per school (or more students per class). That is, they likely had larger schools than the focal districts.

## Findings

This section presents findings regarding the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and changes in fifth-grade student achievement during the three years of the strategy (2002-2003 through 2004-2005). These findings are presented along with figures that compare the average achievement levels of the five BASRC focal districts with those of the non-focal comparison districts. For each group, averages are presented for fifth-grade students during the two or three years before the introduction of the BASRC focal strategy (the baseline period), and for each of the three years after the focal strategy was adopted (the follow-up years).

Presented first are findings for all fifth-grade students and then the trends of key sub-groups, including minority students, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students. Also examined is the trend in the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students. The analyses focus on performance on the language arts portion of

the CST. (The CST is a high-stakes test in California, as state accountability requirements and sanctions hinge on schools' CST results.<sup>10</sup>)

### Findings for All Students

Figure 4.1 presents CST outcomes for cohorts of fifth-grade students. The figure suggests improvements in language arts achievement in the focal districts at both points in the achievement scale. The proficiency rates — that is, the average percentage of focal district students scoring at or above proficient — increased from 38 to 54 percent by the end of follow-up Year 3. A similar change, from 39 to 52 percent, occurred at the comparison districts. These patterns are in line with upward trends across the Bay Area and across the state as well (see Appendix F). Figure 4.1 also suggests that the BASRC focal districts reduced the number of students performing below basic, and that, in Years 2 and 3, these changes may have outpaced those that occurred in the comparison districts. For example, the percentage of students scoring below basic dropped by about five percentage points in the focal districts compared to a drop of about two percentage points in the comparison districts, suggesting a net difference of 3.2 percentage points.

Together, the two panels in Figure 4.1 suggest the possibility of a *small* positive association between the BASRC focal strategy and language arts achievement among fifth-graders, particularly among lower-performing students. However, the differences between progress at the focal districts and progress at the comparison districts are relatively small and not statistically significant. As such, MDRC cannot rule out the possibility that they are simply the result of chance. In short, it is not possible to state that there is actually a systematic association between implementation of the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement on California's state standards. Moreover, any association that does exist appears to be modest in size.

An analysis of fifth-grade performance on the nationally norm-referenced tests given in California, which is presented in Appendix E, suggests that scores at BASRC focal schools, as well as in the Bay Area in general, fell when the state changed assessments in the first year of the focal reforms (2002-2003).<sup>11</sup> This decline seemed somewhat smaller in the BASRC focal districts than in comparison districts from the same area. However, as is the case with the CST findings, the differences are not statistically significant.

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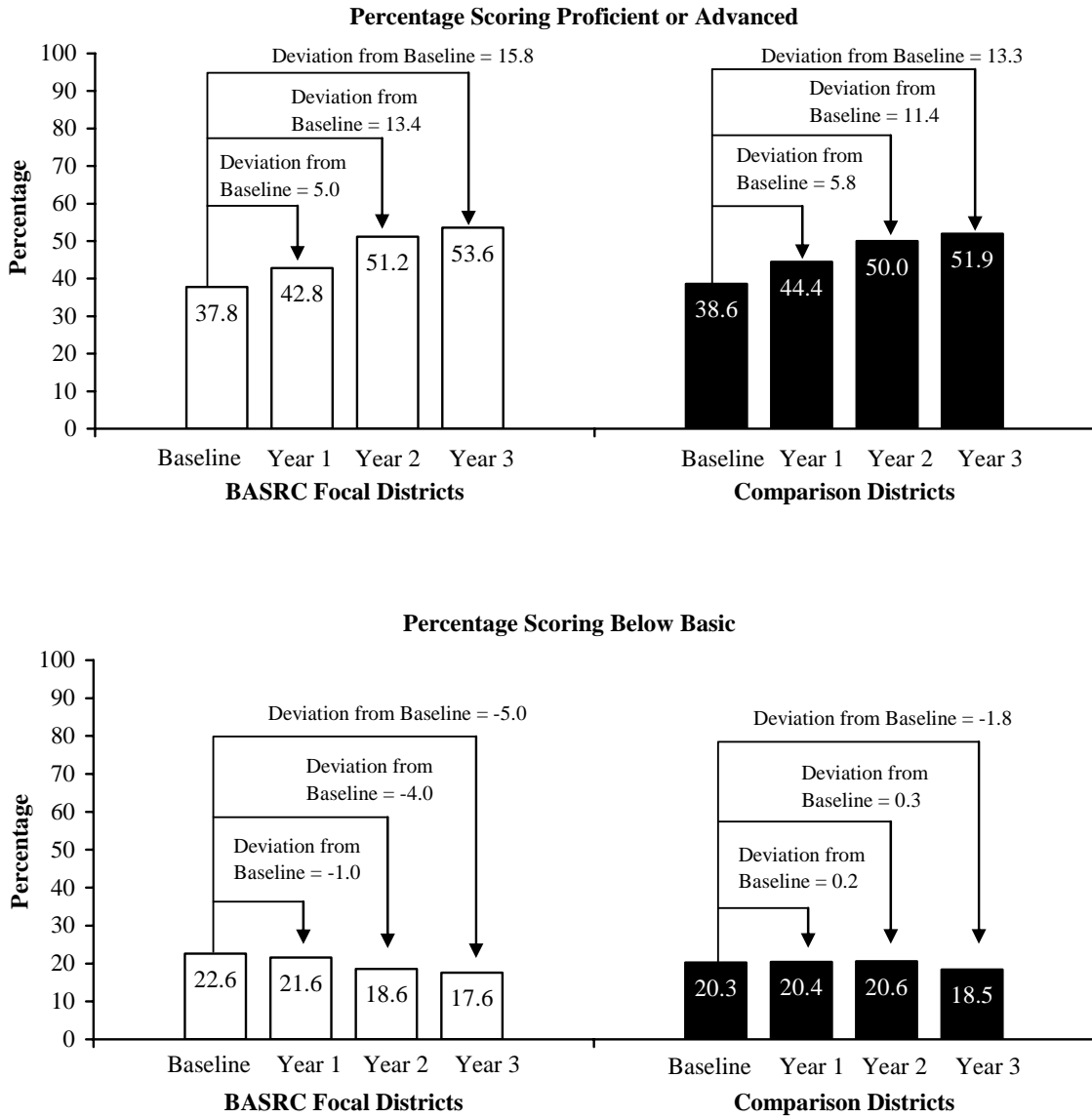
<sup>10</sup>Findings regarding students' performance relative to national norms on the state's nationally norm-referenced achievement tests can be found in Appendix E.

<sup>11</sup>In particular, the state administered the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) during the years immediately preceding implementation of the BASRC focal strategy and the California Achievement Tests (CAT-6) in the years following implementation. Though the test changed, several measures that remain constant over time are still available. These include the percentage of students who performed at or above the 50th percentile and the percentage of students who fell short of the 25th percentile.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.1

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



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

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

## Findings for Key Student Subgroups

A key part of BASRC's mission is "to raise student achievement and narrow the gap in performance between children of color, poor children, English Language Learners, and their higher-achieving peers; and to create a more equitable system of schools."<sup>12</sup> This section explores whether the focal strategy is associated with changes in student achievement for students for which BASRC aims to accelerate achievement. The key findings of this section are summarized in the bullets below.

- Among economically disadvantaged fifth-graders in the focal districts, the percentage achieving "proficient or advanced" scores increased substantially, and the percentage performing at a "below basic" level fell throughout the three-year follow-up period. While positive trends were also observed in the comparison districts, the improvements in the BASRC focal districts outpaced the improvements in the comparison districts. The difference in the improvements at the proficient or advanced level in the third year is statistically significant but small. The difference at the below basic level is not statistically significant, and it is also small.
- Improvements among black and Hispanic fifth-graders in both proficiency rates and the percentage of students falling below basic were slightly larger at the focal districts than at the comparison districts in Years 2 and 3 of the focal strategy. These differences are not statistically significant. At the same time, the achievement gap between black and Hispanic students and white students did not improve during the years of the focal strategy.
- Among English Language Learners in the fifth grade, student performance appeared to increase and outpace that of English Language Learners in the fifth grade in the comparison districts in all follow-up years at the lower end of the achievement spectrum. The differences in increases between the two groups of districts are not statistically significant.

## Economically Disadvantaged Students

Approximately 30 percent of students in the elementary schools in the BASRC focal districts receive a free or reduced-price lunch, a common proxy for economic disadvantage. This proportion is constant through all years in MDRC's analysis, including both the baseline and follow-up periods. On average, economically disadvantaged students scored much lower than aver-

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<sup>12</sup>BASRC Web site (2003).



age on state reading assessments. For example, during the baseline period, 38 percent of all fifth-graders in the focal districts scored proficient or above on the language arts section of the CST, but the same could be said of only 20 percent of economically disadvantaged fifth-graders.

Figure 4.2 shows the percentage of economically disadvantaged fifth-grade students who scored proficient or above on the language arts portion of the CST and the percentage of economically disadvantaged fifth-graders who scored below or far below basic. As the figure illustrates, test scores among these students improved during all three years of the focal reforms. Interestingly, in Years 1 and 2, the improvements in proficiency rates at the focal and comparison districts were quite similar. However, by the spring of Year 3, proficiency rates improved from 20 to 39 percent in the BASRC focal districts, a difference of 19 percentage points. At the comparison districts, proficiency rates improved from 19 to 31 percent, a difference of 12 percentage points. The difference of 7 percentage points in Year 3 is statistically significant. At the same time, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students scoring below basic fell from approximately 36 to 26 percent by Year 3 at the BASRC focal districts and from 36 to 32 percent by Year 3 at the comparison districts. The improvements among lower performing fifth-grade students were larger at the focal districts than at the comparison districts in both Years 2 and 3, but these differences are not statistically significant.

### **Black and Hispanic Students**

This section focuses on trends among black and Hispanic students, two groups for which there are often achievement gaps.<sup>13</sup> During the baseline period, more than 32 percent of students in the elementary schools in the BASRC focal districts were black or Hispanic. In general, these students performed slightly lower than average.

As shown in the upper portion of Figure 4.3, 20 percent of black and Hispanic students scored proficient or advanced during the baseline period. By the second year of implementation, proficiency rates among black and Hispanic fifth-graders had improved by 10 percentage points, and by the third year, they improved by another 6 percentage points, to 36 percent proficiency. Proficiency rates among fifth-graders in the comparison districts followed a nearly identical trend, growing from 21 percent in the baseline period to 34 percent in Year 3 of the reforms. As shown on the lower portion of the figure, 36 percent of black and Hispanic fifth-graders scored below basic during the baseline period. By the third year of follow-up, these rates fell to 26 percent in the focal districts and 28 percent in the Bay Area comparison districts. In short, the changes in achievement levels among black and Hispanic students in the focal and comparison districts were similar.

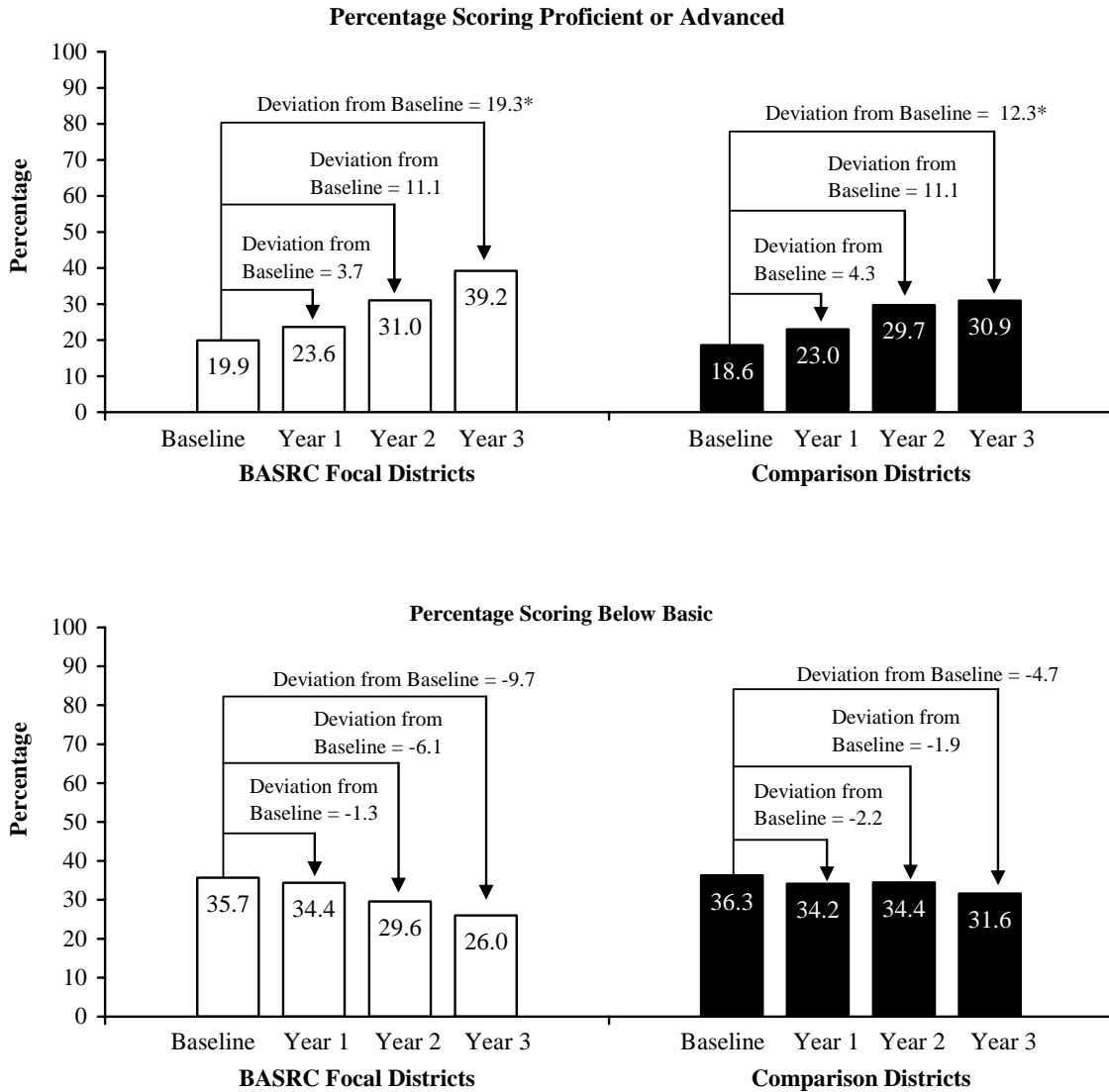
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<sup>13</sup>See Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998).

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.2

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
Economically Disadvantaged Students**



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

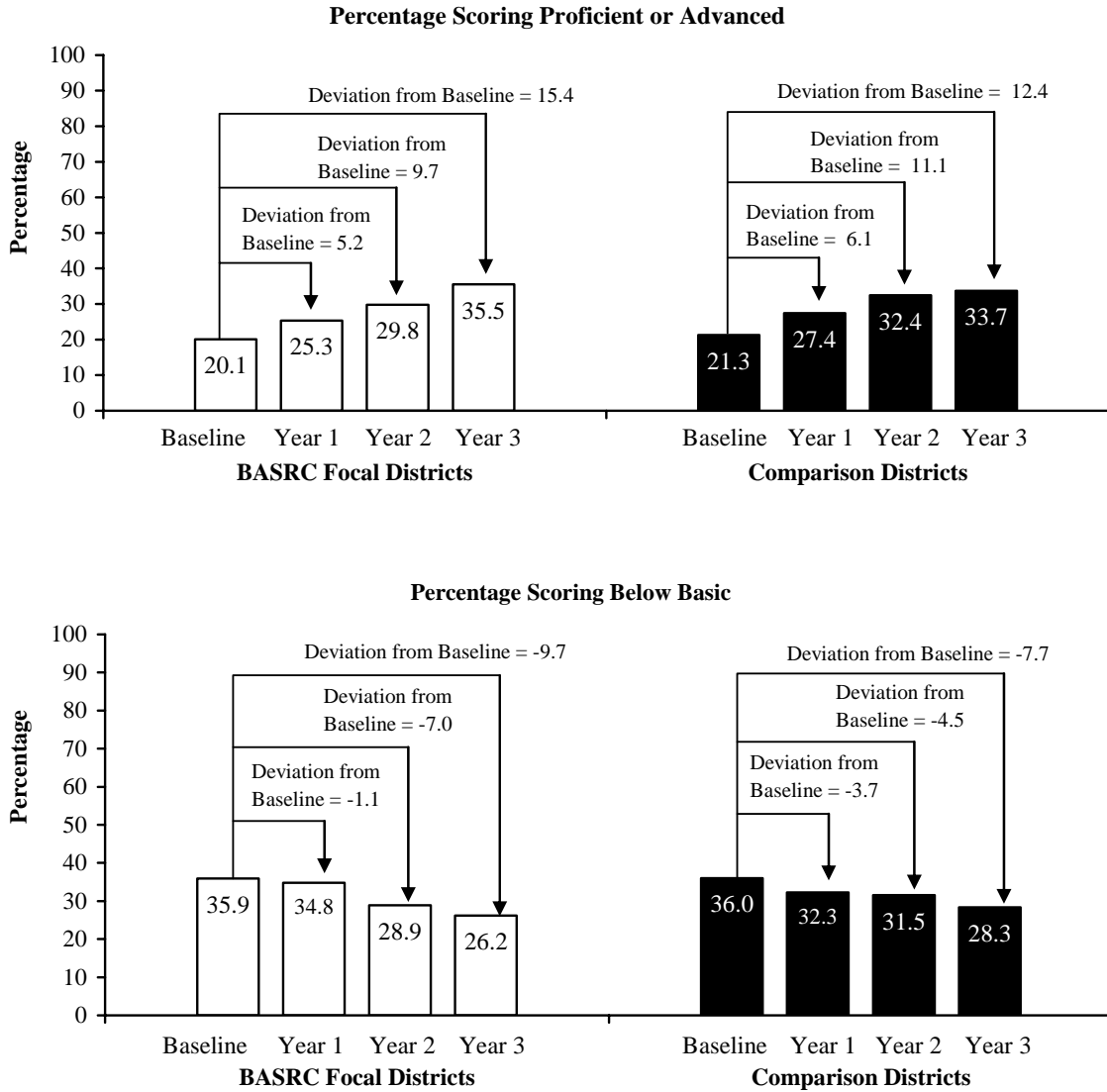
NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.3

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
Black and Hispanic Students**



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

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

BASRC reforms aim not only to raise the achievement of all groups of students but also to *accelerate* the improvements among lower-performing subgroups in order to narrow achievement gaps. Therefore, when looking at outcomes for black and Hispanic students, MDRC also analyzed trends in achievement gaps between black and Hispanic fifth-graders and white fifth-graders, as presented in Figure 4.4. The top portion of the figure focuses on the average districtwide gap in the percentage of students scoring proficient in language arts on the CST. During the baseline period in the focal districts, the difference between the percentage of white students who scored proficient (51 percent; not shown in figure) and the percentage of black and Hispanic students who scored proficient (20 percent) was 31 percentage points; in the comparison districts, the difference was somewhat smaller, at 27 percentage points. The figure also shows that, even though proficiency rates increased among black and Hispanic students in the BASRC focal districts, the achievement gap widened slightly during the focal strategy in Year 2. The percentage point difference between the proficiency rate among black and Hispanic students and white students in Year 2 was 7.8 percentage points greater compared with the baseline. In Year 3, it returned to a level similar to the baseline, just 0.9 percentage points greater. In short, the figure shows that the focal strategy was not associated with a narrowing of the achievement gap in the percent of students scoring at the proficient level.

The lower portion of Figure 4.4 focuses on lower-performing students. It shows that, during the baseline period, more black and Hispanic students performed at below basic than white students, and the difference was 21 percentage points in the focal districts. The size of the achievement gap remained relatively constant in the first two years of the follow-up period but narrowed in Year 3 by 6 percentage points relative to the baseline period. In the comparison districts, the gap also narrowed, beginning earlier. By Year 3, however, the difference in the narrowing of the gap in the focal districts and the narrowing of the gap in the comparison districts was less than 1 percentage point. The difference is very small and not statistically significant.

### **English Language Learners**

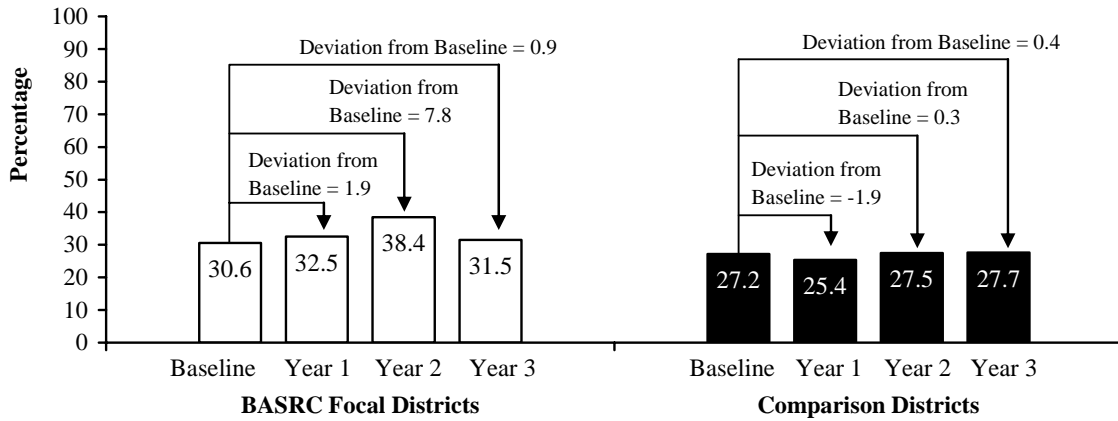
The final subgroup analysis looks at students classified as English Language Learners (ELL). In the BASRC focal districts, 16 percent of fifth-grade students are classified as English Language Learners. In the fifth grade (Figure 4.5), there are substantial changes in the percentage of ELL students performing at proficient levels and at below basic levels of achievement. During the baseline period, 11 percent of English Language Learners in the BASRC focal districts scored proficient on the language arts CST. By the third year of follow-up, 18 percent of English Language Learners in the BASRC focal districts scored proficient. At the comparison districts, proficiency rates increased from 7 to 17 percent, a difference of 10 percentage points. While this difference in progress is not statistically significant, it favors the comparison districts.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

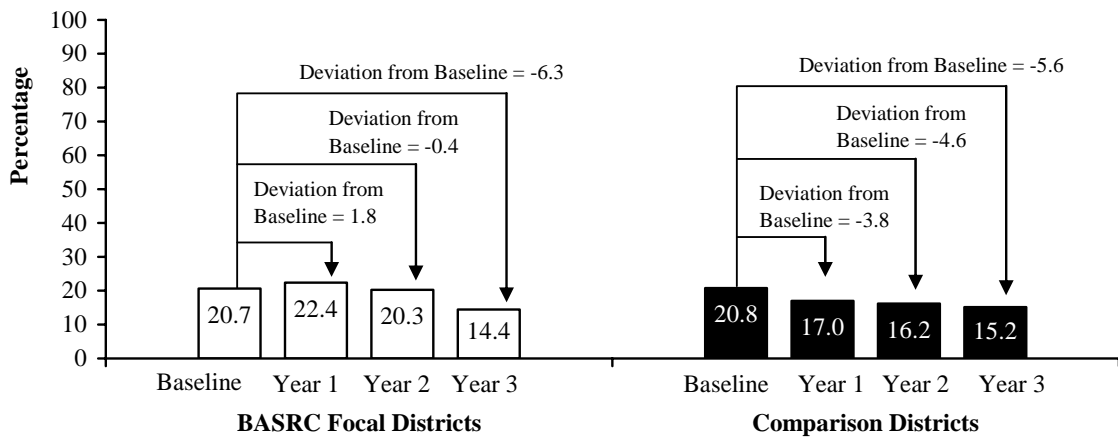
Figure 4.4

**Fifth-Grade Achievement Gaps Between Black and Hispanic Students and White Students on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts**

**The Difference Between the Percentage of White Students and the Percentage of Black and Hispanic Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced**



**The Difference Between the Percentage of Black and Hispanic Students and the Percentage of White Students Scoring Below Basic**



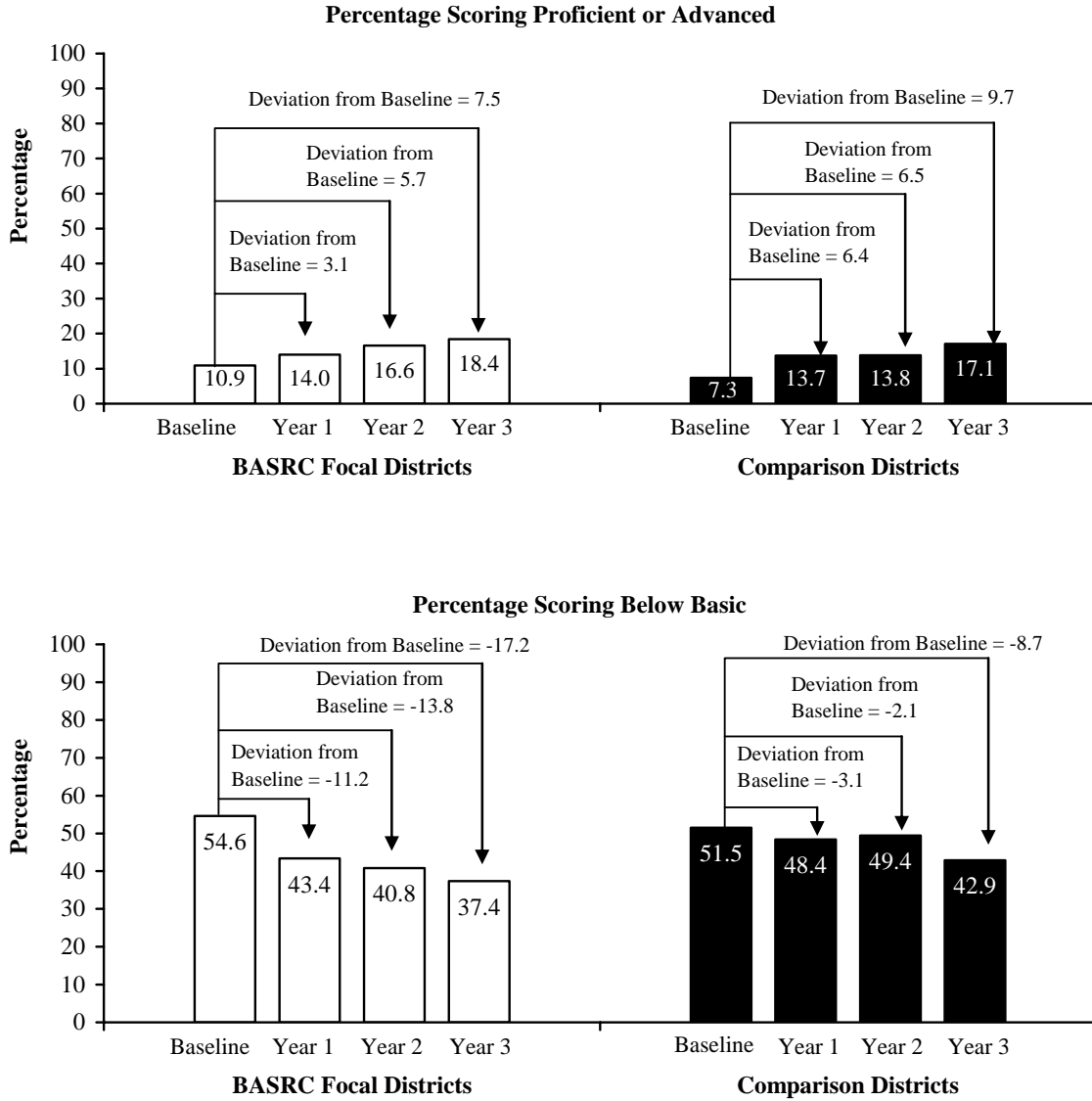
SOURCE: MDRC calculations are based on district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.5

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
English Language Learners



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

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Focusing on lower-achieving students, Figure 4.5 shows that during the baseline period, 55 percent of ELL fifth-graders in the focal districts scored below basic on the CST. By the third year of follow-up, only 37 percent of ELL fifth-graders in these districts scored below basic, a reduction of 17 percentage points. In the comparison districts, the percentage of students performing below basic fell from 52 to 43 percent, a reduction of 9 percentage points. This 8 percentage point differences suggests a possible positive association between participation in the BASRC focal reforms and improvements among ELL fifth-graders, but it is not statistically significant.

## Summary

The analysis of fifth-grade achievement results shows that average CST scores among fifth-graders in the focal districts improved over time, both in terms of an increase in the proportion of students scoring proficient or advanced and in terms of a decline in the proportion scoring below basic. Improvements among fifth-graders in the comparison counterparts were similar.

When focusing on fifth-grade achievement among economically disadvantaged students, black and Hispanic students, and English Language Learners, it appears that improvements in the focal districts surpassed improvements in the comparison districts in the second and third years of follow-up. The differences MDRC observed could suggest a positive association between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in reading scores on the CST among disadvantaged subgroups of students. However, the size of the differences is small, and the differences are generally not statistically significant.

These findings are not surprising given that implementation of the strategy did not translate into instructional reforms or into increased use of BASRC-related practices in the schools. Moreover, even if the small difference between the focal and non-focal districts points to an association, MDRC cannot make causal inferences. The selection of “reform-minded” districts as participants in the focal strategy could mean that the BASRC focal districts were more likely to implement reforms and improve student performance than districts with similar student populations and achievement track records.

In sum, MDRC finds that the focal strategy, above and beyond earlier BASRC reform efforts, is not associated with improved reading achievement at the elementary school level. MDRC’s evaluation therefore concludes that *intensifying* core BASRC reforms by providing more support in the form of coaching of district administrators and meetings with BASRC staff was not associated with greater improvements in student achievement outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Unfortunately, it is not possible to relate BASRC’s focal strategy to student achievement by comparing it to typical non-BASRC district reform activities, because BASRC reforms occurred during the baseline period in both the focal and comparison districts. However, the authors attempted to obtain a greater contrast between BASRC focal districts and comparison districts by eliminating from the comparison group any districts in which schools participated in earlier Phases of BASRC reforms. (This reduces the number of comparison districts to just seven districts.) This adjustment to the analyses, however, produces nearly identical results, as shown in Appendix G. The focal districts did not outpace comparison districts that had no exposure to BASRC reforms any more than they outpaced comparison districts that did have some exposure to BASRC reforms.





## Chapter 5

# Conclusions and Implications

The BASRC “theory of action” specifies a set of reforms built around coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networking and collaboration in order to improve student achievement and reduce achievement gaps among different racial/ethnic groups and students with different socioeconomic backgrounds. The BASRC focal reform strategy intensifies efforts along these dimensions, adding more coaching at both the district and the school levels. What the BASRC focal strategy does *not* do is prescribe the specific instructional changes, or even specific instructional supports (for example, professional development focused on adopted curricula or coaching focused on particular instructional improvements), that should be put in place in schools or classrooms to bring about the desired improvements.

Even in theory, the model’s potential to affect what it intends to change — teaching and learning in the classroom — is limited. Other reforms, particularly school-based efforts such as Success for All, recommend a specific instructional strategy and a set of supports and training designed to supplement and reinforce the implementation of that strategy. Moreover, some districts’ reform agendas are focused — at least in part — on the adoption and implementation of, as well as professional development for, particular reading and math curricula.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the BASRC focal reform strategy does not focus on implementing particular classroom instructional strategies. Rather, the BASRC theory of action and the focal reform strategy emphasize a process through which schools and teachers can come to learn how they can best support improved teaching and learning for the students that they serve.

The implementation data gathered by MDRC underscore this dynamic. The data suggest that the BASRC focal strategy primarily targeted district leadership and that the intensity of the reforms tended to wane with their proximity to the classroom. While district-level coaching continued throughout the implementation of the BASRC focal strategy, *school-level* coaching by BASRC staff was, in most districts, among the first components of the strategy to fall by the wayside. Moreover, though a goal of the BASRC focal strategy was to intensify the core BASRC reforms, it was unclear whether the BASRC-related practices at the school level resulted from the focal strategy. It is possible that the schools would have adopted many of these practices even in the absence of the focal strategy (either as part of earlier phases of BASRC, or as a function of other school improvement efforts already under way). The implementation data indicate that many of the BASRC reform strategies were, in fact, implemented prior to the focal strategy at

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<sup>1</sup>Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002).

many of the schools in the BASRC focal districts. In addition, the teacher survey data indicate little change in BASRC-related practices during the years of the focal strategy.

Given the nature of the reforms and the implementation patterns, perhaps it is not surprising that no strong and pervasive association is found between districts' participation in the BASRC focal reform strategy and changes in average student proficiency rates on state-mandated literacy tests. Overall, the evidence in this report suggests two possible reasons why improvements in achievement in the BASRC focal districts were not larger and more pervasive:

- The BASRC focal reforms were not intense enough to affect students' academic performance.

MDRC's research suggests that implementation of the focal reform strategy simply may not have been intense enough to produce changes in teaching and learning. While the BASRC theory of action suggests that reforms should take place at every level of the system, the primary supports for the *focal* reform strategy were at the district level. MDRC's implementation research suggests that the district-level reforms were not sufficiently focused on the core reforms or were not sufficiently concentrated or consistent enough to lead to systematic changes throughout the district. As such, rather than generating reforms aimed at teaching and learning, the BASRC focal strategy provided general support at the district level. This suggests that, for the BASRC focal strategy to have had an impact, it required more intense district reform efforts, a consistent focus for district reforms, and perhaps additional reinforcement for the reforms at the school level.

- The BASRC focal reform components are not effective levers for improving student achievement.

Even if the focal reforms were sufficiently intense and consistent, it is possible they would not lead to improved student achievement. The BASRC focal strategy did not make specific changes in teaching and learning the direct target of its intervention. Instead, it focused on a set of processes — coaching, evidence-based-decision-making, and networks and collaboration — that were thought to lead to changes in teaching and learning. Because the focal strategy did not lead to substantial changes in the adoption of these practices at schools in the focal districts, it did not provide a good opportunity to assess the value of increasing these practices. However, MDRC did attempt to at least investigate whether the levels of BASRC-related related practices were correlated with higher levels of reading proficiency, relying on the survey measures developed from the annual teacher questionnaire described in Chapter 3.<sup>2</sup> The authors

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<sup>2</sup>Analyses of the change in these practices by schools in BASRC focal districts suggest little variation across schools over time, which, in turn, suggests the possibility that the observed year-to-year changes in survey responses might be driven by minor changes in answers to survey questions rather than by systematic

(continued)

conducted an analysis that asked whether schools with higher levels of BASRC-related practices have higher achievement levels.

Regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between schools' average survey measures during Years 1, 2, and 3 of the focal strategy and proficiency levels in reading in Year 3, controlling for differences in the demographic characteristics of the students the schools served and for achievement levels prior to the start of the focal strategy.<sup>3</sup> This analysis, presented in Appendix H, did not reveal relationships between the BASRC-related practices measured on the survey and fifth-grade reading achievement. None of the seven survey measures of BASRC reform practices were correlated with an increased percentage of students scoring at the proficient level. And just one of the seven survey measures, involvement in coaching by a Local Collaborative coach, was correlated with a decrease in the percentage of students scoring below the basic level. In this case, the association was statistically significant but small.<sup>4</sup> Also, schools that had a high number of teachers participating in Local Collaborative coaching may have also been more likely to have adopted other reform practices aimed at improving the teaching and learning of lower-performing students.

The absence of relationships between the survey measures of BASRC-related practices and student achievement levels may have several explanations. First, the measures may not have sufficiently captured enough variation across schools. For example, all schools had high average ratings for their culture of examining achievement data, which may or may not be because they were all BASRC grantees. Therefore, the analysis only assesses whether improving from a *high level to a higher level* of examining achievement data is related to better achievement outcomes; it does not assess whether improving from a *low level to a high level* of examining achievement data is related to better achievement. The lack of a relationship could also reflect limitations of the survey measures to sufficiently capture teachers' practices. However, it could also indicate that the BASRC-related practices are not associated with improved proficiency in reading.

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changes in BASRC-related fluctuations in the survey measures. As a result, an analysis focusing on changes over time might be driven by "noise" rather than by genuine differences in the manner in which schools' reform practices are evolving.

<sup>3</sup>The sample for this analysis consists of 30 elementary schools. This includes the 19 BASRC schools in the four focal districts that participated in the survey during all three years (2002-2003 through 2004-2005). Also, to increase the sample size, MDRC added 13 BASRC schools from one other district for which teacher survey data from the years of the focal strategy exists.

<sup>4</sup>For example, the association is equivalent to a decrease of four percentage points in the proportion of students scoring below basic when comparing schools with coaching levels at the 75th percentile to schools with coaching levels at the 25th percentile.

Systematic reforms such as BASRC can take a long time to take root. If they do, and if they are translated into effective instructional improvements, the changes in teaching and learning could be substantial and more sustainable than those evoked by other reforms. This evaluation suggests that external support organizations, like BASRC, might be more successful in helping districts achieve successful systemic reforms if they can support both district offices and schools, if they can move beyond building capacity, and if they can help district offices and schools identify and implement effective instructional changes.

**Appendix A**

**Information about the California Standards Tests,  
Stanford Achievement Test, and California  
Achievement Tests**

## **The California Standards Tests (CST)<sup>1</sup>**

The California Standards Tests (CSTs) are a series of tests administered to California public school students in grades 2 through 11. While most questions are multiple-choice, students in the fourth and seventh grades also complete a composition or writing section. CSTs include approximately 65-75 English-language arts (ELA) questions and approximately 65 mathematics questions. Sections for the ELA questions include: word analysis, reading comprehension, literary response and analysis, writing strategies, written conventions. In addition, students in the eighth, tenth, and eleventh grades answer 60 to 80 history/social science questions and those in the fifth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades answer approximately 60 science questions. Tests are typically administered over the course of one to three days.

CSTs are standards-based or criterion-referenced tests. In other words, the tests attempt to measure whether students are meeting the content standards adopted by the California Department of Education. Results are reported according to a five-point proficiency scale as advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic (with the exception of the year 2000, in which CST scores were reported by the average number correct and total number possible).

## **Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) and California Achievement Tests (CAT-6)**

Both the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9), administered from 1998 to 2002 in California public schools, and the California Achievement Tests, Sixth Edition (CAT-6), administered from 2003 to the present, are nationally norm-referenced tests. In other words, results for the SAT-9 and CAT-6 report how students compare with a nationwide sample of students. Scores are reported in terms of a raw score that is converted into a scaled score based on test difficulty and a national percentile rank.

The SAT-9 and CAT-6 are in many ways similar in terms of content and format. Both tests consist entirely of multiple choice questions that are unchanged from year to year, with tests for grades 2 through 11 including reading, language, and mathematics content sections. Tests for grades 2 through 8 also include a spelling section. While there are indeed some similarities, results for the SAT-9 and CAT-6 are not directly comparable with one another because the different publishers (Harcourt and McGraw Hill, respectively) produced each test at different times, employing different national samples, and created tests of different difficulty levels.

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<sup>1</sup>Sources referenced for this appendix include the California Department of Education Web pages on testing (<http://cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/>) and the California Standardized Testing and Reporting Web pages from 2000, 2002, and 2004 (<http://star.cde.ca.gov/>).

**Appendix B**

**Survey Items Comprising Key Analytic Measures**

The following are the survey questions and individual survey items that comprise the seven survey measures of school reform discussed in Chapter 3. Measures are grouped according to the three core elements of BASRC school reform they are designed to measure: coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration.

## Coaching

### 1. Involvement in Coaching by a Local Collaborative Coach

4-point likert scale ranging from 1 (“I was not involved”) to 4 (“I was very involved”)

Question Root: Listed below is a range of activities required or sponsored by BASRC this year. Please indicate **how involved you were** in each one.

Survey Items: 

- Coaching from a Local Collaborative coach

### 2. Local Collaborative Coaching Value

5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (“Not useful”) to 5 (“Extremely useful”)

Question Root: Please indicate **how useful a Local Collaborative coach or reform coordinator** has been to your school in each of the following areas. (Check N/A if you do not know or have not worked with your coach in a particular area.)<sup>1</sup>

Survey Items: 

- Deepening and broadening our school’s focused effort
- Determining how to use assessments effectively to measure change of student achievement
- Identifying effective changes in school/classroom practices to address student achievement gaps
- Setting measurable goals of student achievement
- Developing measurable goals for evaluating teacher practices
- Selecting multiple kinds of assessment to evaluate students’ progress
- Building teacher collaboration in our school
- Refining teachers’ understanding of equity

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<sup>1</sup>The 2004-05 version of the survey substituted “coach” for the phrase “Local Collaborative coach.”



## Evidence-Based Decision-Making

### 3. Teacher Use of Assessment Data

5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”)

Question Root: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding the **reform climate** in your school? (Check one circle for each statement.)

- Survey Items:
- Teachers collect and use data to improve their teaching
  - Teachers are engaged in systematic analysis of student performance data
  - Useful information to make informed decisions is readily available to teachers (e.g., about student performance, resources, community satisfaction)
  - This school uses assessment data to evaluate teachers’ instructional practices
  - The whole school examines gaps in the achievement of students by grade level
  - We use a variety of assessment strategies to measure student progress

### 4. Individualized Assessment and Instruction

5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”)

Question Root: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statement as a description of your instructional practice and accomplishments?

- Survey Items:
- I consistently set benchmarks for assessing student achievement
  - I closely follow the progress of individual students performing at different levels of academic achievement
  - My lesson plans include specific instructional strategies for students who differ in their academic skills
  - I feel that I have made significant changes in my approach to instruction with English language learners

## 5. Inquiry of Teacher Practices

5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”)

Question Root: To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements regarding the **reform climate** in your school? (Check one circle for each statement.)

- Survey Items:
- This school encourages teachers to pursue inquiry into their classroom practice
  - This school has well-defined plans for instructional improvement
  - Teachers in this school are engaged in systematic analysis of their teaching practices
  - Teachers meet regularly to review student performance in order to adjust their practices

## Networks and Collaboration

### 6. Teacher Knowledge Sharing Within Schools

5-point likert scale, ranging from 1 (“Never”) to 5 (“Almost Daily”)

Question Root: How frequently do you do each of the following **with other teachers in your school**?

- Survey Items:
- Share ideas on teaching
  - Discuss what you/they learned at a workshop or conference
  - Share and discuss student work
  - Discuss particular lessons that were not very successful
  - Discuss beliefs about teaching and learning
  - Share and discuss research on effective teaching methods
  - Share and discuss research on effective instructional practices for English language learners
  - Explore new teaching approaches for under-performing students

## 7. Teacher Knowledge Sharing Within Local Collaboratives

4-point likert scale ranging from 1 (“Never”) to 4 (“Many Times”)

Question Root: Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your **professional development** experiences this year (including summer 2003).

**With teachers from other schools in my Local Collaborative, I have...**

- Survey Items:
- Talked about our focused reform effort
  - Shared ideas on teaching practices for improving student achievement/closing achievement gaps
  - Observed another teacher teaching
  - Been observed by another teacher teaching
  - Shared teaching materials (e.g., worksheets, writing samples)
  - Worked together on looking at student data to identify gaps in student achievement
  - Discussed what we have learned about best practices as related to our schools’ reform work
  - Developed assessments to measure change/improvement of student achievement
  - Discussed ways of analyzing and interpreting student achievement data
  - Participated together in professional development, workshops, conferences, or institutes



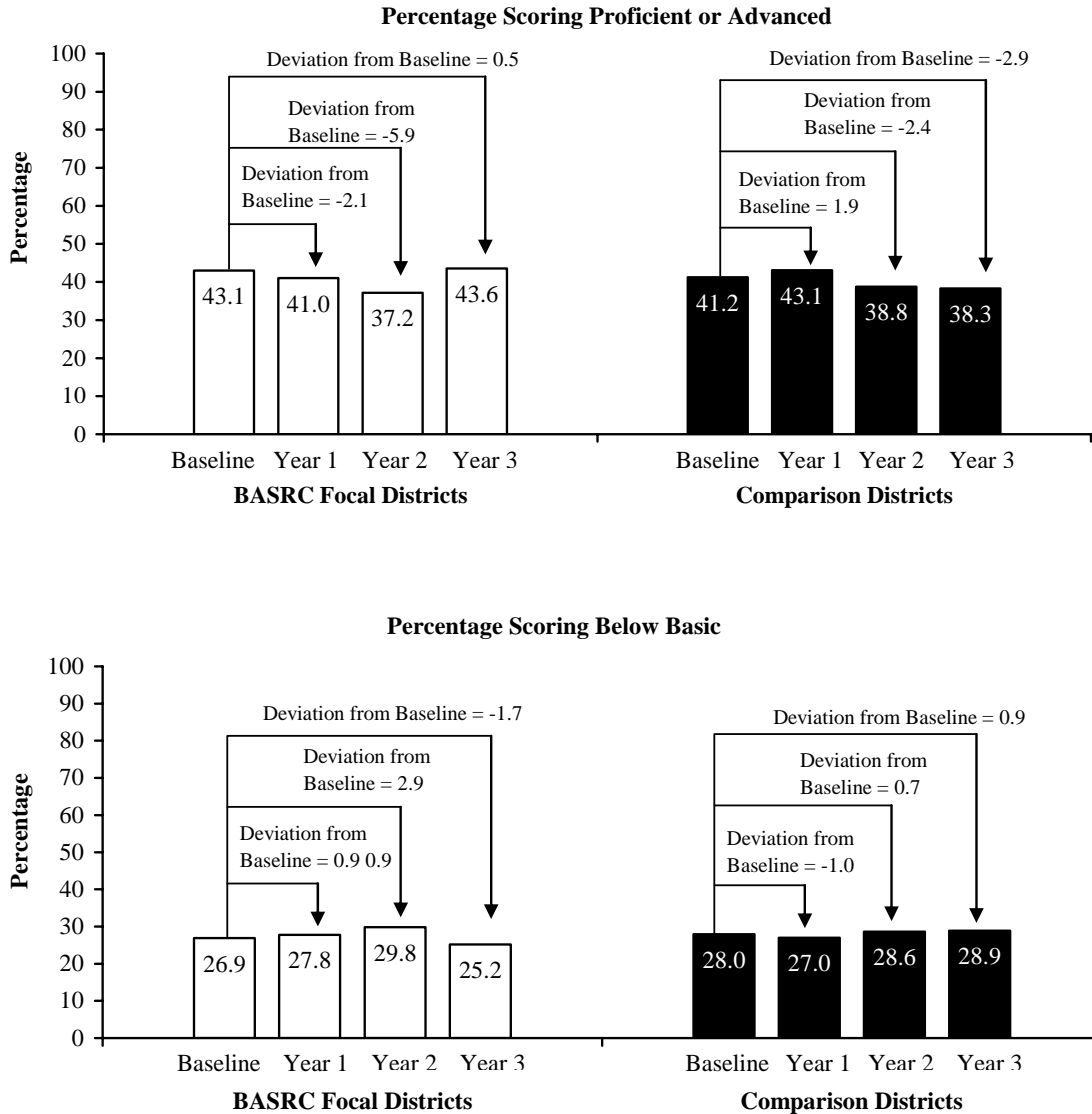
**Appendix C**

**Analysis of Achievement Outcomes  
for Third-Grade Students**

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.1

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



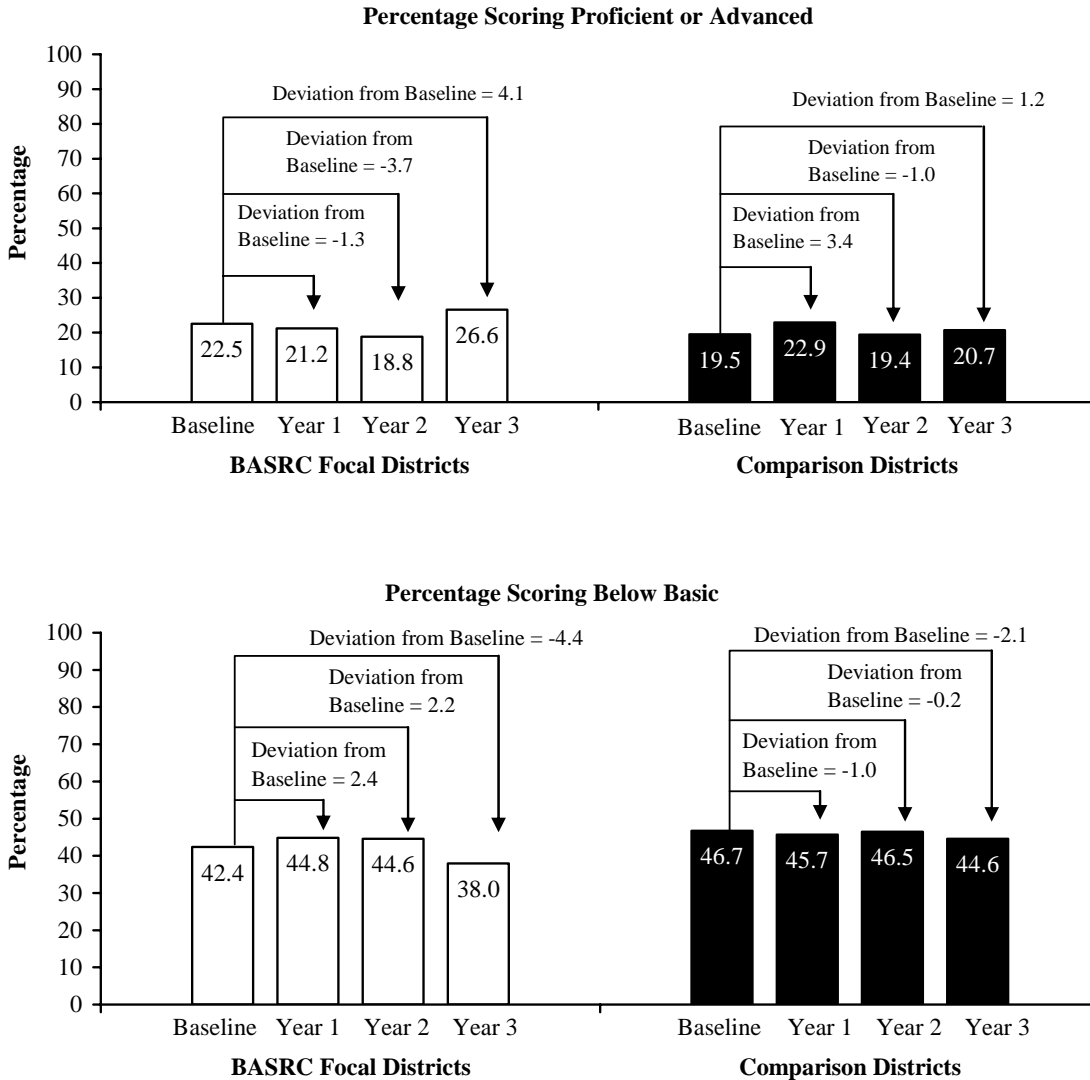
SOURCE: MDRC calculations are based on district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.2

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
Economically Disadvantaged Students



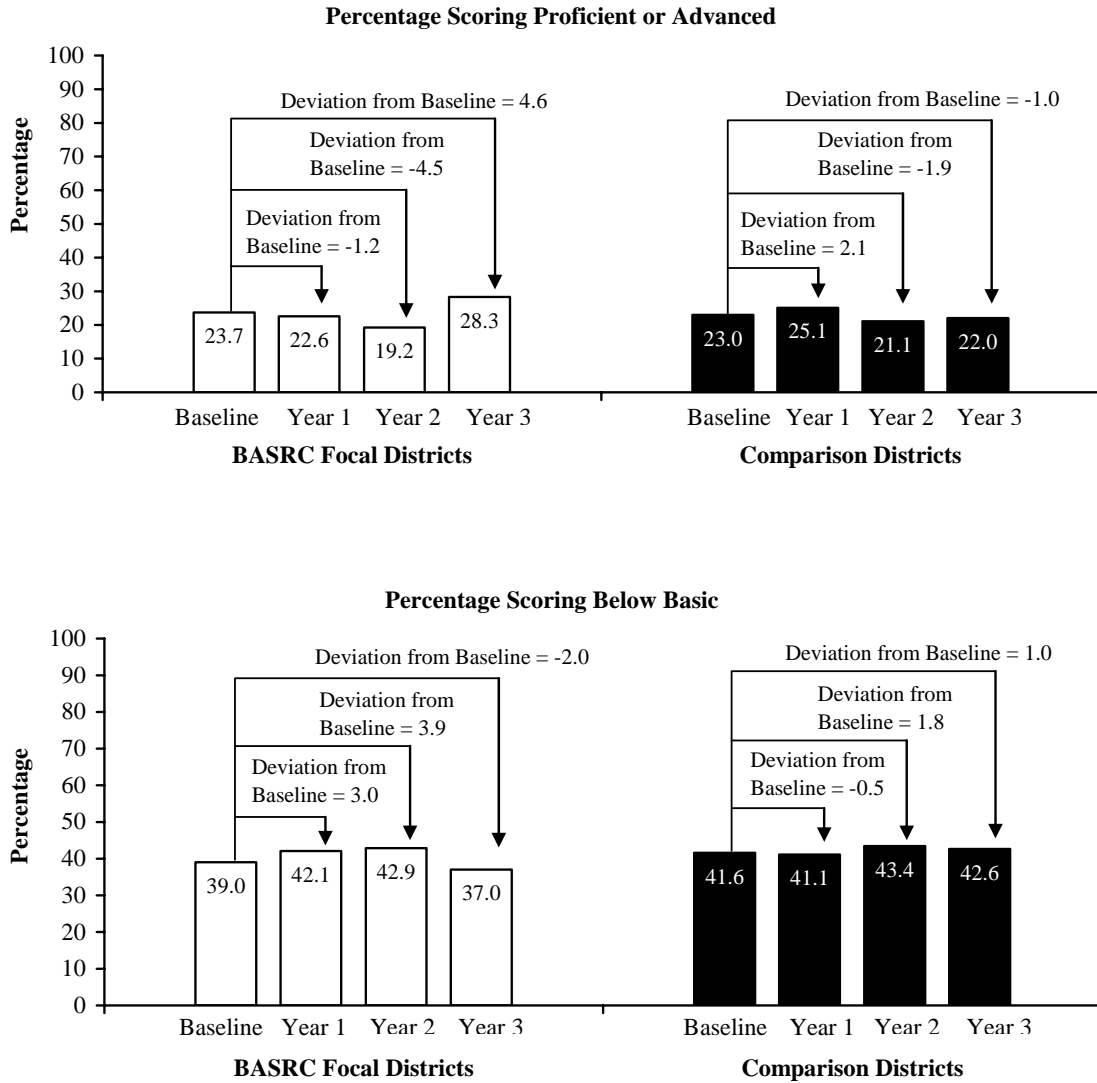
SOURCE: MDRC calculations are based on district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.3

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
Black and Hispanic Students



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

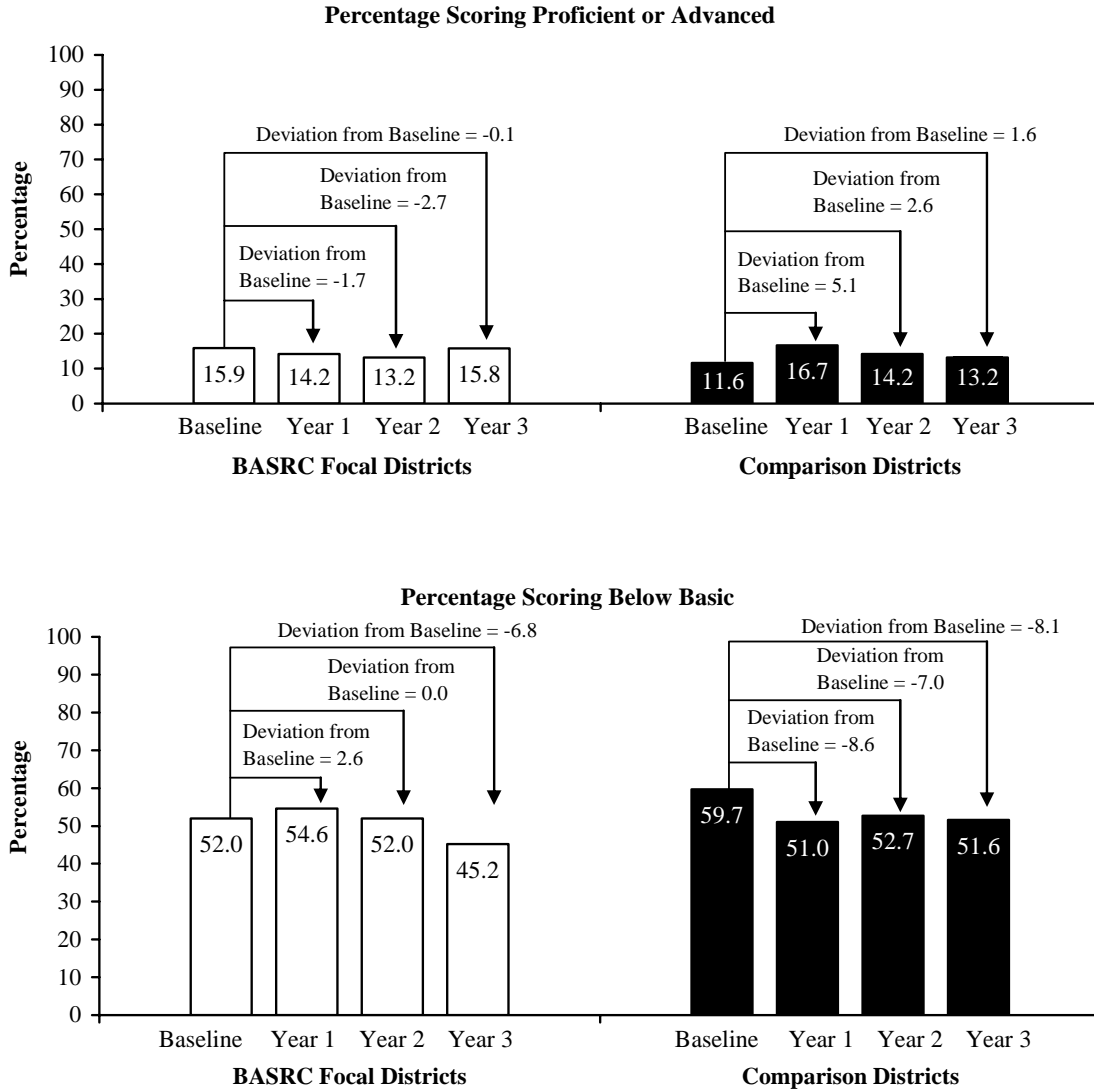
NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.



Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.4

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
English Language Learners



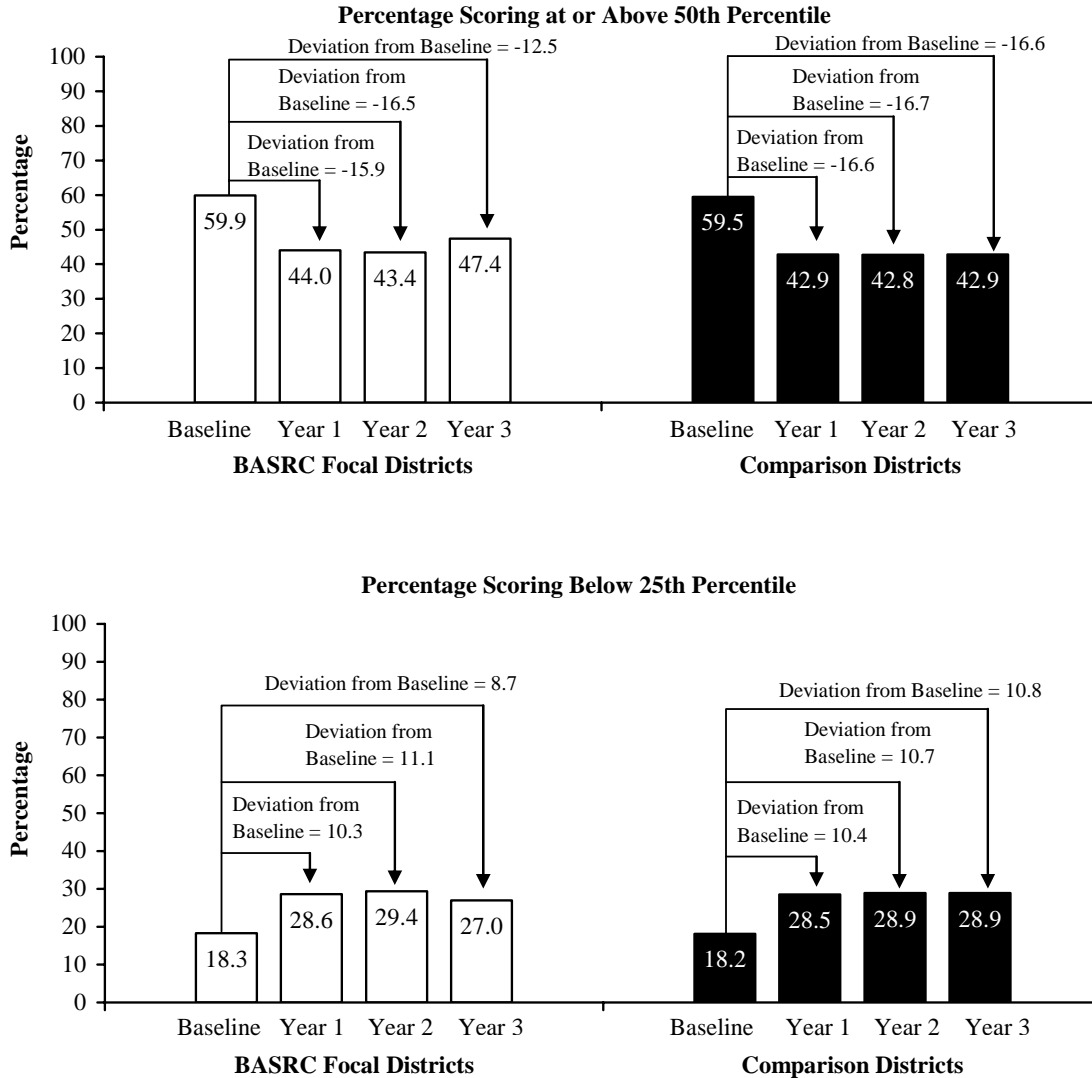
SOURCE: MDRC calculations are based on district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.5

Third-Grade Student Performance on Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading



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

NOTES: The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) was replaced by the California Achievement Tests (CAT-6) in the 2002-2003 school year. The baseline years for the SAT-9, language arts, consist of school years 1999-2000, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year for the CAT-6. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

**Appendix D**

**How Comparison Districts Were Selected**

Comparison districts were selected with the goal of finding districts that were as similar as possible to the BASRC focal districts in terms of student demographics and the history of academic performance. As MDRC's analysis focused on elementary achievement through the fifth grade, researchers selected comparison districts according to average demographic characteristics and achievement levels among the fifth-grade students in each district. Based on annual data obtained from the California Department of Education, MDRC averaged demographic characteristics and achievement levels across three baseline years (the 1999-2000, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002 school years) and matched districts based on those averages.<sup>1</sup> The following list lays out MDRC criteria for identifying comparison districts for each of the five focal districts:

- The district existed and had more than 10 students in the fifth grade in all baseline years.
- The district is in the San Francisco Bay Area (in one of the following counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, or Santa Clara.)
- The baseline mean percentage of fifth-grade students scoring proficient or above on the language arts portion of the California Standard Tests (CST) is within 20 percentage points of the baseline mean percentage at the focal district.<sup>2</sup>
- The baseline mean percentage of fifth-grade students scoring at or above the fiftieth percentile on the reading portion of the SAT-9 is within 20 percent of the baseline mean percentage at the focal district.<sup>3</sup>
- Looking at the most prevalent ethnicity among fifth-grade students in the focal district, the average percent of that ethnic group in a comparison district is within 20 percentage points of the focal district average.
- Looking at the second most prevalent ethnicity among fifth-grade students in the focal district, the average percentage of that ethnic group in a comparison district is within 20 percentage points of the focal district average.
- The number of fifth-grade students in the comparison district is within 50 percent of the number of fifth-grade students enrolled in the focal district.

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<sup>1</sup>California Standards Tests data are available only in 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 for the language arts section and available only in 2001-2002 for the mathematics section. Therefore, district selection is based only on the average across these years.

<sup>2</sup>Note that "language arts" is the broadest subtest on the CST and includes reading and spelling.

<sup>3</sup>Note that "reading" is the broadest strand on the SAT-9 and includes language arts and spelling.

As discussed in Chapter 4 of this report, the process for selecting comparison districts produced the following results: 15 distinct districts within the Bay Area matched with the five focal districts, with some comparison districts matching with more than one focal district. Each of the five BASRC focal districts matched with between two and five comparison districts. Overall, the two sets of districts look very similar.



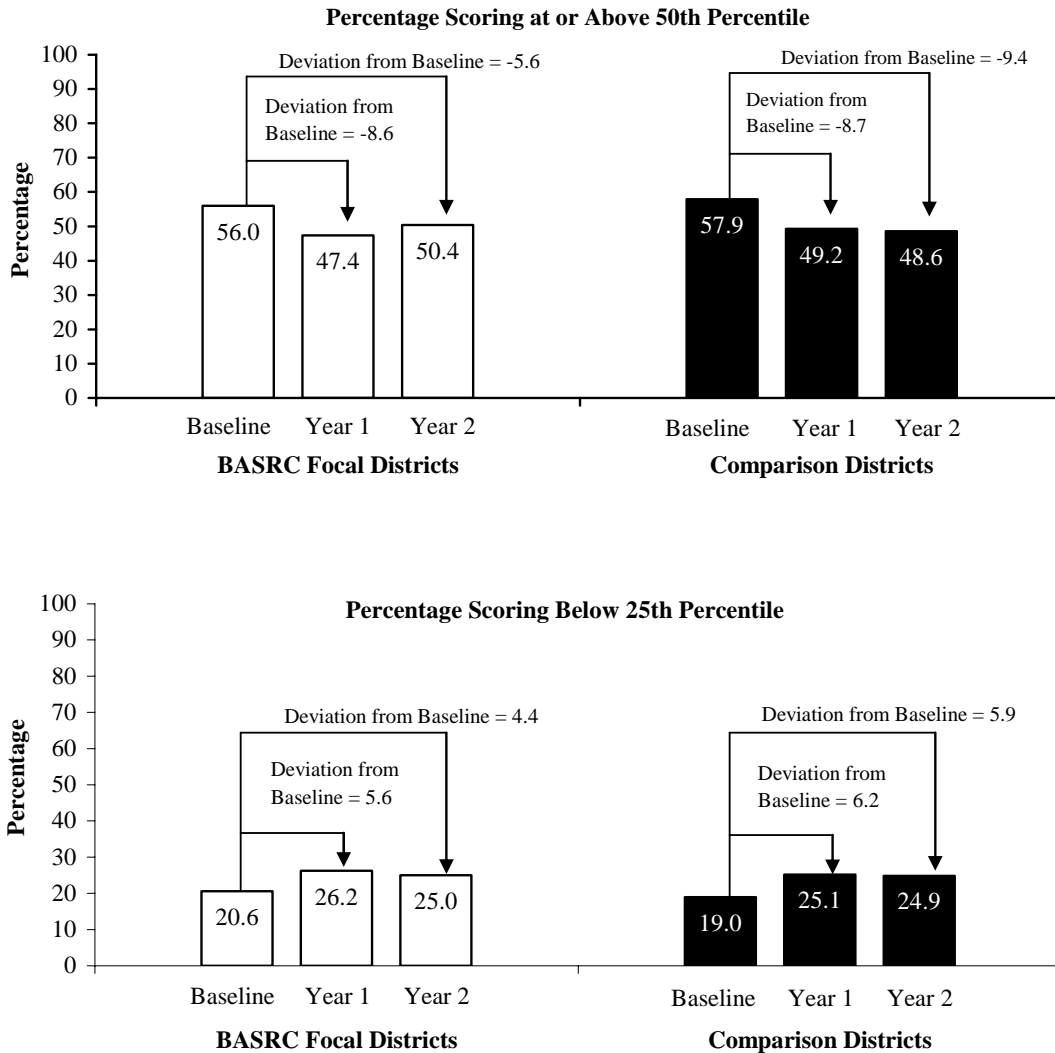
Appendix E

**Analysis of Fifth-Grade Performance on the  
Stanford Achievement Test**

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Appendix Figure E.1**

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading**



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

NOTES: The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) was replaced by the California Achievement Tests (CAT-6) in the 2002-2003 school year. The baseline years for the SAT-9, language arts, consist of school years 1999-2000, 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 for the CAT-6. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

This table includes only two years of follow-up, because fifth-grade students were no longer tested with the CAT-6 in 2005.



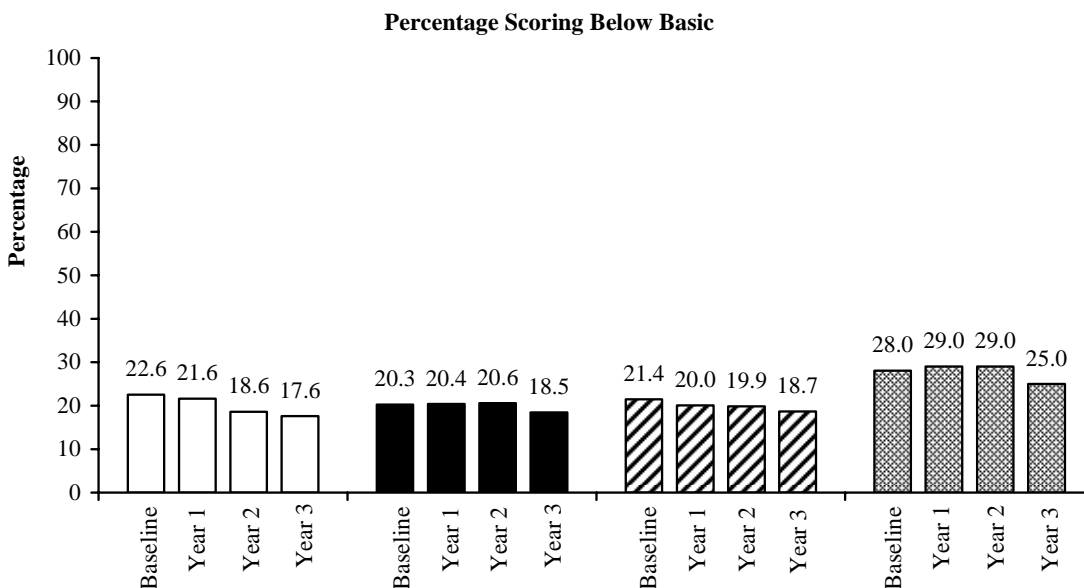
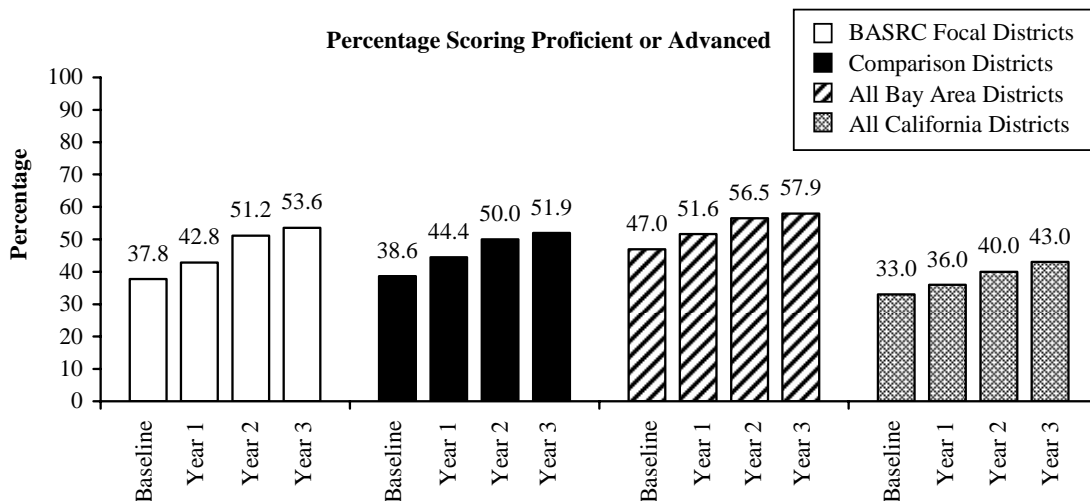
**Appendix F**

**Analysis of Fifth-Grade Achievement Outcomes Relative  
to Bay Area and California State Districts**

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure F.1

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts



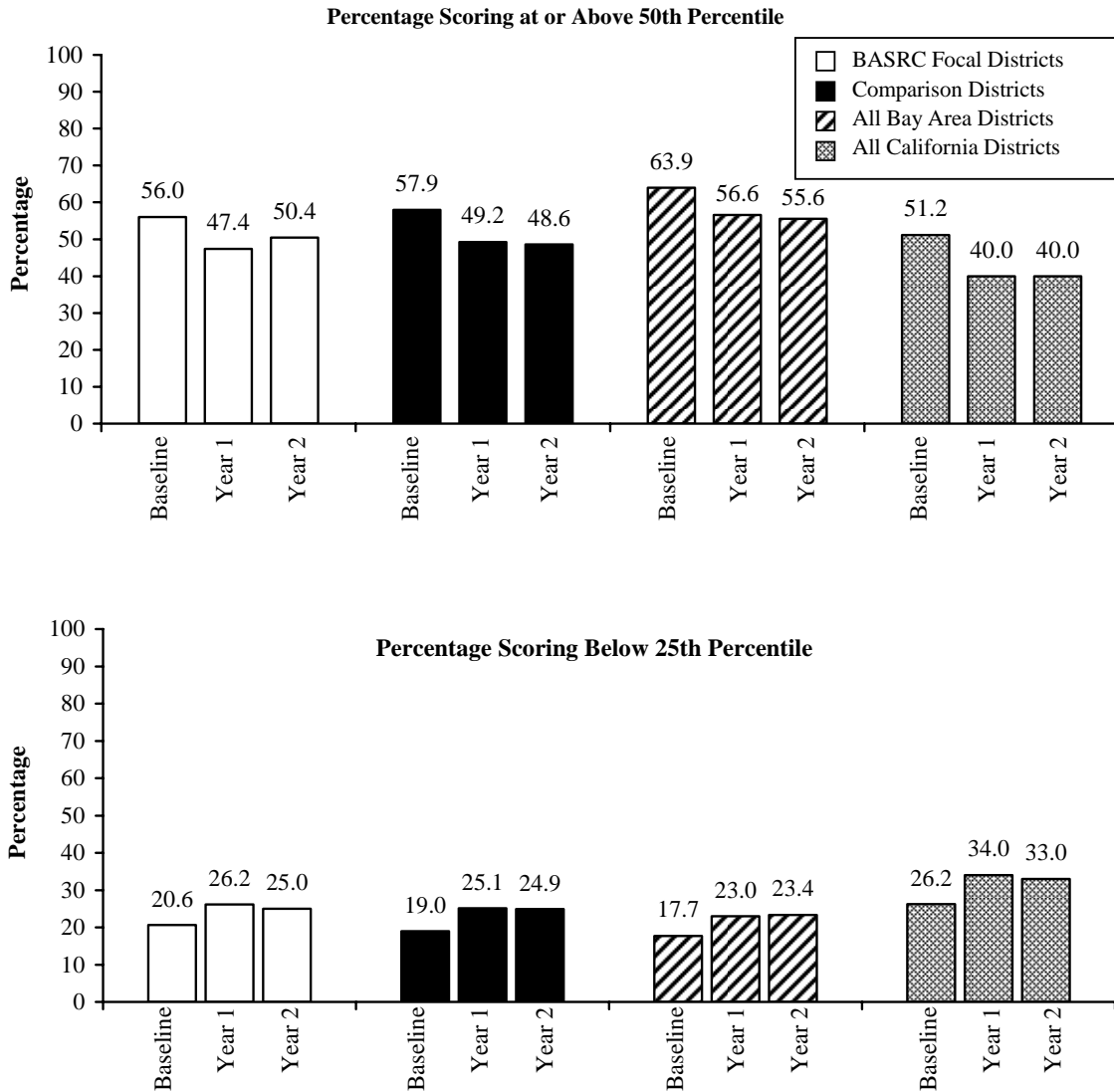
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, 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 district size.

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Appendix Figure F.2**

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading:  
Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts**



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

NOTES: The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) was replaced by the California Achievement Tests (CAT-6) in the 2002-2003 school year. The baseline years for the SAT-9, language arts, consist of school years 1999-2000, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 is the first follow-up (2002-2003) school year, and Year 2 is the second follow-up (2003-2004) school year for the CAT-6. No data exist for the third follow-up year because California did not administer the CAT-6 to fifth-grade students during the 2004-2005 school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of district size.



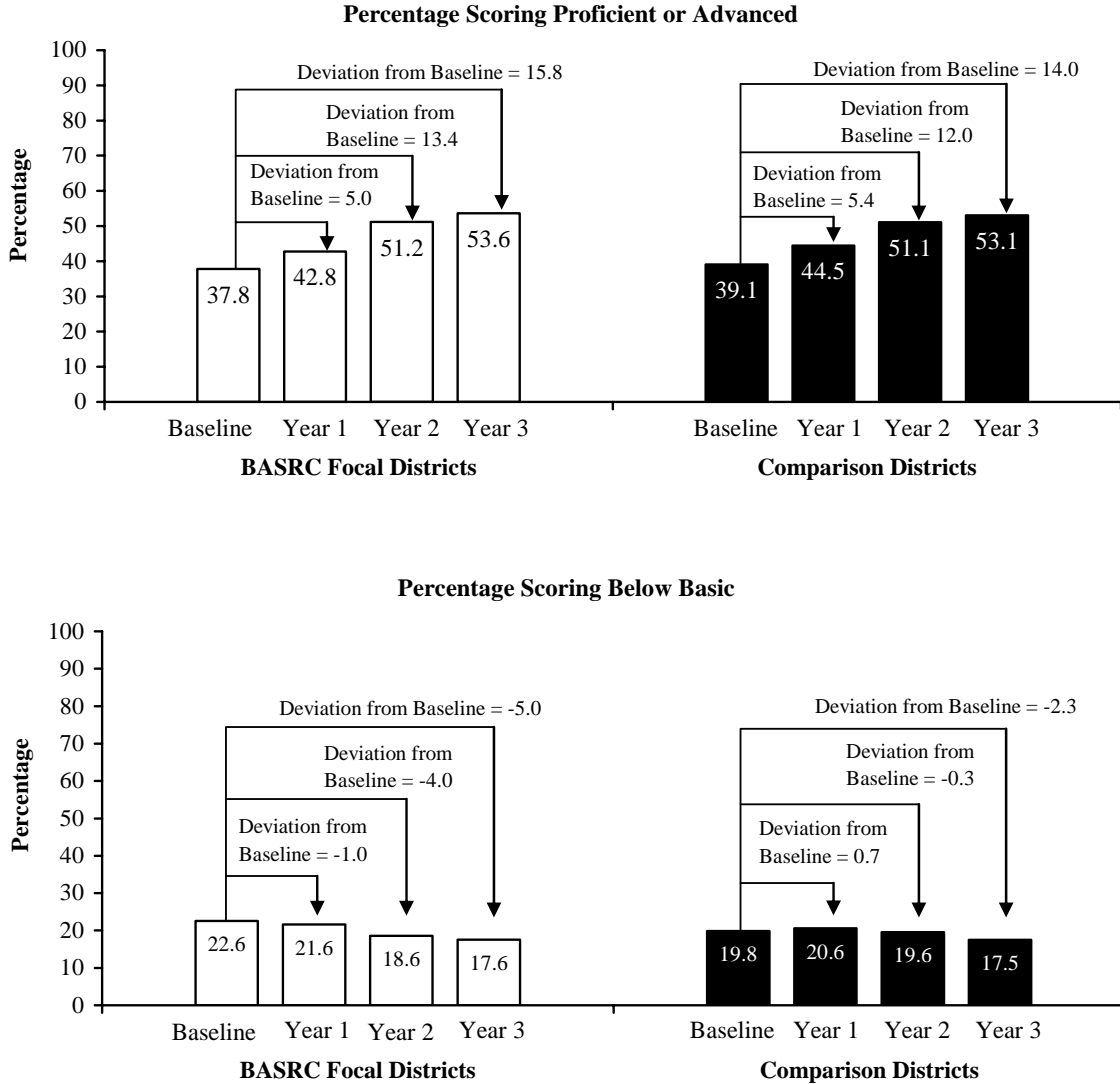
**Appendix G**

**Analysis of Fifth-Grade Achievement Outcomes  
with a Sample of Comparison Districts  
(Not Including Districts That Participated  
in Earlier Phases of BASRC Reforms)**

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure G.1

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts  
(Not Including Districts That Participated in Earlier Phase of BASRC Reforms)



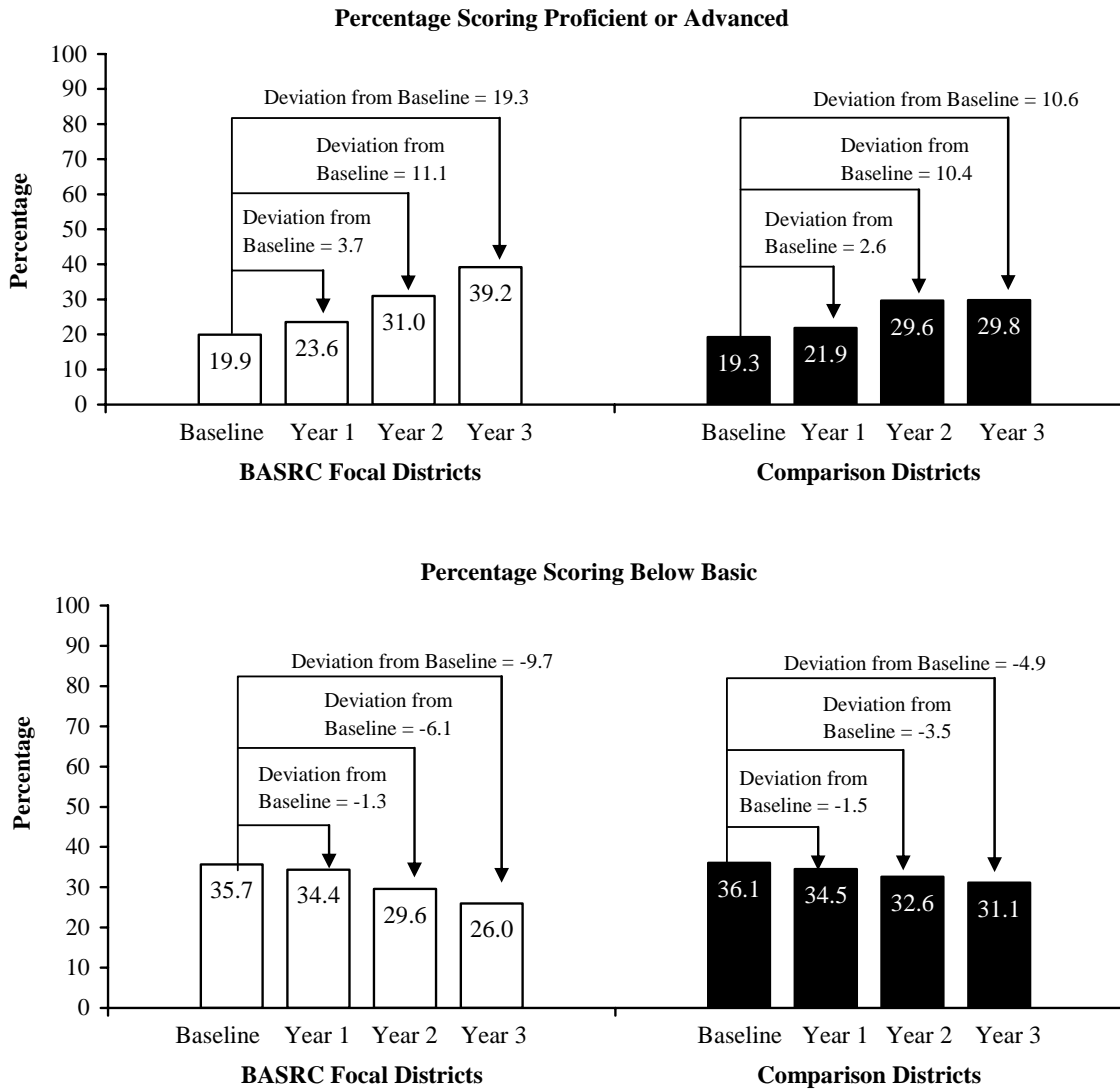
SOURCE: MDRC calculations are based on district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure G.2

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
Economically Disadvantaged Students  
(Not Including Districts That Participated in Earlier Phase of BASRC Reforms)**



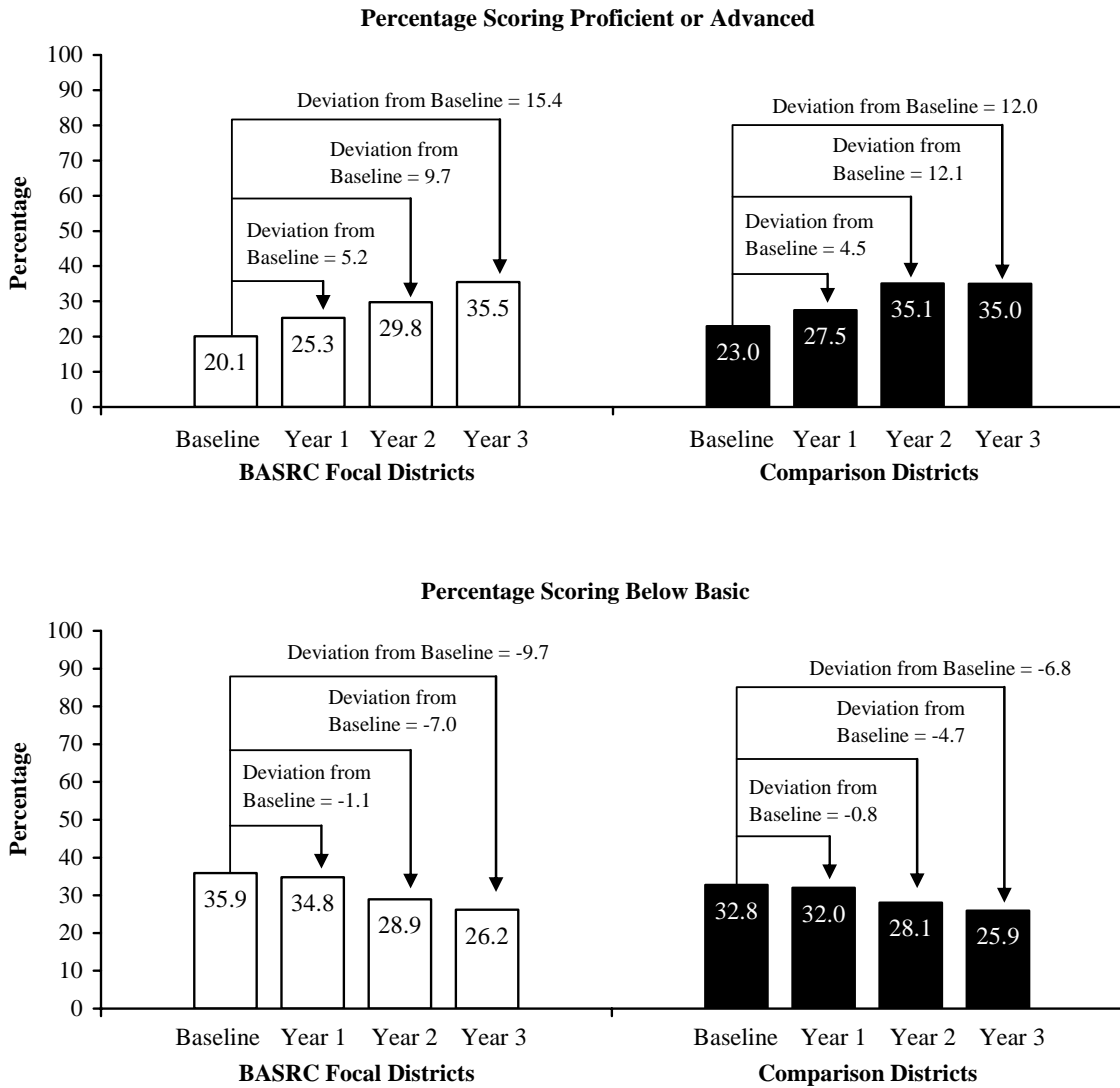
SOURCE: MDRC calculations are based on district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure G.3

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
Black and Hispanic Students  
(Not Including Districts That Participated in Earlier Phase of BASRC Reforms)**



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

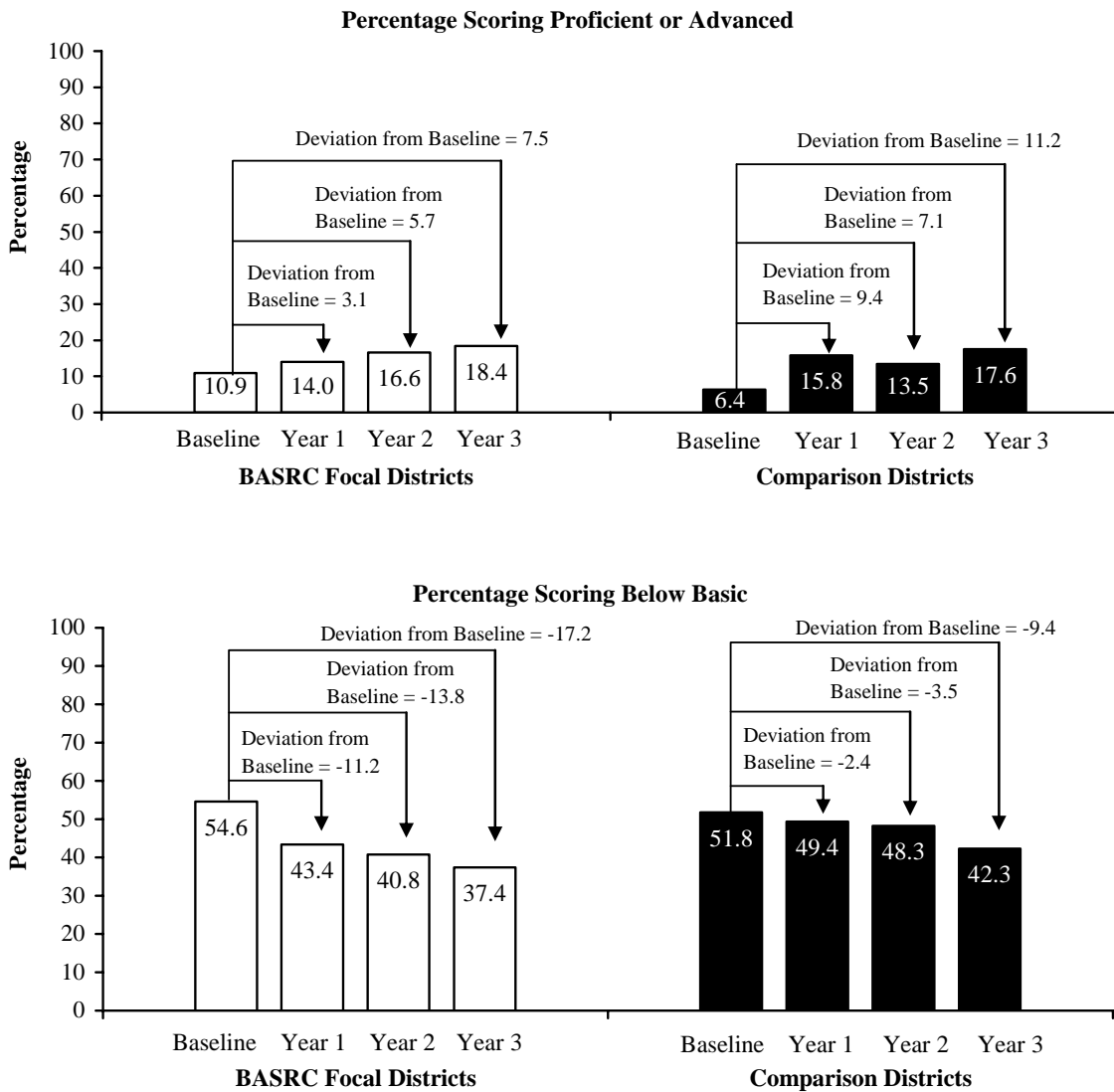
NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.



Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure G.4

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts:  
English Language Learners  
(Not Including Districts That Participated in Earlier Phase of BASRC Reforms)



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

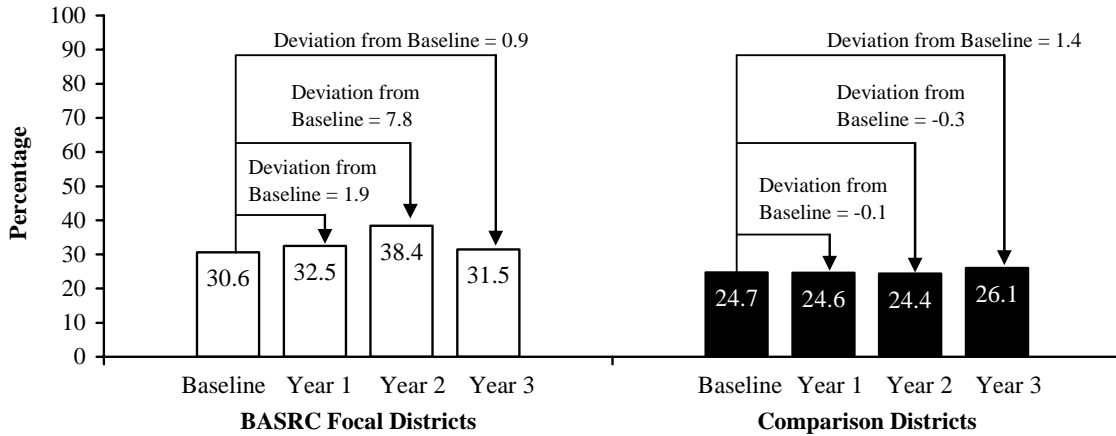
NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

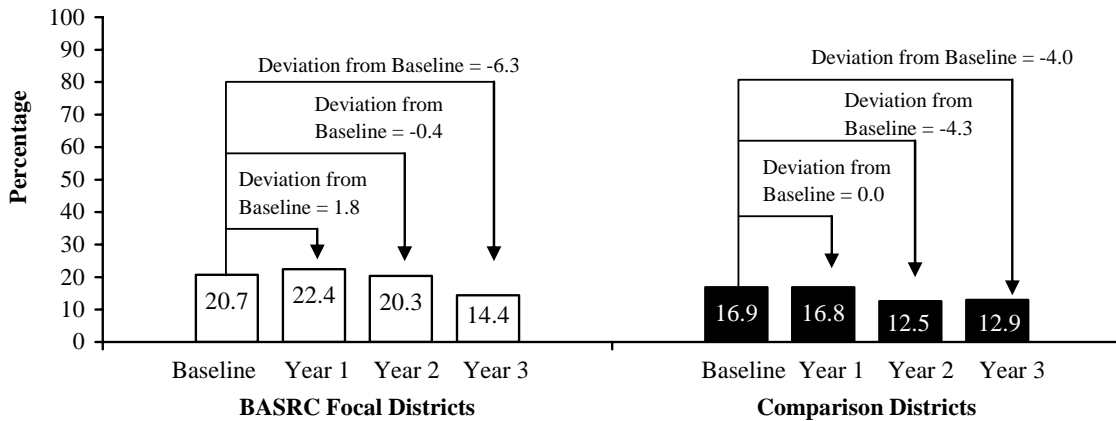
Appendix Figure G.5

**Fifth-Grade Achievement Gaps Between Black and Hispanic Students and White Students on the California Standards Tests, Language Arts**

**The Difference Between the Percentage of White Students and the Percentage of Black and Hispanic Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced**



**The Difference Between the Percentage of Black and Hispanic Students and the Percentage of White Students Scoring Below Basic**



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

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Tests, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year, Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year, and Year 3 (2004-2005) is the third follow-up school year. The estimates in the figure represent averages across all districts, regardless of each district's size.

Appendix H

**Estimated Regression Coefficients**

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Appendix Table H.1**

**The Relationship Between Average Survey Measures of BASRC-Related Practices  
and the Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on the  
California Standards Tests in Year 3 of the Focal Strategy**

**Estimated Regression Coefficients**

	Parameter Estimate	P-Value
<b><u>Coaching Survey Measures</u></b>		
Involvement with coaching by a Local Collaborative coach	4.623	0.479
Value of Local Collaborative coach	0.719	0.859
<b><u>Evidence-Based Decision-Making Survey Measures</u></b>		
Individual assessment and instructional data use	-1.164	0.889
Culture of examining achievement data	5.634	0.351
Inquiry into teacher practices	0.767	0.880
<b><u>Networking and Collaboration Survey Measures</u></b>		
Local Collaborative knowledge-sharing (between schools)	-4.496	0.420
Teacher knowledge-sharing (within schools)	3.217	0.681
Sample size	30	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Teacher Surveys, 2003-2005, conducted by the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC) and MDRC and managed by Survey Research Management (SRM), and also from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: Regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between schools' average survey measures during Years 1, 2, and 3 of the focal strategy and proficiency levels in reading in Year 3, controlling for differences in students' demographic characteristics of the students these schools served and for achievement levels prior to the start of the focal strategy. Each survey measure was included in a separate regression equation.

**Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation**

**Appendix Table H.2**

**The Relationship Between Average Survey Measures of BASRC-Related Practices  
and the Percentage of Students Scoring Below or Far Below Basic on the  
California Standards Tests in Year 3 of the Focal Strategy**

**Estimated Regression Coefficients**

	Parameter Estimate	P-Value
<b><u>Coaching Survey Measures</u></b>		
Involvement with coaching by a Local Collaborative coach	-15.558 ***	0.006
Value of Local Collaborative coach	1.210	0.747
<b><u>Evidence-Based Decision-Making Survey Measures</u></b>		
Individual assessment and instructional data use	1.961	0.786
Culture of examining achievement data	-4.521	0.410
Inquiry into teacher practices	-5.382	0.245
<b><u>Networking and Collaboration Survey Measures</u></b>		
Local Collaborative knowledge-sharing (between schools)	-4.740	0.374
Teacher knowledge-sharing (within schools)	-7.745	0.286
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>30</b>	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from Teacher Surveys, 2003-2005, conducted by the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC) and MDRC and managed by Survey Research Management (SRM), and also from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: Regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between schools' average survey measures during Years 1, 2, and 3 of the focal strategy and proficiency levels in reading in Year 3, controlling for differences in the demographic characteristics of the students these schools served and for achievement levels prior to the start of the focal strategy. Each survey measure was included in a separate regression equation.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as follows: \*\*\* = 1 percent, \*\* = 5 percent, \* = 10 percent.



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## **Earlier MDRC Publications on District Reform Efforts**

*The Search for Progress*

*Elementary Student Achievement and the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy*

2005. Kristin E. Porter, Jason C. Snipes, Jean Eisberg

*Foundations for Success*

*Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement*

The Council of the Great City Schools

2002. Jason C. Snipes, Fred Doolittle, Corinne Herlily



## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

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.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- 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.