

## Promising Practices: Getting the Most Out of Your Education Investment

### ***Standard & Poor's Explores Strategies Used By Highly Resource Effective School Districts***

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Since 2001, Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services has been helping educators and policymakers leverage data to make better-informed decisions about effective strategies to allocate valuable resources. Most recently, Standard & Poor's conducted a unique *Education Resource Management Study for the State of Kansas*<sup>1</sup>, which identified and analyzed how highly efficient school districts allocate resources. The findings hold insights for school districts throughout the country.

Meant to serve as a resource for state lawmakers, education officials and district leaders, the study examined how efficient school systems used their existing resources to raise student achievement.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Standard & Poor's examined the ways in which efficient districts allocated resources in the following key areas: *money, staff, time, and academic programs*.

This landmark study is unique in that it focused not just on spending differences between school districts, but also on specific resource management strategies, described both qualitatively and quantitatively, that cost effectively lead to higher student achievement. Another hallmark of the study is it took into account student performance adjusted for the percentage of economically disadvantaged students enrolled in the district.

Standard & Poor's encourages district leaders and policymakers to take a closer look at this fresh perspective—an examination of resource allocation practices and student outcomes in tandem and in a demographic context—rather than independently and in isolation. This approach can help districts and states maximize our country's investments in public education.

This document highlights a sample of the most “promising practices” exhibited by Kansas' highly resource efficient school districts. The full report, which provides a comprehensive set of techniques, action steps, and guiding principles around district resource allocation, can be found at [www.SchoolMatters.com](http://www.SchoolMatters.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Governor Kathleen Sebelius commissioned Standard & Poor's to conduct a resource management study of school districts in Kansas.

<sup>2</sup> The organizational strategies described in this document and throughout the study were identified by asking the highly resource-effective districts about their resource-allocation practices, specifically through a detailed questionnaire completed by each district and through interviews with senior district leaders, conducted by a team of Standard & Poor's analysts during site visits to each district.

## Resource-Allocation Strategies That Work<sup>3</sup>

Highly Resource-Effective Districts (HREDs) are nothing if not highly intentional in their actions and decisions. Standard & Poor's found that a common set of practices was applied by all the HREDs. Specifically, these districts consistently:

- Make ***pro-active, highly intentional decisions*** that are carefully integrated within the overall organizational context.
- Maintain ***shared central office and school authority over major resource decisions***.
- ***Align spending with strategic priorities***, especially student performance goals.
- Eliminate or combine bus routes in order to more ***efficiently spend transportation dollars***.
- ***Encourage cost avoidance*** through multiple purchase options and reduction of inefficiencies.
- ***Invest strategically*** to optimize the return (i.e., student achievement) on resources.
- Recruit and retain high-quality teachers ***who are in tune with the district's culture and philosophy***.
- ***Support and enhance classroom teachers' performance*** with on-the-ground instructional guidance and assistance.
- ***Align faculty teaching-assignments*** with students' needs.
- ***Invest in targeted professional development*** to ensure return on strategic program investments.
- Use ***teachers as expert resources*** for key decisions.
- ***Adjust schedules to increase the time*** students spend learning reading and math.
- Extend the contract year to ***increase teacher development and planning time***.
- ***Allocate time*** (e.g. school schedules, staff meeting, etc.) ***according to strategic priorities***.
- ***Focus district and building meetings*** on learning and instruction, rather than on administrative issues.
- Consider only ***research-substantiated programs***, and evaluate them thoroughly before and after the purchase.
- ***Use data to drive programmatic decisions***, with careful attention to student needs and resources.
- Systematically use an effective mix ***of formative assessments for learning, and summative assessments of learning***.
- Make substantial investments in ***academic support programs for at-risk populations***, in order to close achievement gaps.

What follows are more detailed illustrations of selected resource allocation strategies. The examples are organized around the four key areas: *money, staff, time, and academic programs*. A more comprehensive discussion of the strategies of Kansas' Highly Resource-Effective Districts is available at [www.SchoolMatters.com](http://www.SchoolMatters.com).

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<sup>3</sup> These strategies describe the actions taken by the districts analyzed in this study to increase resource effectiveness, in the context of their local circumstances and trends. While some of the strategies may be universally replicable, others may not be appropriate for every district.

## Monetary Resources

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Effective Practice: *Aligning spending with strategic priorities, especially student performance goals.*

One HRED uses multiple techniques to achieve the highest return on spending, including spending exclusively against the district's strategic (improvement) plan. This HRED ensures fiscal responsibility and efficiency by requiring that all requests for significant purchases be justified based on their alignment with the district's strategic plan. Furthermore, staff must show how a purchase will positively impact student achievement. "All decisions are measured against the plan," according to the superintendent, who draws the distinction between pressures not to spend and pressures to spend in a deliberate, focused manner. Specific illustrations of effective spending practices adopted by this district include:

1. **Increasing flexibility to meet identified needs** by reducing building-level funding and carrying a sizable amount in the central budget account for instructional materials, capital equipment, and maintenance. When principals request additional funds, their request must be justified in terms of the strategic plan and clearly detail the need, the person responsible, the timetable, and the assessment method that will be used.
2. Pushing aggressively for **zero-interest extended payments** on some large capital equipment purchases to allow the distribution of the expense over additional fiscal years.
3. Establishing a textbook renewal cycle that allowed for the purchase of a multi-grade textbook series. **Buying in large quantities** allowed this district to leverage the publisher for supplemental materials and training consultation.
4. **Prioritizing spending with input from those "on the ground."** Several years ago, district leaders decided to prioritize spending on student achievement, rather than accepting a spending wish list that was unrelated to teaching and learning activities. Gathering input from the people closest to student learning, the academic coaches and the principals in each school became an integral part of the spending/budgeting process.
5. **Spending professional development dollars on core objectives.** Math and reading improvement is required as a focus of all training in the district.
6. **Using grant revenue to further** the curricular, instructional, assessment, and professional development priorities of the district. The district's federal *Reading First* grant, for instance, was used to enhance the staffs' understanding of data analysis and help in training academic coaches.
7. **Deferring spending** on capital improvements has allowed more resources to be directed to instructional programs. Facilities' spending is reviewed during the annual strategic planning cycle.

## Staff Resources

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Effective Practice: *Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers who are in tune with the district's philosophy.*

One HRED uses proactive recruiting and screening practices to attract teachers who are highly qualified and well matched with the district's culture and philosophy. This district, which has high student poverty, screens candidates to assess who can work effectively with low-income children and would fit in with the district's distinct culture.

Interviewers are trained in a diagnostic method known as the "Haberman Process," which promises to identify the true values and underlying motives of prospective teachers. As a result, the process identifies the teachers who are most prepared to meet the unique needs of the district's students, would feel professionally rewarded by the challenges posed by the student population, and thus would be most likely to stay in the district. This is

especially important since the district's salaries are competitive with, but not significantly higher than, nearby districts that have less challenging student demographics.

Effective Practice: *Aligning faculty teaching assignments with students' needs.*

One HRED assigns the lowest performing students to the most experienced teachers. Additionally, lower student-teacher ratios are maintained where they are believed to have the most impact. For example, in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, the district maintains classrooms of approximately 14 students per teacher, as opposed to 18 students per teacher in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Based on student performance data, district officials believe that an investment in smaller 1<sup>st</sup> grade classes reduces the number of students identified as underachieving in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

## Time Resources

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Effective Practice: *Allocating time according to strategic priorities.*

Faculty meetings in most HREDs are largely focused on analyzing student achievement data for the purpose of making instructional improvements, rather than on the inevitable paperwork and general oversight required to manage schools. In one HRED, the district's administrators report spending 85- to 95-percent of their time on activities such as data analysis, coaching on the use of assessments, and school improvement, rather than administrative duties. Administrative tasks and details are typically addressed through other means, including e-mail. Many HREDs use their administrator meetings to advance the administrators' own learning, for instance by engaging in studies of well known books on leadership, like Stephen Covey's *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*.

Effective Practice: *Adjusting schedules to increase the time students spend learning reading and math.*

One HRED has increased the amount of time elementary students spend daily learning mathematics and reading. Elementary students spend 90 minutes on reading and math daily – double the amount of time previously allotted to these core subjects. Furthermore, the elementary students spend an additional 30 minutes on mathematics three times a week, and 30 minutes on writing daily.

## Programmatic Resources

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Effective Practice: *Using data to drive programmatic decisions, with careful attention to student needs and resources.*

In one HRED, teachers—with the support of the school board and superintendent, and the leadership of the curriculum director—helped significantly streamline the district's programs. For example, the number of reading programs in the district was reduced from 13 to three. The district also aligned its curriculum to the state curriculum standards, by considering only research-based programs. To ensure “instructional coherence” teachers and administrators have worked together to select a limited number of textbooks that align well to state standards. For example, one elementary textbook series has been adopted for mathematics, and two have been adopted for reading.

Effective Practice: *Systematically using an effective mix of formative assessments for learning, and summative assessments of learning.*

In one HRED, teachers design criterion-referenced pre-tests and post-tests across instructional programs to measure overall programmatic effectiveness and student progress. Assessment results are used to check the alignment of the program with state standards and adjustments are made as necessary. Student results on state tests are the final determinant of programmatic effectiveness. District-developed criterion referenced tests in reading and mathematics are administered in grades one through 12 in the fall and spring, providing teachers with data on how well students are meeting state and district standards during each academic year.

The study can be found online at the [Kansas Resource Management Study](#) page accessible from the [Kansas State Overview](#) page on [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com).

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