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**Stories From the Classroom:
 The Commission's Recommendations Alive in Schools**

Effective Teachers Are Critical to Success in the Classroom

Belt, Montana, is a small rural community of about 2,000 residents located just 20 miles outside of Great Falls, Montana. The school system in Belt, led by Superintendent Calvin Johnson, serves approximately 300 students in kindergarten through grade 12. As with many school systems across the country—especially small, rural systems—educators in Belt wear many different hats. Teachers serve in many different capacities, especially in the classroom where content expertise in multiple subjects is a necessity. Of the 27 teachers on staff in Belt, 11 have master's degrees and all meet the Montana definition of a highly qualified teacher.

Recruiting can be a challenge in Belt—regardless of grade or subject area. “There is a high demand, but a very low supply,” says Johnson. For the most recent opening in the school system, Johnson received only two resumes. Despite these and other obstacles, Johnson is a firm believer in the impact a teacher can have on student achievement and continues to work with the staff to make improvements. “Teacher quality is one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of student achievement,” says Johnson. “It’s the number one thing—be effective in the classroom.” He is quick to note that being licensed and being qualified to teach are *not* one-and-the-same. A common attribute of a high-quality teacher, Johnson notes, is the ability to adjust to the students and situations at hand.

Supported Teachers Are Effective Teachers

Cynthia Challberg-Hale serves as principal of Washington Middle School, a grades 6–8 middle school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Washington Middle School employs 32 teachers, all of whom meet NCLB's highly qualified definition, according to Challberg-Hale. She adds that 15 of the school's teachers also hold bilingual and ESL endorsements. Yet Challberg-Hale says it's not always her most educated and credentialed teachers who are the best. Teacher quality, she says, has more to do with how they use their skills to reach the students and the heart they bring to the profession. “Their willingness to learn, change and adapt to the needs of the students,” is key, adds Challberg-Hale. She is quick to acknowledge the critical role teaching can play in student learning. “It’s the most important thing; what happens in that classroom between that teacher and students is really the only critical thing,” says Challberg-Hale.

Challberg-Hale is a firm believer in providing teachers with the necessary support to do their job. “I make sure they have training in how to be effective in what they're doing,” says Challberg-Hale. Each teacher is given a laptop and provided with enough funds to order teaching supplies and materials. Mentoring also plays a role in supporting new teachers, through district and union partnerships in the district. The school forms teams called “instructional families,” which allow for grade-level and subject-focused collaboration and mentoring.

Challberg-Hale says she would value having data on individual student achievement growth from year to year to inform her assessments of teacher performance and decisions about professional development, mentoring and other needs. “I think it would be the most effective model,” she says. “Especially when you're looking at how effective they are with English language learners and special education—if you have teachers that only teach to the very top of the class, you don't have an effective teacher.” Washington Middle School, with a Hispanic population reaching 90 percent, recently surpassed its targeted growth for the first time in seven years. The state

set a target of 3 percent growth, but Washington reached 4.7 percent growth in mathematics and 4.62 percent growth in reading.

Formative and Annual Assessment Data Drives Classroom Instruction

P.S. 161 Don Pedro Albizu Campos, located in New York City, serves a community of predominantly immigrant families, many of whom are undocumented. Many parents hold two or three jobs, just to make ends meet. A large portion of the student population is made up of English language learners, and nearly all of the students at P.S. 161 qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. In many cases, families have several children attending the elementary school.

The state of New York requires students at P.S. 161 to be assessed annually in grades 3–6 in literacy and math, grade 4 in science and grade 5 in social studies. English language learners are also tested twice annually. In addition, the school administers diagnostic testing five times a year in reading, mathematics, science and social studies. Kindergartners and first and second graders also take part in an assessment that gauges their phonemic awareness and emergent literacy skills. These efforts are yielding positive results at P.S. 161—for 2006, the number of students in grades 3–6 scoring proficient or greater on the state’s mathematics exam increased from 52 percent in 2005 to 65 percent in 2006.

“The testing is really to inform where work needs to be done,” says Principal Barbara Brown. Results should be measured on a longitudinal basis, she says, instead of the current system of comparing the percentage of students who meet the requirements one year with a new group of children the following year. Test results also need to be returned in a timely fashion to effectively drive instructional change.

Embracing Accountability for the Achievement of All Students

At Centennial Place Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia, teachers and administrators take seriously the idea of holding themselves accountable for the achievement of *all* students. The school’s staff was thrilled when test results came out in 2004. That year, 90 percent of the school’s students met or exceeded state standards, and the school made adequate yearly progress under NCLB. The school’s staff celebrated their accomplishment as a demonstration that a diverse school—the students include children who live in homeless shelters as well as children of Coca-Cola executives—could achieve at high levels.

Yet when the educators examined the results in greater detail, they grew concerned. They noticed that results for students with disabilities were much lower than those for students without disabilities. Only 47 percent of special education students met or exceeded standards that year. Under state policy, Centennial Place did not have to report results separately for students with disabilities because the number of affected students was lower than the required reporting threshold. But the school took to heart NCLB’s mission of holding schools accountable for the achievement of all students. The staff looked at the results and challenged themselves to bring all students to high standards, and took action to improve the achievement of students with disabilities. The school hired a new special education teacher and revamped its special education program. As a result of these efforts, approximately 70 percent of students with disabilities now meet or exceed standards.

Focusing on Individual Student Progress to Spur School Improvement

The Yough School District is located in a rural community about 30 miles from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The district met adequate yearly progress targets for the past two academic years following two years on the state’s warning list. In 2005–06, the district reached 69 percent overall proficiency or above in mathematics and 68 percent overall proficiency or above in reading. Improvement efforts in the district focused heavily on the foundations of a high-achieving system: high-quality *instructors* and high-quality *instruction*. Leadership and the ability to make necessary changes also rank high on the list for turning around low-performing schools.

The use of data and charting the growth of individual students also have helped improve outcomes for Yough’s students. Assessment data enables principals and teachers to identify students most in need of help and target efforts to those students. Teachers are heavily trained in using data to improve classroom instruction, and are encouraged to use the Internet as an instructional tool. The district is also working to bolster collaboration among staff as a means to improve instruction.