

*Interviews with education leaders and policymakers in both states uncovered striking and unexpectedly similar stories.*

National Education Goals  
Panel, 1998

# PATHS TO SUCCESS

## LESSONS LEARNED IN NORTH CAROLINA AND TEXAS

Each year, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) tracks and reports on each state's progress in improving education for its children. The report is based on many factors including student scores on tests of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). In the panel's 1997 report, North Carolina and Texas stood out from all other states by showing significant improvement in the greatest number of areas.

Both states posted measurable, sustained gains in academic achievement, including the largest average increases in student math and reading scores on NAEP tests over a seven-year period. In particular, the scores of disadvantaged students improved more rapidly than those of advantaged students. These results were obtained not only in NAEP scores, but in the states' own assessments as well.

The panel commissioned Dr. David Grissmer, an educational researcher at the Rand Corporation, to uncover how North Carolina and Texas achieved these results. His analysis is worth noting not only for what he found, but for what he didn't.

### Factors That Might Explain Their Success...But Don't:

Grissmer first examined several common factors associated with student achievement. None of them appeared to affect the results in North Carolina and Texas:

- *Per-pupil spending:* Both states are below the national average.
- *Class size:* Both states are near the national average.
- *Percentage of teachers with advanced degrees:* Both states are below the national average.
- *Years of teacher experience:* Both states are below the national average.

### Parallel Paths to Success

The study concluded that the most likely explanation for gains in North Carolina and Texas was the remarkably similar way in which each state set new education policy:

- Both states pursued similar policies to achieve goals in education.
- Both states effectively changed the organizational environment.
- Both states effectively changed the incentive structure for educators.

Though similar sets of education policies exist in other states, the successes in North Carolina and Texas can be traced to the way in which policies were developed, implemented, and sustained: through consistent, determined cooperation among educators, business leaders, and policymakers.

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There were seven striking similarities between the two states:

**1. Leadership From the Business Community**

In both states, the business community played a critical role in developing and sustaining reform. Business leaders helped form the strategic plan for improvement, forging compromises with the education interests and enabling passage of the necessary legislation. Business interests in both states worked to assure that the plans defined clear results and advocated increased flexibility for educators in how prescribed results were to be achieved.

**2. State Standards With Clear Teaching Objectives at Each Grade Level**

Statewide academic standards were developed and adopted in both states in the late 1980s and early 1990s and were supported consistently thereafter. Standards were set for each grade and in several subjects. Teachers in all grades were given clear objectives for what students should know. In both states, efforts were made to align textbooks and curricula with the statewide standards. Both states emphasize that their academic standards apply to *all* students. Disadvantaged students are held to the same standards as advantaged students.

**3. Statewide Assessments Closely Linked to Academic Standards**

New statewide assessment tests were developed in both states to reflect the academic standards for each grade. Assessment in both states is done in third through eighth grade in reading and math. Statewide testing to these standards began in Texas in 1993–94 and in North Carolina in 1992–93. The standards and assessments have remained substantially unchanged since that time.

**4. Data Systems for Continuous Improvement**

Scores on the tests are provided to students, parents, teachers, schools, and school districts. Both states have a well-designed computerized system for storing the testing information and provide access to it in various ways for teachers, principals, and school districts. Access to school-level results is provided on the Internet in both states. Teachers in both states have access to summaries and individual data of students entering their classes each year. In both states test items are made available to the public after each test.

**5. Increasing Flexibility for Administrators and Teachers**

The strategic plans developed in each state in the late 1980s and early 1990s acknowledged that teachers and administrators could not be held accountable unless they were given authority and flexibility to determine locally how to meet the standards. In both states, unnecessarily restrictive statutes governing schools and teaching were repealed. Constraints placed on district superintendents and principals for how money is spent were reduced. The policy objective was to allow local schools to vary the approaches they could take to achieve the standards.

**6. Accountability Systems With Consequences for Results**

Both states reward schools financially for improved performance and have the power to disenfranchise school districts and remove principals based on sustained levels of poor performance. The two state systems take into account both absolute test scores and gains. Schools are rated on scales ranging from exemplary to poor performing. The gain score is used as the primary ranking mechanism, but schools can be penalized if they do not have a specified proportion of students reaching a minimum proficiency level.

Both state systems show awareness of factors that could provide unfair advantage to certain schools, including the social and economic advantages of the school community. Care is taken in both states to account for students coming in during the year and to adjust beginning gain scores to the actual students in the schools at the beginning of the year. Both states keep close scrutiny of the students not taking tests. Thus the procedures—although not perfect—are designed to account for schools’ special circumstances and to protect against manipulation by teachers or principals.

## **7. Shifting Resources to Schools With More Disadvantaged Students**

Both states gradually shifted resources to schools with more disadvantaged students. This shift was partially the result of judicial decisions requiring the states to fund school districts more equitably. However, the shift may be an essential element of achieving a system perceived to be fair and equitable by teachers and administrators. The acceptance, endurance, and effectiveness of these policies may rest upon the perception that the distribution of resources among schools and school districts is fair and equitable.

Many of these reforms were initially opposed by the education community including representatives of school boards, principals, and teachers. In both states, the business community formed and funded new organizations representing the business, education, and policymaking communities: the North Carolina Public School Forum and the Texas Business-Education Coalition. These coalitions provided a forum to discuss education reform issues and forge compromises among the concerned groups to allow them to cooperate in support of subsequent legislation.

Both states also developed a cooperative infrastructure for supporting sustained and continuing improvement in education. Jointly funded with a mix of public, nonprofit, and private sector participation, this infrastructure includes:

- State-focused research institutes and centers
- Organizations devoted to research-based policy formulation
- A network of business-school system partnerships
- A variety of private sector “cottage industries” aiding school improvement with new systems and training methods

The components of this infrastructure work cooperatively to find innovative ways to improve schools and other support systems for children. They continually analyze and evaluate the results of their previous efforts.

Developing these systems in both states was a long and arduous process. However, the success of both states has proven that sustained cooperation among business leaders, educators, and policymakers can indeed improve education.

Adapted from D. Grissmer and A. Flanagan, *Exploring Rapid Achievement Gains in North Carolina and Texas*, Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel, November, 1998; and E. Wurtz, *Promising Practices: Progress Toward the Goals: 1998*, Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel, 1998.



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