Great districts constantly learn from one another, but they never make the mistake of trying to cut and paste success from one context to another. They know that selecting a strategy that’s right for a district is similar to picking the right dress or the right suit. That outfit may look great on the model in the magazine, but that doesn’t mean it will be the right fit or look for your shape or size.

So, successful districts focus on the old adage, “Know thyself.” Districts can shop among many proven practices but must ask whether each strategy fits before making the purchase. If the answer is no, the strategy probably isn’t going to work no matter how successful it’s been someplace else.

When a practice fits, high student achievement can result. If the practice doesn’t fit and low performance results, districts often blame secondary factors, such as a lack of resources or local politics. But the real cause is often a poor evaluation of how well the strategy being implemented will fit the local context. It doesn’t matter what the practice is, it matters most if it fits — fits the students, the teachers, the parents, the community, and the leadership.

Finalists for the Broad Prize for Urban Education have demonstrated that they know how to shop for and implement research-based strategies that will deliver results for their students.

Using themes identified by the American Institutes for Research (Dailey et al. 2005), consider how two 2008 Broad Prize finalists — Long Beach Unified School District in California and Broward County Public Schools in Florida — implemented effective strategies that were right for their local contexts.
Successful districts focus first and foremost on student achievement and learning. This defines the district role.

These districts have a laser-like focus on academic performance, including such supporting systems as standards-based curricula, embedded assessment systems, and strong instructional practices. Student achievement means much more than academic performance in these districts — a productive future, citizenship, and preparation for career and the changing, global society. It starts with the district mission and infiltrates strategic planning documents and decision-making processes.

**LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

In Long Beach, establishing a “college-going culture” has been central to increasing student achievement and advancing college and career readiness. The district has rolled out the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program across all of its middle, K-8, and high schools. As a result of successes experienced by students enrolled in AVID, the district has expanded the program to the elementary level. In addition, enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses has increased significantly (58% from 2003 to 2007) as a result of rigorous recruitment and increased supports for students in AP courses.

These efforts, however, do not occur solely within district walls. Long Beach has a unique and dedicated partnership with Long Beach City College (LBCC) and California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). The decade-long partnership has improved teacher quality and increased alignment between K-12 and postsecondary standards and assessments. The three organizations are partners in the Long Beach College Promise, which guarantees access to a college education for every Long Beach graduate — a tuition-free semester at LBCC to every LBUSD student by 2011, and guaranteed college admission to CSULB for all students completing minimum requirements. Students and families learn about these opportunities as early as 6th grade.

**BROWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Technology is central to Broward’s focus on student achievement and learning. In spring 2004, the school board launched an aggressive technology plan to digitize the district. Broward offers more than 180 web-based courses, most district-adopted textbooks are in electronic format, and districtwide podcasts and a web site are fully available in four languages (English, Spanish, Haitian-Creole, and Portuguese).

"Technology companies tell us we've changed the culture of how they work with the school district."

— Superintendent James Notter

Every Broward classroom is connected to the Internet. All classrooms have at least two computers, and many are wired with speakers, microphones, and interactive boards or document cameras. Several schools have also participated in the Global Learning Initiative through the Digital Education for Students program — a project-based learning activity designed to integrate technology with exploration of real-world, global topics.

Long Beach and Broward differ dramatically in geographic size, student enrollment, and the number of schools. The structure of district leadership differs, as does school configuration. Nevertheless, the primary role of both district and school leadership is instructional leadership. That is, leadership is focused on the essential task of supporting the teaching and learning process to promote student achievement.

**LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

To support teaching and learning in a district that employs almost 4,300 teachers and serves about 90,000 students across 93 schools, LBUSD has a highly collaborative and distributed model of instructional leadership.

Three assistant superintendents — elementary, middle/K-8, and high school — provide vertical oversight and directly support schools and work as a team to assist in delivery of centralized services.

The deputy superintendent’s office, which includes curriculum, instruction, and professional development, supports all
schools. A core of curriculum leaders work for the deputy superintendent, but they are deployed in collaboration with the assistant superintendents. Curriculum leaders work across grade levels to provide specific content expertise based on need. This also ensures strong vertical articulation because a science expert may work in both a middle school and an elementary school.

The principal is the primary instructional leader at each school. But instructional leadership is also a shared effort. At the elementary level, most assistant principals, as well as site-based coaches, have some instructional responsibilities. Most elementary schools also have a facilitator who coordinates many aspects of school management and operations in order to free the principal and assistant principal to focus on teaching and learning. At the middle and high schools, department chairs provide an additional layer of instructional leadership.

Evaluation processes in Long Beach are supportive, distributed, and exemplify leadership’s key task to support teaching and learning. “The supervision looks a lot like coaching,” said one district administrator about the relationship between the assistant superintendent and the principal.

The deputy superintendent of curriculum oversees directors who support specific areas of teaching and learning — for example, core curriculum, multicultural, English Speaking Other Languages, and program services. These offices provide human and material resources to schools specific to their areas of expertise (e.g., mathematics, special education). For example, curriculum specialists (e.g., mathematics, science) and coaches (e.g., Reading First) are deployed to schools as needed.

Human resources (HR) houses new staff training and professional development initiatives and also deploys coaches and trainers who support new district initiatives, new teachers and administrators, and struggling schools.

At the schools, the principal is the primary instructional leader. Assistant principals, team leaders (at the elementaries), and department chairs (at the middle and high schools) share instructional leadership responsibilities with the principal.

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Curriculum specialists and coaches are deployed to schools as needed.

“Now it’s everybody making decisions for the school, not just the principal. The principal cannot be on an island alone. So what we’ve done now is try to change the perception that the principal is the only person to make decisions in the school, to have a leadership team in the school. When everybody is involved in making a decision, whatever decision it is, they’re going to do a better job with implementation,” said an area superintendent.

In Broward, the area office or HR provides differentiated support (targeted, moderate, or intensive) to struggling schools, known as “superintendent’s schools.” An intensive school receives greater overall support (e.g., resources or personnel) whereas a targeted school receives specific supports. For example, a school that receives a poor AYP determination based on the low performance of its ELL students receives targeted support to specifically meet the needs of this population.

Superintendent’s schools also receive extra support through the collaborative network teams (C-NET) — principals on special assignment out of the superintendent’s office. “The whole district is kind of like an umbrella of support,” said a stakeholder.
Educators accept personal responsibility for improving student learning and receive support to help them succeed.

In Long Beach and Broward, the acceptance of responsibility for student learning extends well beyond accountability. Neither district allows excuses. Responsibility is part of the culture. How it plays out, though, from the West Coast to the East Coast, is unique to the local context.

LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

“The Long Beach Way” is an institutionalized belief system about dedication, collaboration, communication, support, and data-driven practices; it embraces diversity, provides students access to opportunities, and realizes the district’s commitment to its students.

The Teacher Resource Center (TRC), for example, is a centralized venue where teachers and district staff meet to discuss teaching and learning. TRC houses all curriculum leaders, as well as professional development staff, and provides a host of resources for teachers under one roof.

“Curriculum development, curriculum training, everything happens there. Every teacher in our district knows that if they need help, they go to the TRC and they’ll find it,” said one district administrator.

Said a teacher, “I go to the TRC for trainings and I see the same people over and over. I start to know resources, not just in our school, but across the district.”

Risk and innovation are also characteristic of the Long Beach Way and also provide another route for district stakeholders to accept and pursue responsibility for student achievement. Central office administrators, schools leaders, teachers, and the community are encouraged to take risks, to try new things; if the data yield positive results, these programs and initiatives are rolled out on a larger scale.

Several districtwide initiatives in Long Beach have begun as pilot programs as a result of staff innovation. For example, Mathematics Achievement Program Professional Development (MAP2D) which was designed to increase grade-level appropriate math skills, began in a single elementary school. Then it was rolled out to all elementary schools and now is being expanded to middle schools. MAP2D includes a district-developed book, specific instructional strategies, a trimester assessment system, and coaches to provide support and training.

BROWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A shared responsibility for student learning starts with the school board, spans the district, and includes the community. Stakeholders districtwide refer to their efforts as “Team Broward,” which reflects the personal responsibility individuals share for student achievement. “We’re all in this together; it’s about creating a strong community and empowering intellectual capital,” say district stakeholders.

The School Board of Broward County has a committee structure designed to keep the board informed, to provide a check and balance, and to ensure that the community is involved. Board members serve on only two committees, with other members appointed by either the board or the superintendent. “We have representatives because we believe in partnership,” said one board member. “We must have the partnerships with the community in order to give us input. That’s the most important thing.”

A transparent cycle that the school board calls “communication looping” leads to most of the school district’s policies. Anyone in the district or community can bring ideas for policies to the table. Typically, a committee researches the proposed initiative and gathers input from stakeholders. Information is brought to the board and to the superintendent’s executive leadership team for discussion, and the policy is drafted. Then, the District Advisory Council (DAC) circulates the draft policy to the community and schools for feedback.

“This ensures that everyone has input. Because our district is so large and different communities have different perspectives and ideas, we want to make sure it reaches everyone,” said a board member. Feedback is then filtered back through the DAC to the board, where it is discussed in workshops before going to the board for a vote.

The district also has a number of councils that provide both formal and informal structures for vetting district policies and sharing ideas. Councils exist to support specific student needs, such as the ELL advisory council. Active parent organizations exist at schools throughout the county. “Parents are invited to every single committee, forum, and activity that the superintendent or the board proposes,” said one parent. “We’re also an information conduit that takes information out of the district, back to the areas, and down to individual schools — it is a very, very effective way of sharing information.”

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A district-level instructional council meets every two weeks before board meetings. The instructional council is composed of a range of central office staff and principal representatives. The instructional council provides a forum to discuss new instructional initiatives and provides updates to the superintendent on school performance.