

Arkansas Elementary Level Best Practices Study

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## Introduction






A consistent goal of education is improving student academic achievement, and educators acknowledge that a variety of factors influence how a student performs in the classroom. In an effort to further our understanding of these factors, the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) and Just for the Kids (JFTK) created a framework for analyzing best practices in today's school systems ([www.nc4ea.org](http://www.nc4ea.org)). As part of the NCEA State-Comparable Best Practice Study, the Arkansas Best Practices Study is designed to identify practices and procedures that help students succeed, with the goal of distributing this information to other schools in the state and the nation. Prior NCEA research indicates that practices throughout a school system contribute to high student achievement; therefore, practices at the district, school, and classroom level are examined in order to identify which factors contribute to student achievement.

### *Theoretical Framework/Perspective*

The Arkansas Best Practices Study accumulates data on elementary, middle, and high schools over the course of three years, and is currently in its third year of implementation. Data were collected through a series of interviews of district personnel at the classroom, school, and district levels. In addition to analysis of the data at these three school levels, data were analyzed based on five general themes related to best practices: Curriculum and Academic Goals; Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building; Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements; Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data; and Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments. These five areas were identified by NCEA as fundamental themes for analysis. Table 1 shows the arrangement of the three school system levels and the five best practices themes. The

specific information in the 15 cells reflects Arkansas' data for elementary schools.

Analysis results found in Table 1 will be discussed in the results section.

ORGANIZING THEMES	DISTRICT PRACTICES	SCHOOL PRACTICES	CLASSROOM PRACTICES
CURRICULUM & ACADEMIC GOALS 	Develop clear academic goals and objectives that are aligned with state standards	Develop curriculum goals with clear focus on academic rigor and high expectations	Align teaching practices with state standards, keeping the focus on student achievement
STAFF SELECTION, LEADERSHIP, & CAPACITY BUILDING 	Focus staff selection and professional development on creating strong instructional leaders	Promote collaboration, teacher leadership, and teacher responsibility	Incorporate information from relevant staff development directly into classroom practices
INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS, PRACTICES, & ARRANGEMENTS 	Research instructional materials to ensure alignment with state standards	Choose instructional materials that efficiently and effectively support teacher and student achievement	Utilize instructional practices that promote student learning
MONITORING: COMPILATION, ANALYSIS & USE OF DATA 	Use data to support educational decisions fostering district quality	Utilize data in evaluations of curriculum, instructional methods, and student achievement	Monitor student performance on an ongoing basis to support instructional practices
RECOGNITION, INTERVENTION, & ADJUSTMENTS 	Create programs that allow students of all abilities to succeed and be recognized	Establish strategies for early identification and intervention to meet student needs	Recognize student success while intervening and adjusting as individual student needs arise

The first area of analysis, *Curriculum and Academic Goals*, encompasses how a school or district uses the state standards to develop and improve curriculum, taking into

account vertical and horizontal alignment and use of materials. In addition, this area of analysis examines the process of setting academic goals and how those goals influence student achievement. Secondly, *Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building* explores how teachers and principals are recruited and selected for hire as well as which policies are used to retain effective teachers and principals. The availability and applicability of professional development activities, the amount of teacher collaboration and how and when teacher support is provided are also included. For the third area of analysis, *Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements*, the main focus is on how teachers select and use published programs in the classroom, including the role of the district, school, and teachers in the selection of instructional programs. Influences of legislation, how instructional time is allocated, the impact of the school schedule, and the use of student grouping arrangements are also explored in this area of analysis. The fourth theme, *Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data* investigates how schools use assessment data to influence instructional practice, how data are organized and distributed to schools, teachers, and parents, and whether schools or teachers use assessments other than state-mandated testing to monitor student performance. Additionally, teacher and principal evaluation systems are included for analysis. The last theme, *Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment*, encompasses recognition programs for teachers and students. Included are both remedial and enhanced programs, with a focus on improved academic achievement. A sixth area of analysis, *Factors Influencing Educational Practices*, was included to identify underlying supports that are beneficial for increasing student achievement. This area explores how the school board, teachers' unions and associations, parents, and communities influence practices. School climate,

funding, and core beliefs about teaching and learning are also examined in this area of analysis.

## Methodology

The methodology for the Arkansas Best Practices Study was created by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA). NCEA currently facilitates Best Practices studies in 20 states, and has established a common protocol to be used in each state throughout the nation. The common school selection process and interview protocol allows for comparisons between state findings, with the overall goal of identifying best practices that would improve student achievement across the United States.

Schools for the Arkansas Best Practices Study were selected from a list generated by NCEA. A set of criteria have been developed by NCEA to categorize schools as high-performing or average-performing. NCEA uses three years of state criterion-referenced testing data in mathematics and literacy for continuously enrolled students. In order for schools to be considered high-performing, they must have tested an appropriate percentage of students in each grade, and must have met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). NCEA then regressed the number of students proficient in a given school on various demographic characteristics, including ethnic breakdown and percentage of free and reduced lunch, to obtain a residual for each school. The residuals were then adjusted by the continuously enrolled group size and the state mean of the same group. Adjusted residuals were ranked within low income deciles, as determined by the school's percentage of low income (Free and Reduced Lunch) students and converted to percentile ranks. Schools were then identified as high-performing or average-performing based on their percentile ranks for mathematics and literacy. More information on the NCEA school selection process can be found at <http://www.nc4ea.org/files/NCEA%20HP%20Selection%20Criteria.pdf>.

For the 2003-2004 Arkansas Best Practices Study, seventeen elementary schools were identified to participate. Twelve of the seventeen schools were designated as high-performing, and five were designated as average-performing. Each average-performing school was matched with two high-performing schools with regard to size, income level, ethnicity, and limited English proficiency population. Geographic location was also considered. All seventeen schools that were invited to participate agreed to be included in the study. For the 2004-2005 Arkansas Best Practices Study, six elementary schools (four high-performing and two average performing) participated.

Triangulation of the data was accomplished by analyzing data from a variety of sources. Data were collected through interviews of superintendents, curriculum coordinators, principals, schools counselors, and classroom teachers. Additionally, districts and schools provided documentation to support and further explain the processes that occur within the district and at the individual schools. School and district websites were visited to gain additional documentation. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed using rigorous qualitative methods. Each transcript was coded by two independent researchers to identify major categories within the six NCEA themes. Once the major categories were established, specific characteristics of each high-performing and average-performing school were identified within each theme. The lists of characteristics were then compared in order to detect differences between high-performing and average-performing schools. Documents were examined for confirmatory evidence, as well as to reconcile discrepancies or to clarify information provided in the interviews. After completion of the data analysis, overall findings were organized into a 15-block (3x5) grid to allow for examination of data by

school system level and theme (see [http://www.just4kids.org/en/files/Publication-Twenty\\_States\\_Best\\_Practice\\_Framework-07-14-06.pdf](http://www.just4kids.org/en/files/Publication-Twenty_States_Best_Practice_Framework-07-14-06.pdf); currently, the information on this webpage is incongruent with the results presented in this paper. We are working with JFTK to ensure the results specific to Arkansas are presented on the JFTK website). After the overall analysis was completed, case studies of each of the high-performing schools were developed so that beneficial practices are outlined in more detail.

## Results

*Elementary School Analysis*

Analysis of the data revealed differences between high-performing and average-performing Arkansas elementary schools for every theme and school system level (see Table 1). Tables 2 through 6 illustrate the types of differences between high-performing and average-performing elementary schools for each of the NCEA themes. Within each table, the column entitled “Missing the Mark” addresses practices that were identified as ones that limit student achievement; the “On Target” column illustrates practices that were revealed to improve student achievement.

Table 2

## Arkansas Best Practices for the Theme of “Curriculum and Academic Goals”

System Level	Missing the Mark	On Target
Classroom	Teachers do not use state standards when developing lesson plans.	Teachers use state standards as the starting blocks for daily lessons.
Classroom	The classroom focus is on covering a particular amount of content in a given period of time.	The classroom focus is on student mastery of content.
Classroom	Curriculum decisions are not data-driven.	Curriculum decisions are made by identifying weaknesses from test scores.
Classroom	Teachers do not have flexibility in terms of what content is taught at each point in the school year.	Teachers are given the flexibility to adapt the curriculum as long as they continue to meet the state standards that mandate the amount of time to be spent in each content area.
School	Curriculum is revisited infrequently.	Curriculum revision is an ongoing process.
School	Horizontal and vertical alignment	Teachers frequently and routinely

	are not a focus of the school.	collaborate on horizontal and vertical alignment.
School	School has vague or unwritten academic goals.	School goals are clearly defined and distributed to all stakeholders.
School	The principal's activities and professional focus are limited to general administration.	The principal is a strong instructional leader.
School	High expectations for teachers and students are not clearly established.	High expectations for teachers and students are clearly established by the principal.
District	Academic goals are not revisited on a regular basis, but only revised when state standards change.	Academic goals are revisited several times each year to evaluate progress and identify areas of improvement.
District	Curriculum alignment is done by the district office only, with no input from individual school building personnel.	Curriculum alignment is done district-wide. Teachers and principals are involved in the alignment process.
District	Curriculum goals are loosely based on state standards.	State standards are closely analyzed to determine what should be taught at each grade level, and curriculum goals strictly adhere to state standards.
District	Goals may be vague or poorly worded. Stakeholders may or may not know what the district goals are or where they can be located.	Goals are clearly and concisely written and distributed to all stakeholders.
District	Long-term goals are nonexistent or are not clearly stated.	Both long-term and short-term goals are clearly defined for the district.

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Table 3

## Arkansas Best Practices for the Theme of “Staff Selection, Leadership, &amp; Capacity Building”

System Level	Missing the Mark	On Target
Classroom	Teachers do not collaborate on a regular basis.	Teachers collaborate regularly on the issue of curriculum and instruction.
Classroom	Teachers do not promote a team environment and do not share ideas with other teachers.	Teachers view the school as a team and student achievement as part of a team effort. Ideas are freely shared.
Classroom	Teachers meet only with other teachers in their grade level.	Teachers meet with other teachers in their grade level, as well as teachers in other grade levels and other buildings.
Classroom	Teachers are not expected to share ideas from professional development with other teachers.	Teachers are expected to share ideas from professional development with other teachers.
Classroom	Incorporation of ideas gained from professional development activities is not monitored.	Incorporation of ideas gained from professional development activities is monitored.
School	Teachers are expected to use their own time to collaborate.	Principals schedule time during the school day for teacher collaboration.
School	Current teachers are not involved in the process of hiring new teachers.	Current teachers are involved in the process of hiring new teachers.
School	Teachers are expected to attend professional development activities within the district.	Teachers are encouraged to find professional development opportunities outside of the district.
School	Teachers are not encouraged to pursue advanced degrees.	Teachers are encouraged to pursue advanced degrees and obtain

		adminstration certification.
School	Staff development is limited to what the school offers to teachers.	Teachers are offered a variety of options for staff development, and are encouraged to attend the activities that are most relevant to them.
District	All district-provided professional development activities are mandatory for teachers.	The district mandates some professional development activities, but offers teachers a variety of options for completing the state-required professional development hours.
District	The district requires teachers to obtain the majority of professional development hours on their own time.	The district schedules days during the school year for staff development.
District	Teachers must pay for professional development if they choose to attend activities that are not district-provided.	The district will pay for teachers to attend professional development activities outside of the district, as long as teachers can provide evidence that the activities will enhance instruction.
District	The district chooses staff development activities with little or no teacher input.	Teachers are surveyed to determine what staff development activities would be most beneficial.

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Table 4

## Arkansas Best Practices for the Theme of “Instructional Programs, Practices, &amp; Arrangements”

System Level	Missing the Mark	On Target
Classroom	Teachers use only a few instructional strategies in the classroom.	Teachers use several different instructional strategies in the classroom, and adapt strategies to fit student needs.
Classroom	Instructional strategies do not focus on preparing students for state testing.	Instructional strategies are adapted to prepare students for the format and content of the state test.
Classroom	Teachers are textbook-driven.	Teachers are standards-driven and supplement textbooks as necessary.
School	Teachers focus only on covering content.	Teachers focus on covering content as well as student mastery of the content.
School	Instructional practices center around tested content.	Instructional practices center around all core content areas, with integration used as much as possible.
School	The school administration does not have a clear discipline plan, or the plan is not communicated to teachers.	The school administration has a clear discipline plan. All teachers are aware of the discipline plan.
School	The school schedule is inconsistent.	The school schedule is structured to minimize interruptions and to give teachers large blocks of teaching time.
District	When curriculum materials do not match the state standards, teachers are left on their own to supplement instruction.	When curriculum materials do not match the state standards, additional materials are purchased by the district to supplement instruction.

District	Textbooks are chosen by a district committee with little input from teachers.	Textbooks are chosen by a committee of teachers, who recommend materials to the district.
District	The school schedule is loosely structured, with many irregular days.	The school calendar is scheduled so that assemblies, faculty meetings, teacher inservice days, and other potential interruptions are minimized.

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Table 5

## Arkansas Best Practices for the Theme of “Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data”

System Level	Missing the Mark	On Target
Classroom	Teachers do not establish personal goals before teacher evaluations.	Teachers establish personal goals each year. Teacher evaluations are used to monitor progress toward those goals.
Classroom	Pre-tests and post-tests are not used to determine curricular decisions.	Pre-tests and post-tests are used to determine weakness in curriculum and instruction.
Classroom	Student progress is not monitored on a regular basis.	Student progress toward mastery is closely monitored, and affects teachers' daily decisions.
Classroom	Teachers do not use state testing data to determine curriculum and instruction decisions.	State testing data are used to identify weaknesses in curriculum in individual classrooms.
School	Teachers are expected to analyze their classroom data on their own.	The faculty works together to analyze data and make instructional decisions.
School	The school assesses students infrequently.	The school frequently assesses students to monitor progress.
School	Data are not used to make curricular or instructional decisions.	Data are used to make all curricular and instructional decisions.
School	The principal does not use a formal teacher evaluation process.	The principal uses both formal and informal teacher evaluations.
District	District disaggregates data and distributes it to teachers, but little training is provided to teachers on how to interpret data.	District provides training for teachers on how to interpret data, and allows teachers to disaggregate and analyze their own data.
District	Data are used for monitoring student performance, but do not	Virtually every educational decision is data-driven, from

	directly impact educational decisions.	selecting curriculum materials to determining interventions.
District	Teacher evaluation and principal evaluation policies may be in place, but are frequently not followed.	Teacher evaluation and principal evaluation policies are strictly followed.
District	The superintendent of the district does not visit classrooms.	The superintendent of the district makes visits to classrooms a priority.
District	District personnel do not network with other districts.	District personnel are constantly networking with other districts to determine best practices.

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Table 6

## Arkansas Best Practices for the Theme of “Recognition, Intervention, &amp; Adjustments”

System Level	Missing the Mark	On Target
Classroom	Teachers do not adapt classroom instruction according to student needs.	Teachers adapt classroom instruction for all student needs, whether the need is remediation or enrichment.
Classroom	Students are identified for interventions based on test scores.	Students are identified for interventions based on test scores or teacher recommendation.
Classroom	Teachers do not use all available resources when students need interventions.	Teachers use all available resources to improve student achievement.
School	Students are not identified for intervention during the first several weeks of the school year.	Students are identified for interventions as quickly as possible, either by teacher monitoring or by examining past test scores.
School	High quality student work is not publicly recognized.	High quality student work is publicly recognized.
School	Reward systems are focused on extrinsic rewards.	Rewards systems use extrinsic rewards, but the focus is on creating intrinsic motivation.
School	Student recognition is mainly focused on academics.	Student recognition is focused on academics, character, and behavior so that each student can be recognized for his or her accomplishments.
School	Teachers do not observe or monitor each other.	Teachers monitor each other, and will intervene if another teacher is struggling.
District	Student interventions are not determined at the district level.	Student interventions are determined at the district level by examining student progress.

District	Teachers are not publicly recognized for accomplishments.	Teachers are publicly recognized for their success.
District	District is not involved in interventions.	District constantly monitors success of interventions and attempts to improve them.

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In addition to the overall analysis, case studies were created for each of the high-performing schools. Documents that related to best practices were selected that illustrated particular best practices in high performing schools. All results, including the case studies and document examples, are located on the CD, and we are working with Just for the Kids to include all information on their website and on the National Office of Research on Measurement and Evaluation Systems (NORMES) website (<http://normes.uark.edu>).

## Discussion

Results of the Arkansas Elementary Level Best Practices Study indicate that high-performing and average-performing elementary schools engage in different practices which influence student achievement. It is important to note that all best practices identified were not present in all high-performing schools, nor were all average-performing schools ignoring aspects of best practices. However, high-performing schools typically had been incorporating best practices more effectively and for longer periods of time than average-performing schools, which contributed to their increased levels of student achievement.

### *Curriculum and Academic Goals*

In high-performing schools, teachers begin planning lessons by examining the state standards. Lessons are then developed to cover the appropriate content for the standard. While teachers are aware of the amount of content that must be covered during the course of a school year, the main focus of the classroom is on student mastery of the material. When necessary, teachers adapt units and lessons to ensure that each student achieves mastery. Since the focus of the classroom is on student mastery, teachers are allowed to have flexibility in their planning in order to adapt to the needs of their students. At the same time, teachers are required to provide evidence to the principal that they are spending the required amount of time on each content area. The expectation is clearly established that teachers will make the best curricular decisions for their students.

Curriculum decisions in high-performing schools are made after a careful examination of test scores. Areas identified as weaknesses become the focus of the curriculum. Goals are then set for the identified areas and progress toward those goals is

closely monitored. Curriculum is revisited on a regular basis, not only when state standards change. High-performing schools constantly reevaluate and revise curriculum goals so that school academic goals are written and clearly defined. The school goals are an extension of the district goals. All stakeholders have copies of the school goals and refer to them on a regular basis to monitor progress.

Academic goals for the district are in a continual state of examination and revision, not only by district personnel but also by teachers and principals, for the purpose of monitoring the district's progress towards those goals. Regardless of size, districts with high-performing schools revisit their goals either by grade level or by subject area rather than attempting to evaluate progress for every grade level in every subject simultaneously. Curriculum goals for the district, like goals for the schools, are established by first examining the state standards with a critical eye to determine what specific instructional topics are included in each standard. State standards are accessed through the Arkansas Department of Education website (<http://arkedu.state.ar.us>), and goals are then developed so that all state standards are addressed for each grade level. Also, goals in these districts include both academic and behavioral goals. Teachers and principals all have copies of the district goals and incorporate the goals into everyday school life. Additionally, districts have both short- and long-term goals, as short-term goals are viewed as "stepping stones" toward the long-term goals.

Teachers in high-performing schools meet on a regular basis to determine if the horizontal and vertical alignment for the school and district is intact. In some high-performing schools, teachers meet as frequently as weekly. Principals arrange for teachers to have time to meet, both within grade level and across grade levels.

The horizontal and vertical alignment process includes all schools in the district. All stakeholders are involved in the process of alignment and are encouraged to provide input. Since teachers and principals, as well as district personnel, are involved in the process, the district alignment goals are perceived as relevant and important to individual schools and classrooms.

A key factor to school success is the principal leadership. In high-performing schools, the principal is a strong instructional leader, with a focus on determining what students and teachers need to have in order to succeed. The principal is willing to listen to both teachers and students, but is also capable of making difficult decisions. High expectations for both teachers and students are established by the principal, and are communicated on a regular basis. One of the principal's high expectations is that teachers will have high expectations for their students.

#### *Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building*

Teachers in high-performing schools meet on a regular basis, typically daily or weekly, to collaborate. This collaboration takes place even if it is not mandated by the school or district. In collaboration meetings, teachers share ideas for instruction and review curricular goals. Principals in high-performing schools strive to arrange the school schedule so that teachers can meet together and collaborate. While teacher collaboration is not always mandated by the school, the expectation is that teachers will use the scheduled time to meet together and improve curriculum and instruction. Faculty in-service days nearly always have time scheduled for teacher collaboration.

A team atmosphere is key to a positive school environment. Teachers view themselves as part of a team, working toward increased student achievement and higher

state test scores. As part of the team, teachers are willing to share ideas about instructional practices and discipline, as well as support each other when problems arise. Teachers are aware that students must reach a certain academic level in order to be successful in the next grade. Therefore, teachers feel the need to be knowledgeable about what the expectations are for the next grade level. Meetings with teachers across grade levels ensures that all teachers are staying on track.

When teachers at high-performing schools attend a professional development activity, it is expected that they will share ideas with the rest of the faculty so that all teachers in the school can use the information. It is also expected that ideas gained at professional development activities will be immediately incorporated into the classroom. The incorporation of these ideas is closely monitored by the principal, as professional development activities that are not valuable in the classroom as viewed as a waste of district money. The school offers teachers a wide variety of options for professional development, and teachers are encouraged to attend the activities that are most relevant or interesting to them. If a principal perceives a weakness in a teacher, he or she will encourage the teacher to attend a professional development activity that address the weakness. The teacher is then asked to present the information to the rest of the faculty.

Most professional development activities that are mandated by the district are limited to the activities mandated by the state. Teachers are allowed to choose from a variety of activities for completing the remainder of the required professional development hours so that professional development is a valuable experience. While the district offers many professional development options, teachers are also encouraged to seek professional development activities outside of the district, with the understanding

that they must provide a rationale to the principal for why they want to attend a particular activity. The district is willing to pay for teachers to attend professional development activities outside of the district, with the provision that the activities must be research-based and will enhance instruction. The school schedule is arranged so that most, if not all, of the necessary professional development hours can be obtained during the school year as part of the teachers' contracted days. Professional development activities are chosen based on what teachers and administrators feel would be valuable. Input from the teachers is considered to be of utmost importance as the district determines which professional development activities will be scheduled for the year.

Teachers may or may not be involved in the hiring of new principals, but are involved in the hiring of new teachers. Typically, teachers within the grade level or subject matter of the new position are included in the hiring process. Teachers are encouraged to pursue advanced degrees, either for the purpose of moving up the pay scale or to obtain certification for administration. New administrators are frequently chosen from the pool of teachers that have obtained or have made progress towards an administrative degree.

#### *Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements*

In high-performing schools, teachers have a wide repertoire of teaching strategies and are flexible enough to adapt strategies to meet student needs. Teachers are also able to recognize their own weaknesses in instructional strategies or content knowledge and will work to either eliminate the weaknesses or cooperate with another teacher that is strong in that particular area. Teachers choose instructional strategies and materials based on the state standards. The districts with high-performing schools select textbooks and

other materials based on their alignment with the state standards, but if the adopted textbook materials are inadequate, teachers will supplement in order to increase student achievement. Supplementary materials are carefully chosen based on their appropriateness for the grade level and whether the materials have been shown to be effective. The district will provide supplementary materials to teachers rather than requiring that the teachers provide their own. Schools are frequently given extra money specifically for supplementary materials.

The textbook selection process is frequently lengthy, typically involving a committee of teachers from different schools in the district. Teachers on the committee examine several textbooks and teacher materials, research the validity of the materials, and pilot materials in a few classrooms before making a recommendation to the district. In one district, schools are given the option to not adopt the district-recommended textbook and are provided money for other materials if the school can provide evidence that the program is effective.

Classroom instruction includes activities that are similar to the state test. This may include assessment strategies, format of classroom questions, or establishing an environment that is similar to what students will experience on the testing day. Teachers believe that "teaching to the test" is a positive concept and will help students learn and achieve more. The focus of teachers is mainly on student mastery of content, rather than covering a certain amount of content within a given time frame. Teachers are constantly monitoring and adjusting their teaching based on their perception of student mastery.

Integration of content areas is a common practice. At the time this study was conducted, math and literacy were the only two content areas tested by the state. High-

performing schools focused primarily on math and literacy, but not to the detriment of other content areas, such as science and social studies. Principals structure the school schedule so that large blocks of time are available for teachers to cover core content areas. In most cases, teachers have ninety-minute blocks of uninterrupted time.

Additional classes, such as art, music, and physical education are scheduled carefully so as to maximize instructional time. The goal of the school is to provide as much continuity in scheduling as possible. School schedules are arranged to provide as many full-length school days as possible. Assemblies, faculty meetings, teacher inservices, and other interruptions are kept to a minimum, and are frequently scheduled to take place after regular school hours.

The discipline plan for the school is clear, and teachers follow the discipline plan closely. Teachers are aware of what steps the administration will take when a student is referred to the administration for discipline problems. School administrators take care to follow the discipline plan so that trust is maintained between teachers and administrators.

*Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data*

Teachers meet with the principal at the beginning of the year to determine what their personal goals are. These goals are kept on file and form the basis for the formal observations. The principal utilizes both formal and informal teacher evaluations to monitor teacher progress toward personal and school goals, and to determine if adjustments need to be made. Documentation is kept on both formal and informal evaluations.

Teachers use pre-tests and post-tests regularly, some as often as daily, to identify problems and monitor student progress. Weaknesses identified by the pre- and post-tests

are addressed in curriculum and instruction adaptations. In addition to the pre- and post-test, teachers use state testing data as a method of identifying curricular or instructional weaknesses within their classrooms. Testing data are viewed as tools for improving instruction, rather than intrusions on their classrooms.

Faculty members work together to analyze data, both within grade levels and across grade levels. All faculty members have a stake in the performance of students on the state test, even if they do not teach a grade that is tested (Note: at the time this study was conducted, only fourth and sixth grades were tested at the elementary level. Beginning in 2005, state Benchmark tests were required for grades 3-8). From the data analysis, the faculty will make instructional and curricular decisions based on identified weaknesses. Data analysis training is provided for teachers so that teachers can learn how to use data effectively to inform instruction. While the district may perform some disaggregation of data, the majority of data analysis is done by the teachers with support provided by the district.

In addition to the classroom assessments, the school regularly assesses students, sometimes as frequently as weekly, to monitor student progress. Off-grade testing is in place and is afforded the same importance as on-grade testing. Assessments are used to determine appropriate interventions, predict state test scores, and make curricular and instructional changes. Every curricular and instructional decision, whether at the classroom, school, or district level, is data-driven, including selection of instructional materials and professional development, student and teacher interventions, and district policies. Data are gathered from a variety of sources before decisions are made.

Daily classroom decisions are affected by student mastery of a content area. Student progress in the classroom is closely monitored, either through teacher-created assessments, computerized assessments, or assessments supplied by textbook publishers. If students do not demonstrate mastery, teachers adapt their daily lessons until mastery is achieved. Student performance is also closely monitored by the district, so that quality decisions can be made for each individual student.

The superintendent of the district regularly visits classrooms. While the superintendent may not visit every teacher every year, he or she is a distinct presence in the schools. Other district personnel, such as the assistant superintendent or curriculum coordinator, may also visit classrooms on a regular basis. Whether formal or informal, policies exist for teacher and principal evaluations, and they are strictly followed. Documentation is kept for all evaluations. Personnel at the district level have worked to establish a network with other districts to assist in determining best practices. This may include obtaining research grants with other districts, on-site visits to districts that are experiencing success, or sharing personnel.

#### *Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustments*

High-performing schools attempt to identify students for interventions as soon as possible. This is done using a variety of methods: teacher assessment, past test scores, or cumulative portfolios. Students are incorporated into intervention programs quickly to ensure their academic success. Teachers are consistently on alert for students that may need intervention, which helps ensure that students will be identified for assistance early on in the school year. For students needing remediation, this is considered to be particularly important, as the student may fall too far behind if the need is not identified

quickly. Teachers use parents, peer tutoring, grandparent programs, other teachers, teacher aides, and community involvement as methods of improving student achievement. Teachers are willing to seek out other resources if they believe that their students can benefit from them.

The district uses student testing data to determine which students need interventions, either for remediation or enrichment. While the frequency of data collection varies from district to district, it is considered to be a valuable tool for the district in determining early student interventions. The district is constantly monitoring intervention programs to determine if they are working. If the district determines intervention programs are lacking in some way, strategies for improving the programs are sought.

Teachers will adapt classroom instruction for all student needs. This means that teachers must be aware of which students are in need of remediation and which students are in need of enrichment. Different teachers reward students in different ways, but the focus is always on motivating students to perform to the best of their ability. High quality student work is displayed in classrooms and in hallways. Students that consistently produce high quality work are recognized in school-wide assemblies. Rewards systems may use extrinsic rewards, but the main focus is to teach students that learning is its own reward. There is a consistent belief that extrinsic rewards will work for awhile, but ultimately reduce student motivation. Student recognition is not only focused on academic achievement. Students may be recognized for appropriate behavior, displaying certain character traits, attendance, or academic growth. It is understood that students

must be taught how to behave appropriately and be rewarded for displaying good behavior.

Teachers frequently visit each other's classrooms and monitor each other. Teachers that are struggling are encouraged to conference with other teachers to solve problems. A team atmosphere is fostered throughout the school. Teachers are publicly recognized for accomplishments, through announcements at faculty meetings, recognition banquets, newspaper articles, and school newsletters. Teacher recognition rarely has a monetary reward attached to it.

### *Summary*

The results of this study are valuable to schools that are struggling with regard to student achievement. Practical suggestions can be drawn from the results, giving districts, schools, and teachers actual practices to implement. These practices can be used not only throughout the state of Arkansas, but can help inform practice throughout the nation in order to improve teaching and learning. Best Practices studies conducted in other states, such as Texas, Illinois, and Tennessee, allow us to identify similarities in best practices and to determine if best practices differ based on region.

While not all best practices were identified in all high-performing schools, the data revealed clear practices that helped students achieve. The quality of implementation of a particular practice and the length of time that a school had been utilizing a given best practice influenced the success that schools have had. As average-performing schools devote more effort and time to implementing best practices, it can be expected that improvements will be seen.