

The Search for Progress
Elementary Student Achievement
and the Bay Area School Reform
Collaborative's Focal Strategy

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Overview

The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC, now called Springboard Schools) in San Francisco, California, is a grant-making organization that supports districts' system-wide efforts to improve the quality and equity of student outcomes. The organization pursues various reform strategies. This report discusses the "focal strategy," which targeted six districts in the Bay Area ("focal districts"), beginning in the 2002-2003 school year. The strategy does not prescribe a particular curriculum or school structure. Instead, it promotes a vision of culture change, relying on three key features: coaching of district and school leaders; evidence-based decision-making at all levels of the system; and networking within and across schools to share experiences and lessons.

With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, MDRC, a nonpartisan, non-profit education and social policy research organization, is conducting an independent evaluation of BASRC's focal strategy. This report, the first of two, analyzes the relationship between the focal strategy and improvements in student achievement. It compares progress in the focal districts in the first two years of the strategy's implementation to progress in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts in the same area over the same period. Though differences in the outcomes cannot necessarily be attributed to the BASRC focal strategy, the comparison illuminates the relationships between student outcomes and the focal strategy.

Key Findings

- In the years following implementation of the focal strategy, achievement among third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts slightly declined, while achievement in the comparison districts showed no change compared with the baseline period.
- On the other hand, fifth-grade students' performance in the focal districts improved over time, slightly outpacing improvements in the comparison districts in Year 2, but the differences were not statistically significant.
- Among blacks and Hispanics, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students, performance in the focal districts appeared to surpass the improvements in the comparison districts. The differences were most evident in reductions in the percentage of fifth-grade students performing below basic levels. However, the differences were modest, generally limited to Year 2, and not statistically significant.

The evident lack of a substantial, pervasive association between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement may not be surprising given that the strategy primarily targets district leadership and does not specify how reform activities may lead to changes in instruction or to instructional supports. The BASRC focal strategy has the potential to strengthen district leadership for supporting school improvement, and it may set the stage for stronger systemic improvements that are designed to change instructional practices. Thus it will be important to continue to look at follow-up data to ascertain whether the differences between the focal districts and the comparison districts — differences that were concentrated in the second year of implementation — persist, grow, or fade over time.

Contents

Overview		iii
List of Tables and Figures		vii
Preface		ix
Acknowledgments		xi
Executive Summary		ES-1
Chapter 1	Introduction	1
Chapter 2	The BASRC Focal Strategy	9
Chapter 3	Implementation of the BASRC Focal Strategy	17
Chapter 4	The Relationship Between Participation in the BASRC Focal Strategy and Trends in Student Achievement	33
Chapter 5	Conclusions and Implications	59
Appendix A	Background Information on the California Standards Tests, the Stanford Achievement Test, and the California Achievement Tests	63
Appendix B	Selection of Comparison Districts	65
Appendix C	Comparing Trends with All Bay Area and California State Districts	73
Appendix D	Analysis of Achievement Outcomes	79
References		89
Earlier MDRC Publications on High School Reform Efforts		91

List of Tables and Figures

Table

1.1	Comparison of BASRC Reform Efforts	4
2.1	Coaching Roles in the BASRC Focal Strategy	13
3.1	BASRC Focal Districts and Their Focal Elementary Schools	18
3.2	Characteristics of BASRC Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts, Elementary-Level Average for School Years 1999-2000 Through 2001-2002	19
4.1	Characteristics of BASRC Focal and Comparison Districts, Elementary-Level Average for School Years 1999-2000 Through 2001-2002	38
B.1	Characteristics of BASRC Focal and Comparison Districts by Year, Third-Grade Students	68
B.2	Characteristics of BASRC Focal and Comparison Districts by Year, Fifth-Grade Students	70
D.1	Third-Grade Outcomes, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	80
D.2	Fifth-Grade Outcomes, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	81
D.3	Third-Grade Outcomes, English Language Learners, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	82
D.4	Fifth-Grade Outcomes, English Language Learners, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	83
D.5	Third-Grade Outcomes, Economically Disadvantaged Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	84
D.6	Fifth-Grade Outcomes, Economically Disadvantaged Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	85
D.7	Third-Grade Outcomes, Black and Hispanic Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	86
D.8	Fifth-Grade Outcomes, Black and Hispanic Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis	87

Figure

ES.1	Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts	ES-6
ES.2	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts	ES-7
1.1	Timeline of BASRC Reform Efforts	3
2.1	BASRC Focal Strategy Theory of Action	16

Figure

4.1	Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts	42
4.2	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts	44
4.3	Third-Grade Student Performance on Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading	46
4.4	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading	48
4.5	Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: Economically Disadvantaged Students	50
4.6	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: Economically Disadvantaged Students	51
4.7	Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: Black and Hispanic Students	53
4.8	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: Black and Hispanic Students	54
4.9	Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: English Language Learners	56
4.10	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: English Language Learners	57
C.1	Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts	74
C.2	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts: Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts	75
C.3	Third-Grade Student Performance on Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading: Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts	76
C.4	Fifth-Grade Student Performance on Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading: Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts	77

Preface

A number of forces have increased the momentum for school districts to develop district-wide reform strategies as a means of initiating and sustaining school improvement. First, districts have sometimes found it easier to manage and support a single districtwide initiative rather than many different school reform models. Second, they have come to recognize that some educational problems, such as high student mobility, are better addressed above the level of individual schools. Finally, new standards of accountability, including requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, have created an audience for new ideas about the appropriate role of districts in spearheading reform.

The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), located in San Francisco, California (and known now as Springboard Schools), is a grant-making organization that supports districts' efforts to improve the quality and equity of student outcomes. BASRC's "focal strategy" is a district-level reform strategy being implemented in six districts throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Emphasizing process rather than particular approaches, the focal strategy relies on three key features: coaching of district and school leaders; evidence-based decision-making throughout the system; and networking within and across schools to share experiences and lessons.

This report suggests that the BASRC focal strategy is not associated with districtwide improvements in average elementary student achievement. While there is the hint of a relationship between participation in the focal strategy and improved performance among lower-achieving, disadvantaged students, the differences tend to be small and are not statistically significant. Moreover, any relationship that exists appears to be limited to the upper elementary grades.

Given the nature of the BASRC focal reforms, the lack of a strong, pervasive relationship with student achievement may be understandable. In practice, the strategy primarily targets district leadership and does not specify how reform activities might lead to specific changes in instruction or specific instructional supports. Moreover, our implementation research suggests that both the intensity of the intervention and the consistency of focus on improving teaching and learning may not be sufficient. Systemic reforms such as BASRC can take a long time to take root; if they do, the changes in teaching and learning could be profound and more sustainable than other reforms. To determine if this is the case here, the next report from this evaluation will present an additional year of analysis and explore the relationship between schools' implementation of particular BASRC reform concepts and improvements in student achievement.

Gordon L. Berlin
President

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Brian Uslan at the California Department of Education was instrumental in acquiring the public data files used in our analysis.

Finally, at MDRC, Rasika Kulkarni and Kathryn Ferreira coordinated production of this report, prepared tables and figures, and helped execute data analyses. James Kemple, Robert Ivry, Fred Doolittle, John Hutchins, Janet Quint, Howard Bloom, Corinne Herlihy, and Christian Geckeler reviewed analysis plans and early drafts. We are grateful to them for their helpful guidance on the content, methodology, and organization of the report. In addition, we would like to thank Dave Nuscher and Amy Rosenberg for their careful editing and Stephanie Cowell for helping to prepare the final text for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

This is the first of two published reports for MDRC's evaluation of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a grant-making organization in San Francisco, California.¹ BASRC is dedicated to improving student achievement in public schools and narrowing achievement gaps between different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. BASRC does not prescribe particular instructional practices, curricula, or school structures as "treatment." Rather, the organization promotes a vision of culture change at every level of the education system, in which teachers and administrators engage in a continuous improvement process driven by collective inquiry into student learning outcomes, school functioning, and teacher practice. This process-oriented reform strategy is designed to build professional knowledge of effective practice, mutual accountability, and collaboration. BASRC hypothesizes that such changes in culture will translate into improved teaching and learning. However, BASRC's reform strategy does not specify the particular changes in teaching practice that should evolve as a result of these processes.

This evaluation centers on a specific BASRC initiative, the "focal strategy," which was implemented in five Bay Area districts (the "focal districts") and two to four selected schools within those districts (the "focal schools") during the 2002-2003 school year. (During the 2003-2004 school year, BASRC added a sixth focal district that is not included in MDRC's study.) Building on earlier phases of BASRC reforms, which began in 1996, the focal strategy is meant to increase the intensity of the core BASRC reforms by creating more opportunities for district and school administrators to interact with BASRC staff. Thus, compared with the earlier reform strategies, the focal strategy serves as a stronger test of BASRC reform ideas in fewer places. Also, in selecting the focal districts, BASRC tended to focus on districts where there already was a strong working relationship developed during earlier BASRC efforts. Therefore, in many cases, focal reforms have essentially been implemented on top of existing BASRC reform work.

The BASRC focal strategy has three main features:

- coaching of superintendents, district and school leaders, and teachers
- evidence-based decision-making at all levels of the system
- networks and collaboration among administrators and teachers, within and across districts and schools

¹After this study was conducted and the report was written, BASRC changed its name to Springboard Schools. For ease of reference, the report uses the former name throughout.

All three features were also part of BASRC’s earlier reform efforts. Once the focal strategy began, school-level coaching by BASRC staff was redirected toward focal districts. In addition, “executive coaches” (former superintendents) were hired to advise and support the leaders in the focal districts. Along with regular meetings on comprehensive needs assessments and to review progress, these efforts were intended to reinforce all elements of the strategy in the focal districts and schools.

The theory of action underlying the BASRC focal reform strategy posits that the implementation of these three design features will yield changes in district, school, and classroom practices that will in turn improve student outcomes. Together, coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration are thought to increase districts’ and schools’ engagement in a continuous improvement process, focused on improving the level and equity of student achievement levels. Because the strategy is process-oriented, it can result in different outcomes within each district, school, and classroom. The outcomes may or may not be policies or practices that are directly linked with specific strategies for improved teaching and learning. They may be incremental improvements in culture that eventually foster better teaching and learning.

The Evaluation of the BASRC Focal Strategy

The independent evaluation of BASRC is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and includes studies by both MDRC and the Stanford University Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC).² The CRC studies focus on the process of reform as it relates to BASRC in general and the relationship between various BASRC reform efforts and changes at the district, school, and classroom levels. MDRC’s study attempts to shed light on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in student achievement by investigating the following:

1. The relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement.
2. The relationship between implementation of specific BASRC reform practices and changes in student achievement.

This report focuses on the first of these issues, that is, documenting the empirical relationship between BASRC participation and changes in student achievement. As such, it addresses three questions:

- What is the BASRC focal strategy reform model/theory of action?

²CRC also conducted an evaluation of BASRC’s first phase of reform work (1995-2001).

- To what extent was this model implemented at the districts involved in this evaluation?
- What is the association between districts' participation in BASRC focal reforms and measured changes in average student achievement?

While MDRC's study will reflect on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement, it cannot identify a *causal* relationship. Due to the nature of the BASRC focal strategy, and the selection process for districts' participation in the strategy, it is not feasible to render a reliable, unbiased single "net impact" estimate summarizing BASRC's effect on student learning. The analysis presented in this report compares progress in the focal districts in the first two years of the focal reforms to progress in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area over the same period of time. BASRC selected districts based on a variety of immeasurable factors, including the extent to which the superintendent was reform-minded. Therefore, any differences in progress in the focal districts versus that in other districts cannot necessarily be attributed to the BASRC focal strategy.

The BASRC focal reforms tended to be focused on literacy instruction and concentrated at the elementary level. As such, all analyses are focused at the elementary school level and emphasize district performance on measures of student literacy.

MDRC's next report, scheduled for later in 2006, will explore BASRC's theory of action by examining the relationship between changes in student achievement and schools' implementation of the practices the reform strategy was designed to encourage. In other words, regardless of *why* schools experience changes in reform practices, MDRC's next report will attempt to ascertain whether those reform practices are correlated with differences in students' learning.

Key Findings

Implementation Findings

- By Year 2, the school-level aspect of the focal strategy faded. Thus, the model evolved to be almost entirely a district strategy in which focal districts received district-level coaching from an executive coach, some additional coaching, and review meetings with BASRC staff.

In theory, coaching by BASRC staff was to be a primary feature of the *school-level* focal strategy. This "external" coaching effort was distinct from the other "internal" coaching efforts in place in non-focal schools (including school-level literacy coaches and coaches employed by the district to support reform work). However, in the first year of implementation, BASRC encountered several complications, including resistance to the BASRC coaches from school-level staff.

By the end of the first year, BASRC coaches did not have a significant coaching role in most of the focal schools. At the *district level*, on the other hand, the key components of the focal strategy were in place by Year 2. BASRC executive coaches met with district leaders on a regular basis, and district staff attended networking and review meetings led by BASRC staff.

- The extent to which the BASRC focal strategy at the district level translated into specific reform activities in these districts is not yet clear.

The coaching delivered by BASRC executive coaches and other BASRC staff was not necessarily focused on implementation of the core BASRC concepts. Instead, in practice, coaching often revolved around a variety of needs of the superintendent or other district staff. This varied from improving the superintendent’s communication skills to advising on the implementation of a new districtwide curriculum. The extent to which coaching or meetings with BASRC staff translated into specific reform activities in these districts is not yet clear. Gathering evidence on activities resulting from participation in the BASRC focal strategy is a priority for future MDRC field work.

- Although there was evidence of all three key features of the BASRC focal strategy in schools in the BASRC districts, these instances of the key features were likely vestiges of *earlier* BASRC reform phases. In addition, it was difficult to detect meaningful differences in the types of BASRC supports and reform activities in place in focal schools compared with non-focal schools.

MDRC found evidence of all three of the key features of the BASRC focal reform strategy — coaching by district or school staff, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration — in place at the schools in the focal districts. However, field research data indicate that these were typically implemented as a result of participation in earlier BASRC reform efforts rather than in the BASRC focal strategy itself. Moreover, it is also possible that these reform practices were in place before *any* participation in BASRC reform efforts. In general, in the schools visited by MDRC, it was difficult to detect meaningful differences in the types of BASRC supports and reform activities in place in focal schools compared with non-focal schools.

Student Achievement Outcomes

In order to explore the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement, MDRC’s analysis of student achievement compares progress in the BASRC focal districts in the first two years of the BASRC focal reforms to progress in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area over the same period.

- In the years following implementation of the BASRC focal strategy, third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts and in similar districts

throughout the Bay Area showed no progress in student achievement compared with the baseline period. In fact, average proficiency rates declined during this timeframe.

Neither BASRC focal districts nor their comparison counterparts experienced progress in third-grade proficiency rates on the California Standards Tests (CSTs). As shown in the top panel of Figure ES.1, in the two years preceding the BASRC focal strategy, an average of 43 percent of third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts scored proficient or above on the language arts portion of the CST. By the end of the second year of implementation, this dropped to 37 percent. Over the same period, average proficiency rates in similar districts throughout the Bay Area and across the state dropped slightly as well. Also, as shown in the lower panel of Figure ES.1, the percentage of third-grade students scoring below basic remained relatively constant in the comparison districts and increased slightly in the focal districts.

- On the other hand, fifth-grade students' performance in the focal districts improved over time, slightly outpacing improvements in the comparison districts, but the differences were not statistically significant.

As shown in the top panel of Figure ES.2, in the years immediately preceding implementation of the focal strategy, proficiency rates on the CST language arts test averaged 38 percent among fifth-graders in BASRC focal districts. This rate increased to 51 percent by the end of the second year of focal strategy implementation. At the same time, proficiency levels in the comparison districts increased from 39 percent to 50 percent. Although the increases were slightly larger in the BASRC focal districts, these differences were modest in size and not statistically significant. As shown in the lower panel of Figure ES.2, there was also a reduction in the percentage of fifth-grade students performing below basic. Again, although these reductions were slightly larger in the BASRC focal districts, the differences were not statistically significant. Rather than reflecting systematic differences between progress in the focal districts and progress in the non-focal districts, they may reflect chance or "random" fluctuations in student outcomes.

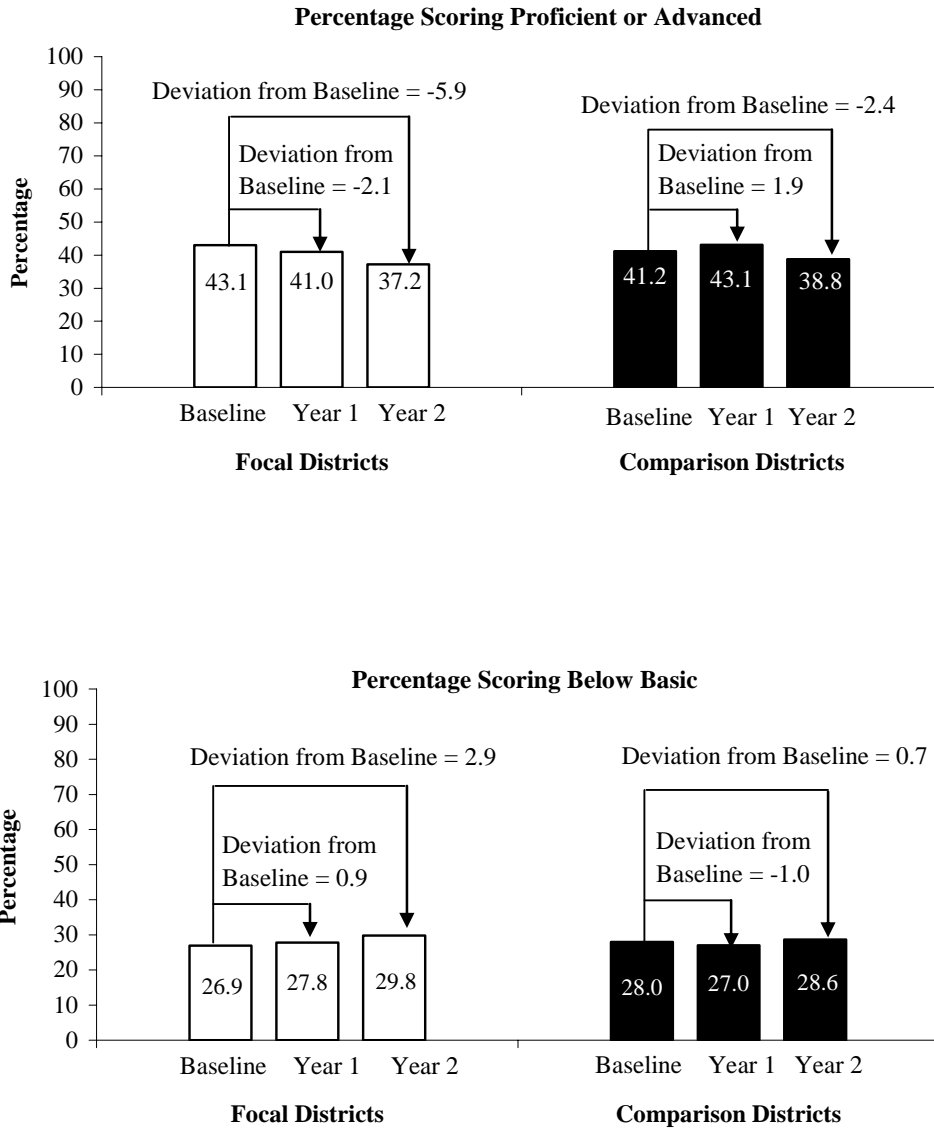
- Among blacks and Hispanics, English Language Learners (ELL), and economically disadvantaged students, reductions in the percent of fifth-grade students performing below basic levels in the BASRC focal districts in Year 2 outpaced the reductions in low-performing fifth-graders at the comparison districts. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

Across the BASRC focal districts, for each of these subgroups, there was a reduction in the percentage of fifth-grade students scoring below basic that outpaced the average reduction in the comparison districts. These differences were not statistically significant and were generally

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure ES.1

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts



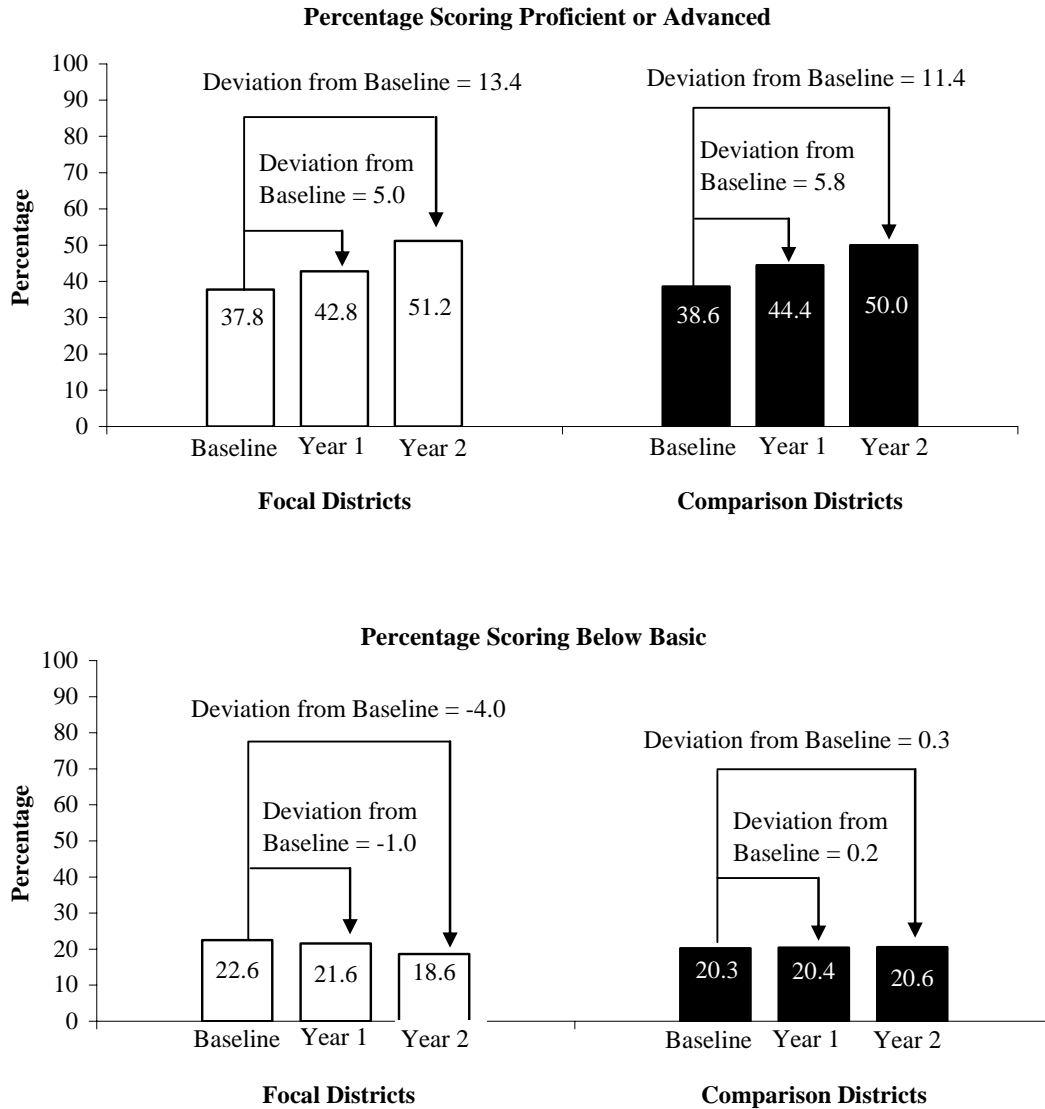
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure ES.2

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2003-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

limited to Year 2 of the intervention. However, the fact that the pattern repeats itself across several subgroups suggests the possibility that the BASRC focal districts may have made progress in improving the performance of their lowest-performing fifth-graders. The improvements were largest among ELL students (not shown in the figures). For example, during the baseline period, 55 percent of fifth-grade ELL students scored below basic in the focal districts. By the second year of follow-up, only 41 percent scored below basic, a reduction of 14 percentage points. The comparison districts, in contrast, experienced less improvement, reducing the proportion of students scoring below basic by 5 percentage points.

Interpreting the Findings

The evidence presented in this report suggests that the BASRC focal strategy is not associated with improvements in achievement among third-graders. However, with respect to fifth-graders, the progress of the BASRC focal districts tended to outpace that of the comparison groups, particularly among lower-performing disadvantaged, minority, and ELL students.

It is important to note that these differences tended to be small, and were not statistically significant. As such, it may be that there are no true differences between the progress in the focal and non-focal districts. Moreover, the design of the study does not prove a causal relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and improved student outcomes for lower-performing students. However, it is possible that focal reforms had a modest effect on student performance by lower-achieving fifth-graders. Since this relationship existed primarily in the second year of implementation, it will be important to examine follow-up data to ascertain whether these differences persist, grow, or fade over time.

What explains the evident lack of a substantial, pervasive association between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement? The implementation and outcome findings suggest several possible interpretations:

Hypothesis 1: The BASRC focal reforms are not intense enough to affect students' academic performance.

While the core components of BASRC focal reforms may be potential drivers of improved teaching and learning, the implementation of the focal reform strategy may simply not have been intense enough to change student achievement in a pervasive manner. For example, there may not have been a sufficient number of interactions between BASRC staff and district and school leaders, or these interactions may not have been sufficiently focused on implementation of the BASRC reform strategies. The fact that the school-level strategy faded away may have limited the intensity of the reform activities. A lack of intensity could also be the result of a lack of focus, which could lead to not spending very much time on any particular effort. To the extent that this is

true, it might suggest that, for the focal reforms to have an effect, BASRC must increase the intensity of its district-reform efforts and imbue those efforts with a consistent focus.

Hypothesis 2: BASRC focal reforms are not reaching the classroom.

It is also possible that the BASRC focal strategy, regardless of intensity (that is, regardless of frequent and focused coaching sessions with the superintendent), would not lead to improvements in teaching and learning because the intervention is not close enough to the classroom. This might suggest that, in order to affect teaching and learning, the focal strategy must intervene in ways that ensure reforms reach the classroom level. This could include sustaining school-level coaching efforts or providing other supports designed to increase the effectiveness of school- or classroom-level BASRC reforms. It is also possible that, by their nature, district reforms can be effective but simply require more time to take root at the school level.

Hypothesis 3: Core BASRC reforms are not sufficiently powerful drivers of improved teaching and learning.

On the other hand, even if the focal strategy did increase the intensity of reform efforts at the school and classroom levels, it is possible that the reforms themselves are not strongly related to improved student achievement. In particular, it is possible that the BASRC reform activities supported by the focal strategy, even when effectively implemented, do not result in measurable improvements in teaching and learning. This would suggest that the BASRC focal districts and schools would make more progress by implementing reforms focused more directly on refining classroom practice or by implementing particular pedagogical approaches. MDRC's next report will explore this hypothesis by examining the relationship between school-level implementation of particular BASRC reforms and changes in student achievement.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This is the first of two reports for MDRC’s evaluation of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), a grant-making and support organization in San Francisco, California.¹ Although BASRC has launched several reform efforts since its inception, this evaluation is focused on a particular initiative, the “focal strategy,” which was implemented in Bay Area districts starting in the 2002-2003 school year. Guided theoretically by the use of data, the focal strategy is a reform effort aimed at building capacity across entire districts and at all levels of the system for a systematic and continuous education improvement process. The focal strategy also concentrates BASRC staff resources in a small number of districts, and in schools within those districts, in order to provide intensive and responsive coaching support to teachers.

With an increasing momentum for school districts to develop systemwide reform strategies as a means of initiating and sustaining school improvement, the evaluation of BASRC provides a timely opportunity to expand knowledge in the field. This report provides a first look at how the BASRC focal strategy has unfolded and analyzes the relationship between participation in the focal strategy and trends in student achievement. The key question driving this report is whether the progress in districts that participated in the focal reforms has outpaced that of similar districts from the Bay Area that did not participate in these reforms. Because some of the participating districts and some of the non-participating comparison districts also took part in earlier BASRC reforms, this report assesses the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement, apart from any changes associated with previous BASRC reforms (or other ongoing reforms unrelated to BASRC). In other words, the districts under evaluation are unique in their participation in the BASRC focal strategy, but not necessarily in their participation in BASRC or in their participation in reforms more broadly.²

Overview of BASRC Reforms

BASRC is dedicated to improving student achievement in public schools and narrowing achievement gaps between different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. BASRC promotes a vision of culture change in which teachers and administrators engage in a collaborative

¹After this study was conducted and the report was written, BASRC changed its name to Springboard Schools. For ease of reference, the report uses the former name throughout.

²BASRC reforms were implemented in numerous districts throughout the Bay Area. If the districts that did not participate in any prior BASRC reforms were eliminated from the evaluation, there would not be a sufficient sample of districts to estimate a relationship between the focal strategy and student achievement.

and ongoing reform process at every level of the education system. BASRC's reforms do not prescribe predetermined instructional practices, curricula, or school structures as a "treatment." Rather, they are designed as processes of continuous improvement, driven by collective inquiry into student learning outcomes, school functioning, and teaching practices. According to BASRC, its process-oriented reform strategy builds professional knowledge of effective practice, mutual accountability, and collaboration, and continuous improvement of the quality and equity of student outcomes. Importantly, while BASRC hypothesizes that these changes in culture will translate into improved student learning, the organization does not specify the specific mechanisms or pathways through which such changes translate into changes in teaching. Nor does it specify the specific changes in teaching that should evolve as a result of these processes.

BASRC reforms are distinct from prescriptive classroom-level reforms such as "Success for All," which aim to implement particular changes in instructional practice in order to improve student achievement and reduce racial and economic achievement gaps.³ Though BASRC reforms are implemented at both the school and the district level, BASRC is conceptually closer in approach to the initial idea of the "Accelerated Schools" model, in that it is not built around a single definition of effective teaching practice, but instead draws on coaches to facilitate a process for school improvement that is intended to improve teaching.⁴

BASRC reforms have been implemented in Bay Area schools and districts in several phases over the past nine years (see Figure 1.1). Initially incorporated in early 1995, BASRC received \$50 million in matched grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Annenberg Foundation. During Phase I (1995-2001), BASRC awarded grants to 87 schools over three to five years. At this stage, BASRC reforms focused on school-level change and centered on inquiry as the engine for improving school practice and student achievement.⁵ In 2001, the organization received an additional \$40 million (\$25 million and \$15 million from the two foundations, respectively) to embark on its second phase of reform work in the Bay Area. In Phase II (2001-2006), BASRC began to focus more on the district as an agent for change and for scaling up reform. BASRC expanded its focus to a coordinated school- and district-level reform model in response to feedback from the Phase I evaluation that schools could not sustain improvement without active district support.⁶ As part of Phase II, BASRC awarded grants to 18 districts to support 23 clusters of schools within those districts (a total of 91 schools) in working together on reform efforts. These districts, selected from a pool of Bay Area grant applicants,

³Slavin, Madden, Dolan, and Wasik (1993).

⁴Bloom (2002).

⁵Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (2002).

⁶Masten and Rendell (2002).

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 1.1

Timeline of BASRC Reform Efforts

	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005
Phase I									
Phase II									
Focal Strategy									

received annual renewable, multiyear improvement grants, which ranged from \$125,000 to \$500,000 (depending on the number of BASRC schools in the BASRC district grant).⁷

While Phase II was underway, during the 2002-2003 school year, BASRC also embarked on a “focal strategy.” This strategy directed BASRC staff resources to six “focal districts” and 19 “focal schools” within those districts.⁸ While the focal districts and schools did not receive any additional BASRC funding with the introduction of the focal strategy, they did receive increased staff coaching time. (BASRC decreased individualized support for its broader pool of grantees in order to reallocate more staff time to the focal sites.) Table 1.1 summarizes the key dimensions of BASRC Phase I, Phase II, and the focal strategy.

While the initiatives were in operation, BASRC maintained a consistent vision of raising overall achievement and closing achievement gaps; however, the strategy for attaining this goal changed over time. BASRC’s focus, or unit of change, shifted first from working with individual schools to groups of schools working together (referred to as Local Collaboratives),

⁷BASRC also awarded grants of \$2.1 million over three years to another nine school districts to support them in research and development efforts aimed at discovering how to change their own policies and practices to better support school improvement.

⁸Phase II schools may or may not have been funded in Phase I. Likewise, focal schools may or may not have been funded at the start of Phase II.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Table 1.1

Comparison of BASRC Reform Efforts

	Phase I	Phase II	
		Ongoing Phase II	Focal Strategy
Years	(1996-1997 to 2000-2001)	(2001-2002 to 2004-2005)	(2002-2003 to 2004-2005)
Vision	Raise achievement and close achievement gaps	Raise achievement and close achievement gaps	Raise achievement and close achievement gaps
Unit of Change	Schools	Local collaboratives (clusters of schools within district and district office)	Districts
Breadth	87 schools	23 local collaboratives (91 schools in 18 districts)	6 focal districts and 19 focal schools within them
Key Dimensions of Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evidence-based decision-making - Distributed Leadership - Professional community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coaching - Evidence-based decision-making - Networks and collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coaching - Evidence-based decision-making - Networks and collaboration
Delivery System			
BASRC Staff Coaching	Direct assistance to leadership schools not achieving review-of-progress (ROP) goals	Available to all grantee schools (2001-2002 only)	Executive coaching and BASRC staff coaching of district leaders. BASRC staff coaching of all focal schools within focal districts ^a
Meetings	Summer institutes Network meetings by topic (for example, data, assessment, literacy)	Summer institutes Network meetings by roles (for example district administrators, principals and coaches)	Summer institutes Focal district network meetings Network meetings by roles
Accountability	Portfolio review Review of Progress (ROP) (annual review meetings)	Review of Progress (ROP)	Quarterly reviews Review of Progress (ROP)

NOTES: ^aSchool-level coaching by BASRC staff was discontinued early in the process of implementing the BASRC focal strategy. As such, most of the coaching in the focal strategy occurred at the district level.

and then to districts (and schools within those districts). The reforms developed over these phases, but remained centered on pursuing evidence-based decision-making (BASRC's Cycle of Inquiry) and building collaboration. During Phase I, BASRC encouraged schools to employ outside support providers, but did not initially engage in direct technical assistance. After acknowledging that some schools needed assistance to achieve their goals, BASRC started offering school-level coaching toward the end of Phase I.⁹ The coaching component became an integral part of BASRC's delivery strategy in Year 1 of Phase II and, in turn, in the focal strategy. In fact, BASRC developed the focal strategy to offer more support to districts and schools than had been offered in earlier phases of reform. In this way, BASRC concentrated and expanded many of the ideas developed for Phase II. The focal strategy was designed to increase the extent to which BASRC reform ideas would be carried out, by increasing contact with BASRC staff, particularly at the district level.

In selecting the focal districts, BASRC tended to look to districts where there was already a strong working relationship from Phase I and/or Phase II efforts. (As a result, four of the six focal districts were part of earlier BASRC efforts.) Districts with achievement gaps and with a reform-minded superintendent were also high priorities. The focal schools were then selected through negotiations between BASRC and district administrators.

Like the original Phase II reform model, the BASRC focal strategy emphasizes system-level reform and is built on three primary design features:

- (1) coaching
- (2) evidence-based decision-making
- (3) professional networks and collaboration

However, by 2002-2003 (Year 2 of Phase II and the first year of the focal strategy), coaching by BASRC staff or individuals selected and trained by BASRC was dedicated primarily to focal districts and focal schools. Coaching by *district* or *school* staff, data-based decision-making, and networks are each elements of BASRC's original Phase II reform model. However, in focal districts and schools these effects were supposed to be reinforced by interactions with BASRC staff. All of these features will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

⁹Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (2002).

The Evaluation of the BASRC Focal Strategy

The independent evaluation of BASRC is a collaborative effort of MDRC and the Stanford University Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC).¹⁰ MDRC's study will shed light on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in student achievement. This report will show the degree of academic progress in BASRC focal districts, and whether or not it outpaces progress in similar districts not participating in the BASRC focal strategy. In future analyses, MDRC's study will also demonstrate whether or not school reform practices that are consistent with the BASRC focal theory of action are actually correlated with improvements in student performance. BASRC focal reforms are focused on literacy instruction and are concentrated at the elementary level. As such, all analyses are focused at the elementary school level and emphasize district performance on measures of student literacy.

MDRC's study does not isolate the *effect* of BASRC focal strategy on student achievement. Due to the nature of the BASRC focal strategy, and the nature of districts' participation in the intervention, it is not feasible to render a single reliable and unbiased "net impact" estimate summarizing BASRC's effect on student learning. Assessing the net impact of any educational reform requires a reliable estimate of outcome levels that would have occurred in the absence of the reform. As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 4, because districts are not selected at random, this is simply not possible in the case of the BASRC focal strategy. Nevertheless, MDRC's study will be able to reflect on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and improvements in student achievement.

This study will inform and is informed by the CRC studies. Its studies focus in more detail on the process of reform and the relationship between BASRC reform efforts and changes at the district, school, and classroom levels. CRC's studies will generate detailed information about the implementation of (1) particular design features, (2) the school and district contexts in which these reforms take place, and (3) how both the reform efforts and the reform contexts evolve over time. Moreover, information provided by the CRC studies will facilitate the interpretation of the findings of the MDRC study (for example, descriptions of the factors driving the changes in particular reform practices, or the dynamics limiting or enhancing the connections between particular reform practices and improved student achievement). Together, the MDRC and CRC studies will contribute to the knowledge base for local system reform by exploring both the process of system reform and the relationship between particular reform practices and changes in student achievement.

¹⁰CRC also conducted an evaluation of BASRC's first phase of reform work (1995-2001). (See Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, 2002.)

Overview of This Report

This is the first of two published reports in MDRC’s evaluation of BASRC. This report sets out to answer the following question: “What is the relationship between participation in the BASRC focal strategy and student achievement?” As the evaluation proceeded, the researchers refined their research questions according to lessons learned in the field. Primarily, through interviews with principals, coaches, and teachers in the focal schools, as well as with members of BASRC staff, the researchers learned that the focal strategy at the *school* level was not implemented as planned.¹¹ Because implementation of the school-level part of the focal strategy was weak, it no longer made sense to compare achievement trends between “focal” and “non-focal” schools. This report therefore focuses on district-level trends, and evaluates how changes in student performance in BASRC focal districts compare with changes in student performance in similar districts over the same period. In particular, this report focuses on the following two questions:

- How does student performance in BASRC focal districts compare with student performance in those districts prior to the implementation of focal reforms?
- How do these changes in student performance in focal districts compare with the changes in student performance in other similar districts over the same period?

The findings presented in this report do not indicate a systematic relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and districts’ progress in average reading achievement among third-graders. In fact, achievement among third-graders declined by slightly more in the BASRC focal districts than in similar districts throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. On the other hand, the findings do suggest the possibility that there is an association between districts’ participation in the BASRC focal strategy and improved achievement among fifth-graders, particularly among key subgroups. These key subgroups include economically disadvantaged students, black and Hispanic students, and English Language Learners. However, as these differences were small and not statistically significant, MDRC cannot rule out the possibility that these associations were driven by chance.

The remainder of this report is organized as follows. Chapter 2 explains the theory of action behind the BASRC focal strategy. Chapter 3 presents characteristics of BASRC focal districts before they started participating in the focal strategy and provides a summary of implementation issues during the first two years. Chapter 4 describes the analytic approach and presents preliminary findings on the relationship between the BASRC focal district strategy and trends in student achievement, for all students and for subgroups of students. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses hypotheses for explaining the findings and raises questions for further analysis and reporting.

¹¹This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

A subsequent report will examine the connections between specific school- and classroom-level reform practices and school-level trends in student achievement. Those analyses will draw on three years of data from a survey of teachers at elementary schools. The report will shed light on how variation in changes in school reform and organizational practices related to BASRC correlate with student achievement outcomes. It will assess the empirical relationships underlying BASRC's theory of action and provide valuable insights for district leaders and reform partners about the types of promising practices upon which they might want to focus. This second paper will also draw on field research conducted during the second and third years of focal strategy implementation to add context and interpretation to the findings. Lastly, the paper will update the findings presented in this report with one additional year of achievement data.

Chapter 2

The BASRC Focal Strategy

Theory of Action

Since the inception of its focal strategy in fall 2002, the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) has continuously refined the theory of action underlying the focal strategy in order to be responsive to changing local needs and priorities. However, three key features have remained central:

- Coaching
- Evidence-based decision-making
- Professional networks and collaboration

This section describes these core features of the focal strategy, how they were originally intended to be put into practice in focal districts and schools, and the underlying theory linking them to improved achievement and accelerated learning among the lowest-performing students. This section also includes a description of BASRC’s “blueprint” for the focal strategy, and what might be observed if the strategy were to be implemented as planned.¹ Chapter 3 offers observations based on actual implementation of the focal strategy.

As mentioned earlier, it is important to note that the focal strategy is very similar to the Phase II strategy in terms of the key components. What sets the focal theory apart from the Phase II theory is that BASRC provides districts and schools with more intensive support for reform, primarily in the form of coaching by BASRC staff and experienced coaches hired by BASRC to support district reform. To support the work of the coaches, BASRC also conducts comprehensive needs assessments in the focal districts and quarterly meetings to review progress. Coaching (from within the school system), evidence-based decision-making, and networks, established as the key components for reform in Phase II, are also the key components of the focal strategy.

¹The ongoing changes in BASRC’s model and implementation make this challenging, but this evaluation focuses on the basic features that appear to remain stable in BASRC’s design over time.

Coaching

BASRC has based its underlying theory of coaching on the idea that educators “need help finding, prioritizing, and implementing the many good ideas available [in the field].”² Coaching was intended to be the primary delivery system for BASRC focal reforms. BASRC’s original focal strategy included coaching at both the district and school levels. At the outset of their participation in the focal strategy, both districts and schools set measurable goals for raising student achievement and narrowing the performance gaps between different groups of students. BASRC coaches were supposed to work with leaders at both levels to keep them focused on these goals and to help them develop and implement strategies for achieving the goals.

The BASRC theory is that, by providing “practical, useful, and effective support,” their coaching will lead to better teaching and improved student achievement.³ According to BASRC, by “diagnosing problems, identifying organizational areas of need, setting goals and agreeing on a focus, establishing an instructional plan based on research and best practices in high-performing schools and districts, and putting in place a rigorous and thoughtful continuous improvement process,” coaching can lead to improved teaching and learning.⁴ The coaching model does not, however, call for any specific activities designed to ensure particular changes in teaching practice, nor does it stipulate how these changes are to occur.

At the district level, BASRC hired executive coaches with district leadership experience to work with superintendents and/or other central office administrators. Their coaching was intended to address the district’s capacity with respect to five core elements defined by BASRC:⁵

- *Leadership:* The superintendent and other district leaders should provide and articulate a vision for a districtwide focus. They should support that vision by allocating resources, providing schools with flexibility, and making sure all school staff members have the instructional materials, technology, and tools they need to achieve agreed-upon organizational goals.
- *Culture:* Teachers and administrators throughout the district should believe that every student in the district, regardless of gender, race, primary language, or socioeconomic status, is capable of meeting district standards, when provided with effective instruction. Teachers and administrators should strive for and reward excellence, make the best use of time during the school

²BASRC Web site (2003).

³BASRC Web site (2005).

⁴BASRC Web site (2003).

⁵These terms and their definitions summarize the BASRC document entitled “District Critical Elements” (2002).

day, ensure safe and clean environments, and involve the community in the life of the school.

- *Infrastructure:* The Board of Trustees and district leaders should adopt reform policies that work, distribute authority and resources properly, and regularly evaluate progress toward goals. These leaders should also build strong professional learning communities, establish effective two-way communications systems, and provide well-developed professional development programs.
- *Educational Program:* District leaders should define content standards for what students should know and performance standards for how students should demonstrate their achievement. They should also adopt or develop a comprehensive K-12 curriculum aligned with state and national standards and reinforced by evidence-based practice, define standards for effective implementation of programs and practices, and regularly examine data to determine program effectiveness.
- *Professional Development:* District leaders should design professional development that is aligned with the district focus, and targeted to improving instruction and accelerating the achievement of low-performing students. These professional development opportunities should be regularly evaluated and adjusted to better meet the needs of teachers, and they should focus on helping teachers and administrators understand the implementation of new programs and strategies and use data to inform instruction.

Executive coaches plan their activities by first leading a needs assessment of the district's capacity in each of these areas, and then helping district leaders formulate goals based on the results. An important aim of the executive coaching model is to help district leaders become reflective and outcome-oriented. Executive coaches, along with BASRC staff, also lead quarterly review meetings to review and discuss district reform progress. This model assumes that the district's organizational culture and the behavior of its leaders can be leveraged in order to put effective reform practices into place in schools. BASRC does not, however, prescribe the specific pathways or mechanisms that will translate these behaviors into actual school-level changes in teaching and learning.

Executive coaches were hired to work with superintendents and other leaders at the district level. At the school level, the original design was that BASRC staff would deliver coaching to support schools' efforts to achieve their reform goals. In collaboration with the executive coaches, BASRC school coaches were to address any number of school organizational issues related to district initiatives, from leadership to performance monitoring. For example, if a dis-

district embarks on an initiative to implement a new assessment program, BASRC's school-level coaching might focus on helping a school use that assessment data in an analysis of student achievement. BASRC school-level coaches work with principals, school- and district-based coaches, grade-level teams, and/or other leadership teams. (As Chapter 3 will discuss, because of implementation challenges, school-level coaching faded from the focal model in many schools relatively early in the implementation process.)

BASRC coaches provide focal districts and schools with specific tools and supports developed by BASRC. An example of one such tool is a database developed by Just for the Kids – California (JFTK-CA). The database provides districts and schools with state standards assessment results by grade, and includes average results for all students as well as for students who have been in the school for at least three years. For any school in the system, JFTK-CA also provides the names of the top 10 performing schools in California with comparable student demographics. The vision for this system is that a district's leaders and teachers will communicate with these highest-performing schools in order to learn about practices that drive their success. Another example of a tool coaches may use is a worksheet that walks leaders and teachers through a Cycle of Inquiry process. The worksheet includes questions for educators to answer, which allow them to identify a problem, diagnose it, and develop a practice to address it.

Coaching by the BASRC staff is a delivery system for the BASRC focal reforms. At the same time, coaching by staff *within* the school system is also a key feature of the BASRC focal reforms and of the earlier phases of BASRC.

Three types of coaching roles were originally specified as part of the broader Phase II strategy. These remain as part of the focal strategy as well. First, Local Collaborative coaches grew out of the focus on groups of schools working together on reform issues (Local Collaboratives) in Phase II. These coaches, based either in the district office or at a school site, bridge BASRC schools with one another and the district office, promoting both bottom-up and top-down reform work. They may be district administrators, principals, school-based coaches, or individuals hired by the district specifically for the role. Second, reform coordinators are based on-site at BASRC schools and are often teachers or other school staff who are released part time to help advance BASRC reforms. Third, literacy coaches are typically part of a district strategy not necessarily related to BASRC. Literacy coaches help with the adoption of new curriculum or provide intervention work for struggling students. Table 2.1 lists the various coaching roles, their organizational affiliations, and their relationship to the different phases of BASRC.

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Evidence-based decision-making is the second key design feature of the BASRC focal strategy. BASRC promotes this component through coaching as well as through a variety of

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Table 2.1

Coaching Roles in the BASRC Focal Strategy

	Unique to focal strategy?	Who are the coaches?	Relation to BASRC phases?	Where do they work and whom do they coach?	Are they trained by BASRC?
Executive Coaches	Yes	Former superintendents hired by BASRC	Element of focal strategy	Work in district office. Coach superintendents and other district leaders.	Yes
BASRC School Coaches	Yes	BASRC staff	Element of focal strategy	Work in schools. Coach principals, local collaborative coaches, school leadership team; also work with executive coaches.	Yes
Local Collaborative Coaches	No	District or school personnel (administrators, coaches, principals, or teachers)	Initiated in Phase II; still in place during focal strategy.	Work in and/or across schools. Coach principals, literacy coaches, school or grade leadership teams, district leaders.	Yes
Reform Coordinators	No	School personnel (coaches or teachers)	Initiated in Phase I or II; still in place during focal strategy.	Work within schools. Coach principals, literacy coaches, school or grade leadership teams.	May attend some BASRC meetings.
Literacy Coaches	No	Existing school or district personnel (sometimes hired or supported using BASRC grants)	Not part of BASRC model but often involved in BASRC reforms.	Work within schools (sometimes several schools). Coach teachers.	May attend some BASRC meetings.

BASRC tools and processes. Instead of prescribing a set of specific classroom practices, this component articulates a general process for reform of instructional practice. One of the key tools in this process is the Cycle of Inquiry, which is a method of identifying, understanding, and meeting the needs of struggling students. Educators begin this process by examining student achievement data, including diagnostic assessments, to identify problems and determine which students are struggling and in which areas. BASRC also encourages schools to adopt and give more frequent assessments. At the school level, this cycle is designed to enable teachers to better diagnose students' needs and fine-tune classroom strategies before students move on to the next grade. BASRC encourages districts and schools to implement the Cycle of Inquiry at many levels in the system (school, grade, and classroom) to identify achievement gaps, and to focus on a specific academic area across all levels (typically, literacy). The inquiry model assumes that districts, schools, and teachers will work to identify teaching practices that will boost the achievement of students, particularly of the lowest-performing students.

With the goal of building districts' and schools' capacity to engage in evidence-based decision-making, BASRC uses a variety of other tools, including annual Reviews of Progress (in which districts and schools present evidence about progress in improving performance and closing achievement gaps) and the JFTK-CA database. In addition, BASRC encourages districts to develop systems for providing schools and teachers with useful and accessible data, and linking the data to systemwide assessment programs.

Professional Networks and Collaboration

Professional networks and collaboration are the third primary design feature of the BASRC focal strategy. This feature consists of a variety of opportunities for school leaders to convene and share knowledge with each other. For example, BASRC organizes professional development services in four different professional networks for focal district and school leaders:

1. the Principals' Network for principals in all BASRC schools
2. the Local Collaborative Coaches' Network for school- and district-based coaches in all BASRC districts
3. the District Leaders' Network for district leaders in all BASRC districts
4. the Focal Superintendents' Network for the superintendents in the focal districts only

BASRC's goal for these networks is to build educators' capacity to address student and school performance. Examples of topics include leadership, the Cycle of Inquiry, and equity. Other collaboration opportunities are BASRC-organized Summer Institutes for school and dis-

trict leadership teams, as well as meetings organized around particular themes, such as literacy and the use of data. In all of these meetings, BASRC encourages participants to continue knowledge-sharing, and develop school-level networks back at their sites, often providing them with tools to pass on what they have learned.

In addition to the collaboration opportunities BASRC provides at network meetings, BASRC encourages districts and schools to create collaboration opportunities at their district offices and school sites. BASRC advocates for collaboration that supports what it refers to as “bottom-up and top-down” reform, in which both schools and districts share reform ideas and influence one another. BASRC also promotes collaboration across and within schools. The theory is that such collaboration builds knowledge and creates mutual accountability, leading to improved practice.

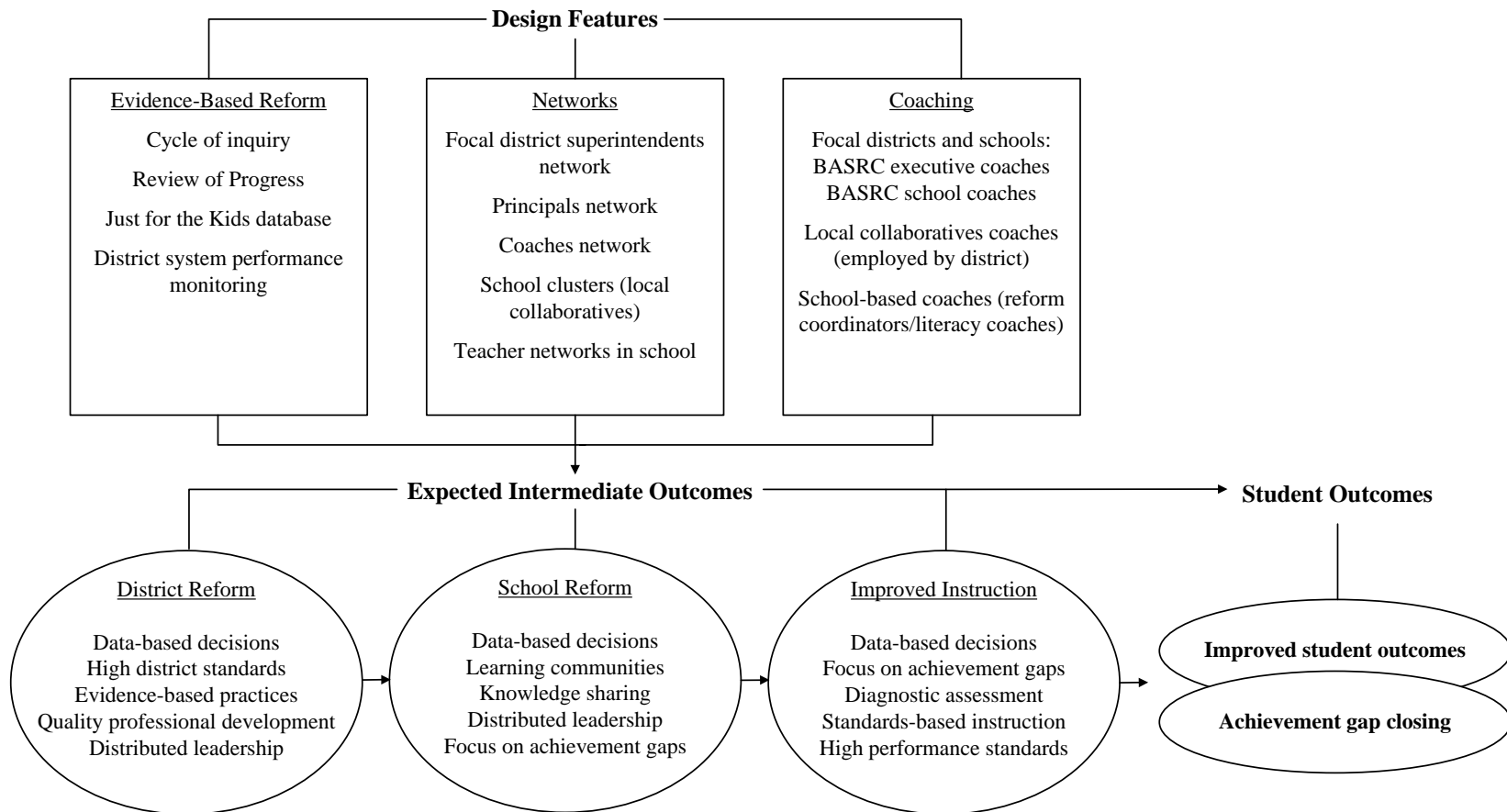
Conclusion

The theory of action underlying the BASRC focal reform strategy suggests that the implementation of these three design features yields changes in district, school, and classroom practices hypothesized to improve student outcomes, as illustrated in Figure 2.1. Taken together, coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration are thought to lead to districts and schools becoming more engaged in a continuous improvement process that is reflective, evidence-based, and collaborative. This process is supposed to help educators find effective ways to improve instruction for all students, and for low-performing students in particular, leading to improved and more equitable student outcomes. Because the focal reforms are process-oriented, they can result in different outcomes within each district, school, and classroom. The outcomes may be or may not be policies or practices that are directly linked with improved teaching and learning. Rather, they may be incremental improvements in culture that eventually foster better teaching and learning.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 2.1

BASRC Focal Strategy Theory of Action



SOURCE: Adapted from the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC), Stanford University, 2004.

Chapter 3

Implementation of the BASRC Focal Strategy

Chapter 2 described the theory of action behind the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) focal strategy, and how the strategy was intended to unfold if put into practice as planned. This chapter describes the places where the focal strategy was implemented and summarizes the lessons learned so far about actual implementation.

Overall, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests:

- BASRC implemented the focal strategy in a set of districts that were similar to, though slightly more disadvantaged than, the Bay Area as a whole.
- Although the BASRC focal strategy originally included a model aimed at a set of “focal schools” within the focal districts, this school-level component was not implemented as planned. As a result, there was no meaningful distinction between focal and non-focal schools in program resources or implementation.
- Focal districts are characterized by district-level coaching by an executive coach, some additional coaching or support from other BASRC staff, a separate BASRC-led Focal Superintendents’ Network, and more frequent review meetings with BASRC staff. However, important questions remain regarding the specific reforms undertaken as a result of these activities.

The BASRC Focal Districts

This report focuses on five of the six BASRC focal districts.¹ All five districts are in the San Francisco Bay Area. As mentioned earlier, BASRC selected the focal districts, looking in particular to districts where there was already a strong working relationship from Phase I and/or Phase II efforts. As a result, four of the six focal districts were part of earlier BASRC efforts. Achievement gaps and a reform-minded superintendent were also important criteria in the selection of focal districts. Within each focal district, two to five focal schools were selected through negotiations between BASRC and each superintendent. The schools selected may have been elementary, middle, or high schools, but MDRC’s research efforts have focused solely on

¹Because BASRC’s sixth focal district, Oak Grove, joined the initiative one year later and is following an action plan different from that of the original five districts, MDRC is not including it in the evaluation sample.

the elementary schools, of which there are a total of 12. Table 3.1 lists the five focal districts and the elementary-level focal schools within them.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Table 3.1

BASRC Focal Districts and Their Focal Elementary Schools

Focal District	Focal Elementary Schools
Newark Unified School District	Snow Elementary Musick Elementary Milani Elementary
Alameda Unified School District	Paden Elementary Woodstock Elementary
Laguna Salada Union School District	Linda Mar Elementary Valleamar Elementary
San Rafael City Elementary and High School Districts	Bahia Vista Elementary San Pedro Elementary Laurel Dell Elementary
San Bruno Park Elementary School District	El Crystal Elementary John Muir Elementary

SOURCES: MDRC field research data.

NOTES: Focal Districts are districts participating in the BASRC focal strategy. Focal Schools are schools participating in the BASRC focal strategy.

Looking at the five BASRC focal districts in this evaluation, Table 3.2 compares the districts' demographic characteristics and achievement levels before implementation of the BASRC focal

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Table 3.2

**Characteristics of BASRC Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts, Elementary-Level
Average for School Years 1999-2000 Through 2001-2002**

Characteristic	BASRC Focal Districts	All Bay Area Districts ^a	All California Districts
<u>Demographic characteristics of third-grade students</u>			
Race/Ethnicity (%)			
White	39.9	51.0	53.7
Hispanic	28.9	23.6	32.5
Asian	21.8	16.0	5.7
Black	5.5	7.2	3.8
Other	3.9	2.1	3.7
English language learners (%)	22.7	18.2	21.5
Eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (%) ^b	29.8	22.2	44.6
<u>Achievement levels of third-grade students</u>			
California Standards Tests			
Language arts ^c			
Proficient or advanced (%)	43.1	49.8	35.3
Basic (%)	29.9	26.2	29.1
Below or far below basic (%)	26.9	23.9	35.5
Mean scale score	341.8	349.6	328.4
Math ^d			
Proficient or advanced (%)	49.4	51.3	38.7
Basic (%)	27.2	24.4	28.0
Below or far below basic (%)	23.6	23.8	33.2
Mean scale score	350.8	355.8	333.3
Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition			
Reading			
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	59.9	65.5	51.8
25th-49th National Percentile Rank (%)	21.8	18.2	23.0
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.3	16.4	25.1
Mean scale score	626.4	633.5	617.7
Math			
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	69.0	71.4	62.0
25th-49th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.2	16.1	20.2
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	12.8	12.4	17.8
Mean scale score	620.8	624.7	613.0
Sample size	5	106	938

(continued)

Table 3.2 (continued)

Characteristic	BASRC Focal Districts	All Bay Area Districts ^a	All California Districts
<u>Demographic characteristics of fifth-grade students</u>			
Race/Ethnicity (%)			
White	43.1	52.7	55.4
Hispanic	26.2	21.6	30.6
Asian	21.9	16.3	5.7
Black	6.2	7.6	3.9
Other	2.5	1.9	3.8
English language learners (%)	15.5	14.0	17.7
Eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (%) ^b	29.8	22.4	44.6
<u>Achievement levels of fifth-grade students</u>			
California Standards Tests			
Language arts ^c			
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.8	47.0	33.0
Basic (%)	39.8	33.4	38.9
Below or far below basic (%)	22.6	19.6	28.0
Mean scale score	338.4	348.4	332.0
Math ^d			
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.2	44.0	31.2
Basic (%)	32.6	27.6	31.4
Below or far below basic (%)	30.4	28.3	37.4
Mean scale score	335.6	347.2	325.5
Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition			
Reading			
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	56.0	63.9	51.2
25th-49th National Percentile Rank (%)	23.4	18.3	22.6
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	20.6	17.7	26.2
Mean scale score	659.1	667.2	654.2
Math			
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	63.5	68.0	58.0
25th-49th National Percentile Rank (%)	17.7	14.7	18.6
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.7	17.3	23.5
Mean scale score	659.6	666.9	654.7
Sample size	5	106	944

SOURCE: Publicly available district- and school-level data files from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100 percent. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of their size.

^aBay Area districts include all districts in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties with students in grade 3 (including BASRC focal districts).

^bAverages for free or reduced-price lunch are presented at the school level only.

^cDue to availability of test scores, California Standards Test averages in language arts are based on just two baseline years, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, except for the Below or Far Below Basic average, which is based on one baseline year, 2001-2002.

^dDue to availability of test scores, California Standards Test averages in math are based on just one baseline year, 2001-2002.

strategy with those of other districts in the San Francisco Bay Area and throughout California.² Achievement levels are measured by performance on both the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9), a nationally norm-referenced test, and the California Standards Tests (CSTs), which measure student performance relative to California state standards. The baseline, or preimplementation, period for the BASRC focal strategy for which MDRC has data includes the 1999-2000, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002 school years.³ The baseline demographic characteristics and student achievement levels shown in Table 3.2 represent averages over these three years. Note, however, that CST scores were available only for 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 for reading (except for the below- or far-below-basic average, which is based on one baseline year, 2001-2002) and only for 2001-2002 for math.

Table 3.2 shows that, relative to Bay Area districts,⁴ BASRC focal districts served a smaller proportion of white students and a slightly larger proportion of Hispanic and Asian students, but similar proportions of black students.⁵ For example, on average, 40 percent of the third-grade students served by BASRC focal districts were white, compared with 51 percent in the Bay Area districts. At the same time, 29 percent of the third-graders in BASRC focal districts were Hispanic, compared with 24 percent of those in the other Bay Area districts. Table 3.2 also shows that BASRC focal districts had slightly higher percentages of English Language Learners and students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch. During the baseline period, an average of 23 percent of third-grade students in the focal districts were English Language Learners, compared with 18 percent of students in Bay Area districts as a whole. Also, 30 percent of third-graders in focal districts were eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program, compared with 22 percent in the rest of the Bay Area.⁶

This table also compares characteristics of third- and fifth-grade students in the BASRC focal districts with students in all districts in the state of California. Contrary to the comparison with Bay Area districts, relative to the whole state, the BASRC focal districts included a smaller proportion of Hispanic students and more Asian students. BASRC focal districts also served a similar proportion of students who were English Language Learners. Lastly, both the focal dis-

²Bay Area districts are defined as those districts in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara counties. All districts and schools with students in these grades were included in the samples.

³Data for these and future analyses are from the California Department of Education. For more information on the tests, see Appendix A.

⁴This includes focal districts and districts that participated in earlier phases of BASRC reforms.

⁵The category of “other” includes Native American students and students of multiple ethnicities. The category “Asian” includes Pacific Islander and Filipino students.

⁶Note that the figures for eligibility for a free or reduced-price lunch represent school-level percentages rather than grade-level percentages.

tricts and the Bay Area districts as a whole served much lower proportions of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than the state average.

Students in the focal districts generally demonstrated lower levels of reading achievement and math achievement on the CST compared with students in the Bay Area as a whole. This is consistent with BASRC's efforts to target its interventions toward relatively low-performing districts, particularly with respect to literacy. However, the extent to which the achievement levels differ varies by grade and subject. In particular, differences are larger for reading scores than they are for math, and the differences between BASRC focal districts and the Bay Area as a whole are larger among fifth-graders than they are among third-graders. This pattern is consistent with the literature on achievement gaps, which points to the widening of achievement gaps over time.⁷ The patterns of test scores on the SAT-9, also presented in Table 3.2, seem to show similar trends. These trends suggest the possibility that the differences in student performances are exacerbated over time by differences in the quality of teaching and learning in the BASRC focal schools compared with the rest of the Bay Area. In contrast, compared with all districts in the state of California, students in the BASRC focal districts have higher levels of achievement in both reading and math.

In sum, while not all the differences are large, achievement levels in BASRC focal districts are lower than in other Bay Area districts for both the CST and SAT-9, and in both the third and fifth grades. While lower-achieving districts than these exist within the Bay Area, the focal districts do appear to be below average and face growing gaps as students move into higher grades.

Implementation of the Core BASRC Components

The findings in this section are based primarily on field research conducted during the 2003-2004 school year — the second year of the BASRC focal strategy. During this year, MDRC visited 7 of the 12 focal elementary schools and 4 non-focal elementary schools in the focal districts to interview principals, coaches, and teachers.⁸ MDRC also met with key BASRC staff and reviewed notes from interviews conducted by the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC) at district offices. MDRC also reviewed transcripts from interviews CRC researchers conducted with school, district, and BASRC staff.

What follows is a snapshot of implementation along the three key dimensions of the BASRC focal strategy. This chapter describes implementation at elementary schools within the

⁷Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998).

⁸MDRC's findings are limited to four of the five BASRC focal districts; due to implementation difficulties at the fifth focal district, researchers did not have access to staff in that district.

focal districts (both focal and non-focal schools), and, to the extent that it is possible, implementation at the district-office level. The next round of MDRC field work, currently underway, will focus more attention on district-level reform activities and will aim to make connections between participation in the focal strategy and the reform activities found in the schools.

So far, most of MDRC's field research has focused on the school level. Evidence has been gathered during school visits regarding the reform activities along the key dimensions of the BASRC focal strategy: coaching, evidence-based decision-making, and networks and collaboration. Important questions remain regarding the extent to which many of these activities are the result of the district's participation in the focal strategy as opposed to earlier BASRC reforms or ongoing district initiatives. It would not be unusual to see some of these activities in schools that participated in earlier BASRC initiatives (Phase I and Phase II), but it is unclear whether these schools have been more successful in implementing these activities because they are in focal districts. As field research continues, particularly at the district level, MDRC will try to better understand the connection between participation in the focal district strategy and implementation of school-level reforms.

Coaching

The following section summarizes key observations regarding the implementation of coaching in the second year of the BASRC focal strategy:

- In each focal district, BASRC assigned an executive coach to work with the superintendent. All of the executive coaches served as advisors according to the needs of each district.

In the 2002-2003 school year, BASRC assigned executive coaches to each BASRC focal district. CRC interviews with executive coaches and MDRC interviews with BASRC staff coaches indicated that executive coaches aimed to help superintendents define their roles and improve communication with central office colleagues, the school board, and school-level staff. Executive coaches also helped address a range of system reform efforts, which were either identified through BASRC's needs assessment or decided on before the onset of the focal strategy. BASRC's goals for executive coaching included promoting academic coherence (for example, alignment between the reading curricula and teacher professional development), creating accountability structures, and advocating for the implementation of data-reporting systems. However, the extent to which coaches actually delved into these issues is not yet known. The available data suggest that coaching focused mostly on building capacity for reform by strengthening leadership, developing a focus for reform work, and improving communication.

- In Year 2, there was very little coaching by BASRC staff at the focal schools.

At the outset of the BASRC focal reform strategy, BASRC planned to include school-level coaching by BASRC staff as an important part of the focal reforms. In Year 1 (the 2002-2003 school year), school-level coaches focused on engagement and assessing the needs of their schools. For example, they made sure there was a school leadership team in place, met with principals to decide which issues to work on, and defined roles for reform efforts. However, by the following year, many of the school-level BASRC coaching relationships faded, and the BASRC staff in this role instead focused on district-level reform efforts.⁹ This shift took place for various reasons, including: resistance from principals and other school staff, redundancy with the roles of Local Collaborative coaches, and a shift in BASRC's focus. The BASRC staff coaches did make themselves available as resources for principals and other school leaders at focal and non-focal schools. However, rather than supporting individual school reforms, they generally supported the executive coaches and worked with district staff, principals, and school leaders on reform efforts *across* schools. For example, in one district, a BASRC staff coach working on district-level reforms met with all the principals in the district to communicate information about a curriculum adoption. By Year 2, because there was no school coaching effort specifically aimed at most of the focal schools, there was little distinction between “focal” and “non-focal” schools.

- Within the school system, Local Collaborative (LC) coaches promoted bottom-up and top-down reform work, engaging with district staff, principals, and literacy coaches at the school or cross-school level.

Local Collaborative coaches were district or school employees who support BASRC reforms within and across schools. Three of the four focal districts visited by MDRC had one or more Local Collaborative coaches working within or across schools. Though these efforts were ongoing in the BASRC focal districts, they were not a part of the focal strategy per se, but a continuation of earlier BASRC reform efforts. The LC coaches were chosen from among individuals playing a variety of roles in their district. They were teachers, existing school- or district-based coaches, principals, or district administrators. BASRC grants were used to give educators some release time to serve as LC coaches. The responsibilities of the LC coaches varied, but they generally worked with school-based literacy coaches and/or leadership teams to guide reform efforts. They helped to facilitate grade-level or school-level meetings and they often conveyed information from the district office and spread ideas from other schools in the district. For the most part, BASRC trained these coaches through the Local Collaborative Coaches Network (a feature of the Phase II strategy), or during Phase I activities. By Year 2, most of these coaches were already working either within or across schools, regardless of their focal or non-focal status. In Year 2, LC coaches continued to attend the network meetings, picking up new tools and activities, and could

⁹Coggins (2004).

utilize BASRC staff as a resource. They met with schools across the collaborative or district, setting up monthly meetings that included some of the following activities: sharing BASRC tools and rubrics; preparing and discussing assessment data; and facilitating discussions around a particular school, strategic plan, or other facet of the reform effort.

- At both focal and non-focal schools, literacy coaches, reform coordinators, and other school leaders served as school-level coaches, supporting the curriculum adoptions and reform work of the school and district.

Again, as part of earlier BASRC reforms, in all four focal districts, most of the focal and non-focal schools MDRC visited had either a part-time or full-time literacy coach. These positions were sometimes funded by BASRC grants, and sometimes through other resources. Nevertheless, the work of these coaches was typically consistent with or influenced by the school's BASRC reform work (for example, inquiry around literacy instruction). These coaches helped teachers review assessment data and led discussions around curriculum implementation at the grade, school, or classroom level. In the second year of implementation, in schools that had already adopted the state-required literacy programs, the literacy coaches and mentor teachers focused much of their attention on the implementation of the programs. They worked with teachers on lesson planning and pacing guides, occasionally modeling instruction and pulling out struggling students. Often, these school-based coaches collaborated with their Local Collaborative coaches and with coaches from other schools.

- BASRC supplied tools and resources to district administrators and school-based coaches through its formal networks and through BASRC coaches.

Within the focal districts, coaches used BASRC tools in several ways. In at least one district, the BASRC school coaches along with the principals reviewed Just for the Kids – California reports of CST data in order to set targets for student achievement. In several focal and non-focal schools, the Local Collaborative coach or school leaders learned about activities and collected meeting ideas from BASRC networks or coaches, and brought them back to use in meetings in their district. Likewise, these coaches used Cycle of Inquiry worksheets and diagrams that they received to explain inquiry and also supply a way for teachers to record and track information. In some instances, coaches recreated the documents, changing some of the language and removing the BASRC logo, in order to make teachers feel that the process was more a part of their own work.

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

The following section presents key findings about the implementation of evidence-based decision-making in Year 2 of the BASRC focal strategy:

- At least three of the four focal districts required assessments measuring progress in language arts and/or math several times during the school year, but several obstacles impeded the extent to which these assessments were systematically made available and used in district- or school-level decision-making.

In 2003-2004, the second year of the BASRC focal reform strategy, at least three of the four districts administered districtwide assessments and collected the test score data several times a year. MDRC still needs to learn more about the extent to which BASRC influenced focal districts in how they chose or used assessments. With the adoption of state-required literacy curricula (Houghton-Mifflin or Open Court), which include frequent assessments, the number of measures districts collect has been growing. Each of the districts had a vision for how the required assessments could inform practice at various levels in the system. However, a variety of obstacles seemed to have impeded implementation. For example, one district's assessments were frequently changed, making it difficult to track trends over time. In another district, teachers reported a lack of adequate professional development to help them analyze assessment data or realize the value of the analysis. Moreover, limited access by schools and teachers to assessment data was an ongoing obstacle in all districts. This is discussed further below.

- In Year 2 of the BASRC focal reforms, at least two of the four focal districts focused on making assessment data more readily accessible to schools and teachers; the efforts looked promising but the systems were still in development.

Two of the focal districts were developing data systems that would make classroom- and school-level data accessible to teachers and principals. In one district, the system is comprehensive and customized to the districts' instructional goals. It contains, for example, all Houghton-Mifflin assessments, with state standards crosswalked with test questions. Teachers will ultimately have the ability to compile information on a student across assessments according to a particular standard. As of Year 2, this district was in the very early stages of implementation, and the data systems were not yet in widespread use. A second district also had plans to make assessment data available to teachers through a networked system, but had not yet specified an actual plan. The other two districts relied on district staff to produce hard copy charts for school site leaders. MDRC does not know the frequency, detail, and usefulness of their approach; such details represent important areas for inquiry as MDRC's study progresses. The focus on improving data systems may have been aided by the support of an executive coach, but these efforts typically began before the focal strategy was implemented.

- Among both the focal and non-focal school sites, the most widely mentioned BASRC concept for evidenced-based decision-making was a focus on "target students."

The strategy of selecting a few “target students” in each classroom to whom teachers pay particular attention in order to evaluate the effects of their practice was an idea proposed by BASRC and disseminated through network meetings and coaching. It seems to have been a popular idea that was readily adopted at most BASRC schools that MDRC visited. In two of the districts, the target student strategy was supported or required by the district central office. However, all of the schools visited referred to the selection of and attention to “target students.” Typically, every teacher in the school was encouraged or required to select two to four target students each fall, based on report cards, CSTs, other assessments, or anecdotal data. Most schools focused on the lowest-performing students; at least one school advised teachers to choose a mix of levels; and others chose low-performing students who they thought had the best chance of advancing. Throughout the year, teachers discussed target students in grade- or school-level meetings or in meetings with the principal. Also, teachers were often encouraged by school leaders to individually consider the needs of their target students, to consider interventions or changes in practice appropriate for them, and to assess the results of their changes. The practice of identifying and working with “target students” originated in earlier BASRC work, and precedes the BASRC focal strategy.

- BASRC’s “brand” of inquiry was modeled for focal districts and schools through quarterly review meetings and through an annual Review of Progress meeting facilitated by BASRC staff. The former was unique to the focal strategy, while the latter was part of the larger Phase II strategy.

Two BASRC accountability exercises — quarterly review meetings and annual Review of Progress meetings — provided opportunities for BASRC coaches and staff to model the inquiry practices they espoused. At these meetings, BASRC staff led district and school leaders through an exercise of analysis and reflection, providing an example of the types of practices they encouraged in district offices and school sites. These meetings therefore served not only as a review of districts’ progress on reform efforts and in achievement trends, but also as a way to deliver a key feature of the focal strategy. Leaders in focal districts attended more review meetings. As a result, they may have become more skilled at or more inclined to adopt inquiry practices. However, the extent to which the focal districts actually implemented these inquiry practices is not clear. This is an important area that MDRC will study as the evaluation proceeds. The extent to which inquiry was conducted at the school level is discussed below.

- Across all four districts, most of the schools reported conducting BASRC’s Cycle of Inquiry or practicing “inquiry,” but “inquiry” represented a different set of activities at each school.

For all the schools, inquiry seemed to be interpreted broadly as analysis and reflection. The activities school leaders and teachers described to illustrate their inquiry practices ranged

from informal conversations about student work to filling out detailed worksheets with questions about student assessment data. They typically cited collaborative situations when describing inquiry, either regular grade-level meetings or casual conversations with colleagues. Teachers said they also practiced inquiry at the classroom level, which usually seemed to be equated with attention to target students. The teachers seemed supportive of inquiry practices as long as they remained informal. There was “pushback” when they were asked to fill out forms. In addition, inquiry at the school level was strongly encouraged by one of the focal districts. In Year 2, this district required that schools follow a Cycle of Inquiry protocol when developing their annual school improvement plans for the district. In general, schools in the other focal districts did not report the presence of similar types of district-level inquiry requirements.

- The adoption of the Houghton-Mifflin or Open Court reading programs was often seen as a conflict with target student and inquiry practices.

In the 2003-2004 school year, Year 2 of the focal strategy, schools were implementing or preparing to implement the state-required reading program selected by their district. All four of the districts were requiring high fidelity in the adoption of the reading program. Typically, this meant that teachers (at least most teachers) were expected to use the program’s teaching materials in their lessons, administer the program’s assessments selected by their district, and stick to a schedule planned by their district. Many school leaders, coaches, and teachers viewed the requirements of the reading program adoption as a contradiction with or obstacle to conducting inquiry. They said that this structure did not allow for analysis or reflection and that the complexity of learning a new program took over all collaboration and professional development time. As MDRC conducts additional district-level research, it will be important to ascertain how the district central offices perceived these changes, and if they too (as well as BASRC staff) saw them as running counter to the Cycle of Inquiry or other BASRC focal reforms.¹⁰

Networks and Collaboration

As mentioned in Chapter 2, BASRC organized and led regular meetings for principals, Local Collaborative coaches, and district administrators, to provide networking opportunities and share ideas. BASRC also promoted networking and collaboration as a key to sharing reform ideas within and across schools. This section summarizes key observations regarding networks and collaboration in Year 2 of the focal strategy,

- District leaders, coaches, and principals in the focal districts had the opportunity to attend meetings of networks organized by BASRC: the Focal Superin-

¹⁰These findings will be reported in MDRC’s next BASRC report.

tendents' Network, the Local Collaborative Coaches' Network, and the Principals' Network. The extent of participation in these meetings varied.

When interviewing coaches and principals, MDRC asked whether they attended the BASRC network meetings, and if so, what they got out of the meetings. Local Collaborative coaches, and sometimes other school coaches (reform coordinators or literacy coaches) attended the BASRC Local Collaborative Coaches' Network meetings pretty consistently. They reported that they came away with tools and activities that they could use back at their schools. Some principals attended every Principals' Network meeting, while others attended sporadically or not at all, citing scheduling difficulties. Those who attended said they welcomed the opportunity to talk with other principals, especially those from other districts, and occasionally were motivated by guest speakers. However, the principals interviewed did not provide any examples of specific benefits, particularly pertaining to instructional reform at their schools. As with the other BASRC components, participation in these coach and principal networks did not seem to vary by focal school status.

- In the focal districts, it was common for school leaders (principals and/or teacher leaders and coaches) at both focal and non-focal BASRC schools to meet with each other on a regular basis to share ideas and advance their reform goals.

These meetings were part of the “Local Collaborative,” a structure introduced as part of the larger Phase II work and which included a group of BASRC Phase II-funded schools and the district office. In one focal district, the BASRC schools were grouped into three Local Collaboratives, but more typically, each district had one Local Collaborative composed of all the BASRC grantees. The structure was intended to promote collaboration and both bottom-up and top-down spread of reform ideas. The frequency, attendance, and content of LC meetings varied by Local Collaborative. Some groups convened monthly; others struggled with poor attendance and met only sporadically. Some teams discussed current reform issues — often related to the new or impending adoption of one of the state-required reading programs. Some teams planned joint professional development activities or shared guest speakers for staff or parents. In one district, the team developed a districtwide survey regarding target students. The absence of district leaders at some LC meetings sometimes created misunderstandings. In one district, school leaders thought district administrators were no longer focused on BASRC reforms, not realizing that recent district initiatives were part of the BASRC focal reforms that evolved from the collaboration of district leaders with a BASRC executive coach.

- Other than districtwide professional development sessions, there were few opportunities for teachers to collaborate across schools.

There were a few examples of cross-site collaboration, but for the most part, collaboration across schools was typically limited to school leaders. In one district, teachers in both focal

and non-focal schools had the opportunity to attend collaborative professional development workshops on cultural awareness and English language development (ELD) strategies. In another district, teachers from one school modeled a lesson from a new writing curriculum for teachers at another school that was gearing up to implement the same program.

- At schools in the focal districts, both planned and informal collaboration was widespread.

Most BASRC schools had grade-level collaboration time built into their schedules, often paid for with BASRC grants. Teachers used the time to discuss concerns about students, offer ideas for teaching strategies, and go over student assessment data or student work. In some meetings, teachers participated in inquiry practices as described above, with guidance from a coach or reform coordinator. However, at schools in the first year of adopting one of the state-required reading programs, teachers most often used the time to share challenges and ideas related to the reading program. Collaboration in the form of shared teaching or teaching observations was much less common. While there were a few attempts in a handful of schools, teachers resisted these sorts of activities, primarily because they were reluctant to leave their classrooms and were uncomfortable with peer evaluations.

Summary

Beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, the BASRC focal strategy was put in place in several districts that were relatively similar to the rest of the San Francisco Bay Area. To the extent that they were different, they served fewer white students and students with lower average achievement.

In terms of implementation of the focal strategy, the primary features that distinguished BASRC focal districts from non-focal districts appear to be: district-level coaching by an executive coach, sometimes additional coaching or support from other BASRC staff, a separate BASRC-led Focal Superintendents' Network, and more frequent review meetings with BASRC staff. However, important questions remain regarding the specific policies, programs and strategies undertaken as a result of these activities. In focal districts, did coaching activities or interactions with BASRC staff lead to reform goals or reform activities? How are reform activities in focal districts different from those in non-focal districts? What is the anticipated path from reform activities to improvements in student achievement? Going forward, MDRC's field work will explore these questions. If the focal districts are not engaging in reforms in a way that is more substantial than or different from the reforms in comparable districts, then changes in student achievement above and beyond those seen in similar districts are unlikely.

At the school level, there do not appear to be differences between the reforms occurring in focal and non-focal schools. By Year 2, the coaching by BASRC staff, which was originally planned to distinguish focal schools from non-focal schools, was not in place in most of the focal schools visited by MDRC. While some focal schools did interact with BASRC staff coaches, the interactions were limited, and no more extensive than non-focal schools' interactions with the same BASRC personnel. At both focal and non-focal schools, MDRC did observe evidence of all three of the key features of the BASRC focal reform strategy (coaching by district or school staff, evidenced-based decision-making, and networks/collaboration). However, given that these features are also central to BASRC's Phase I and Phase II strategies, it is possible that these were implemented as a result of participation in earlier BASRC reform efforts rather than the BASRC focal strategy. Moreover, it is also possible that these reform practices were in place before any participation in BASRC reform efforts. As such, the evolution of these reforms in schools within the BASRC focal districts is an important part of MDRC's inquiry in its current field work and will be described in the next report.

Chapter 4

The Relationship Between Participation in the BASRC Focal Strategy and Trends in Student Achievement

The ultimate aim of the BASRC focal strategy is to raise achievement among all students and accelerate achievement gains among the lowest-performing students. This chapter addresses the question of whether participation in the BASRC focal strategy was associated with district-wide improvements in student achievement — above and beyond the progress that would have occurred otherwise — in the five Bay Area school districts in which it was implemented. To accomplish this, the chapter assesses the degree of academic progress in these BASRC focal districts, and whether or not it outpaces progress in similar districts that did not participate in the BASRC focal strategy. In particular, this chapter answers the following questions:

- How does student performance in the BASRC focal districts compare with student performance in those districts prior to the implementation of the focal strategy?
- How do these changes in student performance in the BASRC focal districts compare with the changes in student performance in similar districts in the San Francisco Bay Area?

Below is a brief overview of the findings, discussed in detail later in the chapter.

- In the years following implementation of the BASRC focal strategy, third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts and in similar districts throughout the Bay Area showed no progress in student achievement compared with the baseline period. In fact, average proficiency rates declined.
- On the other hand, fifth-grade students' performance in the focal districts improved over time, slightly outpacing improvements in the comparison districts, but the differences were not statistically significant.
- Among blacks and Hispanics, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students, reductions in the percentage of low-performing fifth-grade students in the BASRC focal districts in Year 2 outpaced the reductions in low-performing fifth-graders in the comparison districts. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

The section below provides a description of MDRC's analytic approach to answering the questions outlined above, followed by an explanation of the baseline characteristics and per-

formance levels in the BASRC focal districts and their comparison counterparts. Finally, the findings are discussed in detail, presenting preliminary results for the first two years of the BASRC focal strategy.

The Analytic Approach

The most challenging aspect of assessing whether an intervention improves student performance outcomes is determining what would have happened if the intervention had not been adopted. This unobservable scenario is referred to as the “counterfactual.” Only by estimating the counterfactual can the “impact” or “net effect” of a reform be understood. Random assignment of students or schools to a reform program is the most reliable basis from which to estimate the counterfactual. When random assignment is not a feasible option, often the next best approach is to combine an “interrupted time series” (ITS) or “difference in differences” approach with comparison groups.

The ITS approach posits that, absent any change in student population, the best predictor of future educational outcomes in the given district or school is past educational outcomes for that same entity.¹ However, a simple comparison over time does not account for the possibility that local events (for example, changes in state policy) not related to the implementation of the reforms in question are driving any observed progress. In order to account for this “local history” as much as possible, MDRC compares changes over time in the set of BASRC focal district with changes over time in a set of similar districts from the same local context. This analysis relies on three basic comparisons:

- The difference between the preimplementation (baseline) average of student outcomes in BASRC focal districts and actual student outcomes in the years after implementation of the BASRC focal reform strategy (that is, the deviation from baseline).
- The difference between average baseline achievement and actual student achievement over the same period of time in a set of carefully chosen comparison districts.
- The difference between changes over time in achievement at the BASRC focal districts versus changes over the same period of time in their comparison counterparts (that is, the difference in the deviation from baseline).

¹In other studies, this logic has been applied to schools. Examples of those studies include Bloom (1999 and 2003), Bloom, Ham, Melton, and O’Brien (2001), Snipes (2003), and Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith (2005). In the case of BASRC, similar logic is applied to districts.

If a reliable counterfactual can be estimated, applying the comparative ITS approach can provide a reliable estimate of the net effect of a reform. In previous evaluations, MDRC has used comparative ITS methods to distinguish between the effects of particular programs and progress that would have been observed without the reforms in question.² The evaluation of BASRC differs from these other studies in that, due to the nature of the BASRC focal strategy and the manner in which it evolved, it is difficult to develop a reliable estimate of the outcomes that would have been observed in the absence of the strategy. Therefore, in this particular case, while the results of the analysis can indicate whether there is an association or correlation between the BASRC focal strategy and changes in student achievement, they do not provide a sufficient basis for ascertaining whether there is in fact a causal relationship between the two.

In particular, BASRC staff tried to select “reform-minded” districts for participation in the focal strategy. These districts may differ from the comparison districts in ways that are neither quantifiable nor observable. It is therefore possible that — even in the absence of the BASRC focal reforms — these districts were more likely to implement reforms and improve student performance than districts with similar student populations and achievement track records. This possible predisposition is exacerbated by the presence of earlier phases of BASRC reforms not only in the BASRC focal reform districts, but also in some of the comparison districts.³ As a result, the “interruption” in time, as well as the contrast between the focal reform and comparison districts, is more difficult to interpret than in other evaluations. Finally, the fact that the focal strategy (and therefore the analysis) is implemented at the district level as opposed to the school level limits the sample size and reduces the power of any statistical inferences.⁴

Nonetheless, the analysis presented in this chapter sheds light on whether student achievement outcomes in BASRC focal districts changed in ways that are systematically different from those of similar districts in the Bay Area. In other words, though it is uncertain whether or not the BASRC focal strategy caused changes in student achievement, MDRC can at least explore the extent to which the BASRC focal strategy is associated with improved achievement outcomes. While this does not isolate the effect of the BASRC focal reforms, it may aid the discussion of the BASRC focal reform strategy’s viability as a means of improving student achievement.⁵

²Kemple, Herlihy, and Smith (2005), Snipes (2003), and Bloom (1999, 2003).

³Unfortunately, it was not possible to rule out Bay Area districts that participated in earlier phases of BASRC and maintain a sufficient sample size for the study.

⁴It is important to note that the district-level analysis might limit statistical power in two ways. First, focusing on districts limits the number of observations that can be included in the study. Second, most variation in achievement is within rather than across districts, which will drive up the standard errors and reduce the precision of the estimates.

⁵A potential threat to the validity of the comparative ITS approach is the possibility of systematic changes over time in the student populations in the BASRC focal districts or their comparison counterparts (for exam-
(continued)

Comparison Districts for the BASRC Focal Districts

As discussed above, including comparison districts in the analysis helps provide an estimate of the progress that would have occurred in the BASRC focal districts in the absence of the BASRC focal reforms. The approach helps account for local or regional factors above the district level that may influence student performance, such as a change in state policy or state tests. To execute this strategy, each BASRC focal district was matched with a set of similar non-focal Bay Area districts.⁶

Logic suggests that the most accurate predictor of future performance on a particular outcome is past performance on that same outcome. Since the focus of this analysis is BASRC's relationship to elementary-student achievement, prior academic achievement among elementary students in these districts was the primary criteria upon which comparison districts were selected. Given BASRC's focus on literacy, MDRC focused in particular on student performance on reading or language arts assessments. It is possible that, even among districts with similar prior achievement, districts that serve different student populations might be expected to evolve differently over time. Therefore, MDRC also matched districts in terms of racial/ethnic composition. Finally, districts were also matched on their size.⁷ In order to capture schools' and districts' influence on students by the end of elementary school, all matching was done at the fifth-grade level.

The BASRC focal strategy was implemented in the five focal districts in this study during the 2002-2003 school year. Therefore, the baseline period for this analysis is the three years immediately preceding this point, the 1999-2000 through 2001-2002 school years. Comparison districts were chosen on the basis of their similarities throughout this baseline period.⁸ Appendix B contains a more detailed description of the comparison-district selection process.

The matching process resulted in a set of comparison districts with similar baseline achievement patterns and student populations. The five focal districts were matched with 15 non-

ple, demographic changes in the surrounding community or districts changing their geographic boundaries). It is also possible that the adoption of a reform program can cause a change in the student population by, for example, increasing attendance and reducing mobility. MDRC's analysis of demographic shifts suggests that there weren't significant systematic shifts in the demographics of either the focal or the non-focal districts during the baseline or follow-up periods of the analysis. Therefore, this chapter presents results that do not control for changes in district composition.

⁶The San Francisco Bay Area was defined to include six counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara.

⁷This was done by matching on the number of fifth-grade students in the district.

⁸The preimplementation or baseline period from which MDRC determines the historical patterns varies for different outcomes due to data availability. When assessing baseline patterns on the nationally norm-referenced test, the SAT-9, this study relies on three years of baseline data: 1999-2000 through 2001-2002. When assessing baseline patterns on the newer test in California, the California Standards Test (CST), the study relies on just two years of baseline data to project future trends: 2000-2001 and 2001-2002.

focal districts, with some comparison districts matching with more than one focal district. Overall, as shown in Table 4.1, the two sets of districts look very similar, particularly on the characteristics used for matching. For example, across all baseline years, the focal and comparison districts matched within 2 percentage points on the California Standards Test (CST) proficiency levels (proficient/advanced, basic, and below/far below basic) for both third- and fifth-grade students. The focal districts and the comparison districts also look similar in terms of students' race/ethnicity. For example, in the focal districts, 26 percent of fifth-grade students were Hispanic, compared with 27 percent in the comparison districts; 22 percent of the students in the focal districts were Asian, compared with 17 percent in the comparisons; and 6 percent of the students in the focal districts were black, compared with approximately 5 percent in the comparisons.

The two sets of districts are also comparable in characteristics that were not the basis for matching. Table 4.1 also shows that the comparison districts are within 5 percentage points of the focal districts in the percentage of English Language Learners (approximately 16 percent versus 14 percent), the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (30 percent versus approximately 25 percent), and on performance levels on the math portions of the CST and Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9) for both third-grade and fifth-grade students.

The most apparent difference between the focal districts and comparison districts is in the average number of third- and fifth-grade students enrolled in each district. The comparison districts are on average larger than the focal districts (599 fifth-grade students compared with 499 in the comparisons), but had fewer schools (six elementary schools per district compared with eight in the focal districts). Together, these two indicators suggest that the comparison districts had more classes per school (or more students per class). That is, they likely had larger schools than the focal districts.

Findings

This section presents preliminary findings on the relationship between the BASRC focal strategy and changes in student achievement in the first two years of the strategy (2002-2003 and 2003-2004). These findings are presented along with figures that compare the average achievement levels of the five BASRC focal districts with those of the non-focal comparison districts. For each group, averages are presented for third-grade and fifth-grade students during the two or three years before the introduction of the BASRC focal strategy (the baseline period), and for each of the two years after the focal strategy was adopted (the follow-up years).

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Table 4.1

**Characteristics of BASRC Focal and Comparison Districts, Elementary-Level
Average for School Years 1999-2000 Through 2001-2002**

Characteristic	BASRC Focal Districts	Comparison Districts
<u>Demographic characteristics of third-grade students</u>		
Average number of third-grade students	505	601
Average number of elementary schools ^a	8	6
Race/Ethnicity (%)		
White	39.9	47.7
Hispanic	28.9	28.8
Asian	21.8	17.4
Black	5.5	4.8
Other	3.9	1.3
English language learners (%)	22.7	18.2
Eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (%) ^b	29.8	24.7
<u>Achievement levels of third-grade students</u>		
California Standards Test		
Language arts ^c		
Proficient or advanced (%)	43.1	41.2
Basic (%)	29.9	30.9
Below or far below basic (%)	26.9	28.0
Mean scale score	341.8	339.3
Math ^d		
Proficient or advanced (%)	49.4	46.2
Basic (%)	27.2	26.8
Below or far below basic (%)	23.6	26.8
Mean scale score	350.8	346.1
Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition		
Reading		
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	59.9	59.5
25th National Percentile Rank (%)	21.8	22.4
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.3	18.2
Mean scale score	626.4	624.7
Math		
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	69.0	68.1
25th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.2	18.2
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	12.8	13.7
Mean scale score	620.8	618.6
Total number of districts	5	15

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

Characteristic	BASRC Focal Districts	Comparison Districts
<u>Demographic characteristics of fifth-grade students</u>		
Average number of fifth-grade students	499	599
Average number of elementary schools ^a	8	6
Race/Ethnicity (%)		
White	43.1	49.2
Hispanic	26.2	26.8
Asian	21.9	17.4
Black	6.2	5.3
Other	2.5	1.3
English language learners (%)	15.5	14.0
Eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch (%) ^b	29.8	24.7
<u>Achievement levels of fifth-grade students</u>		
California Standards Test		
Language arts ^c		
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.8	38.6
Basic (%)	39.8	41.1
Below or far below basic (%)	22.6	20.3
Mean scale score	338.4	341.1
Math ^d		
Proficient or advanced (%)	37.2	36.9
Basic (%)	32.6	33.5
Below or far below basic (%)	30.4	29.6
Mean scale score	335.6	335.7
Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition		
Reading		
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	56.0	57.9
25th National Percentile Rank (%)	23.4	23.1
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	20.6	19.0
Mean scale score	659.1	659.7
Math		
At or above 50th National Percentile Rank (%)	63.5	63.5
25th National Percentile Rank (%)	17.7	17.9
Below 25th National Percentile Rank (%)	18.7	18.6
Mean scale score	659.6	659.4
Total number of districts	5	15

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: Comparison district columns represent the average of the average across each comparison district cluster. Note that some comparison districts match with more than one focal district. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of their size.

^aElementary schools include any school with a fifth-grade class, since comparison districts were selected from fifth-grade outcomes.

^bAverages for free or reduced-price lunch are presented at the school level only.

^cDue to availability of test scores, California Standards Test averages in language arts are based on just two baseline years, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, except for the Below or Far Below Basic average, which is based on one baseline year, 2001-2002.

^dDue to availability of test scores, California Standards Test averages in math are based on just one baseline year, 2001-2002.

MDRC has focused its analyses on third- and fifth-grade students for two reasons. First, test scores of third-graders are more reliable than those of second-graders, but still capture results of students who are learning early reading skills.⁹ Much of the current accountability efforts are focused on whether or not students can read by the third grade. Fifth-graders allow for an analysis of a slightly older group of students who have been in school longer, are learning more advanced reading skills, and reflect a more cumulative effect of the quality of education across the elementary grades. Second, achievement gaps tend to be larger in later grades, so fifth grade provides a good opportunity to see if efforts to support the lower achievers close the performance gap. The sections below present findings for all third- and fifth-grade students and then examine the trends of key subgroups, including minority students, English Language Learners, and economically disadvantaged students.

Presented first are findings for performance on the language arts portion of the CST. The CST is a high-stakes test in California, as state accountability requirements and sanctions hinge on schools' CST results. Next, this section presents findings regarding students' performance relative to national norms on the state's nationally norm-referenced achievement tests.¹⁰

⁹Shepard, Kagan, and Wurtz (1998).

¹⁰In particular, the state administered the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) during the years immediately preceding implementation of the BASRC focal strategy, and the California Achievement Test (CAT-6) in the years following implementation. Though the test changed, several measures that remain constant over time are still available. These include the percentage of students who performed at or above the 50th percentile and the percentage of students who fell short of the 25th percentile.

Findings for All Students

The following summarizes the findings from the analysis of the relationship between BASRC focal district status and progress in student achievement measures over the first two years of the intervention:

- Achievement among third-grade students in BASRC focal and comparison districts, as measured by performance in language arts on the CST, declined in the two years after implementation of the BASRC focal strategy. Though not statistically significant, the declines were greater in the BASRC focal districts than in their non-focal counterparts throughout the Bay Area.
- The percentage of fifth-grade students performing at proficient or advanced levels in language arts on the CST increased during the first two years of the BASRC focal strategy. This pattern was mirrored by the changes in achievement observed in the comparison districts in the Bay Area.
- The percentage of fifth-grade students scoring below basic in language arts on the CST fell over the course of the first two years of the BASRC focal reform strategy, indicating improvements among low-performing students. Similar improvements did *not* appear to take place in comparison districts in the Bay Area. However, these differences are not statistically significant, and may be due to chance.
- For both third- and fifth-grade students, performance on nationally norm-referenced tests suggests that scores at BASRC focal schools, as well as in the Bay Area in general, fell when the state changed assessments in the first year of the focal reforms. Among fifth-graders, this decline seemed somewhat smaller in the BASRC focal districts than in comparison districts from the same area. However, as is the case with several other findings, the differences are not statistically significant.

Student Performance on the CST

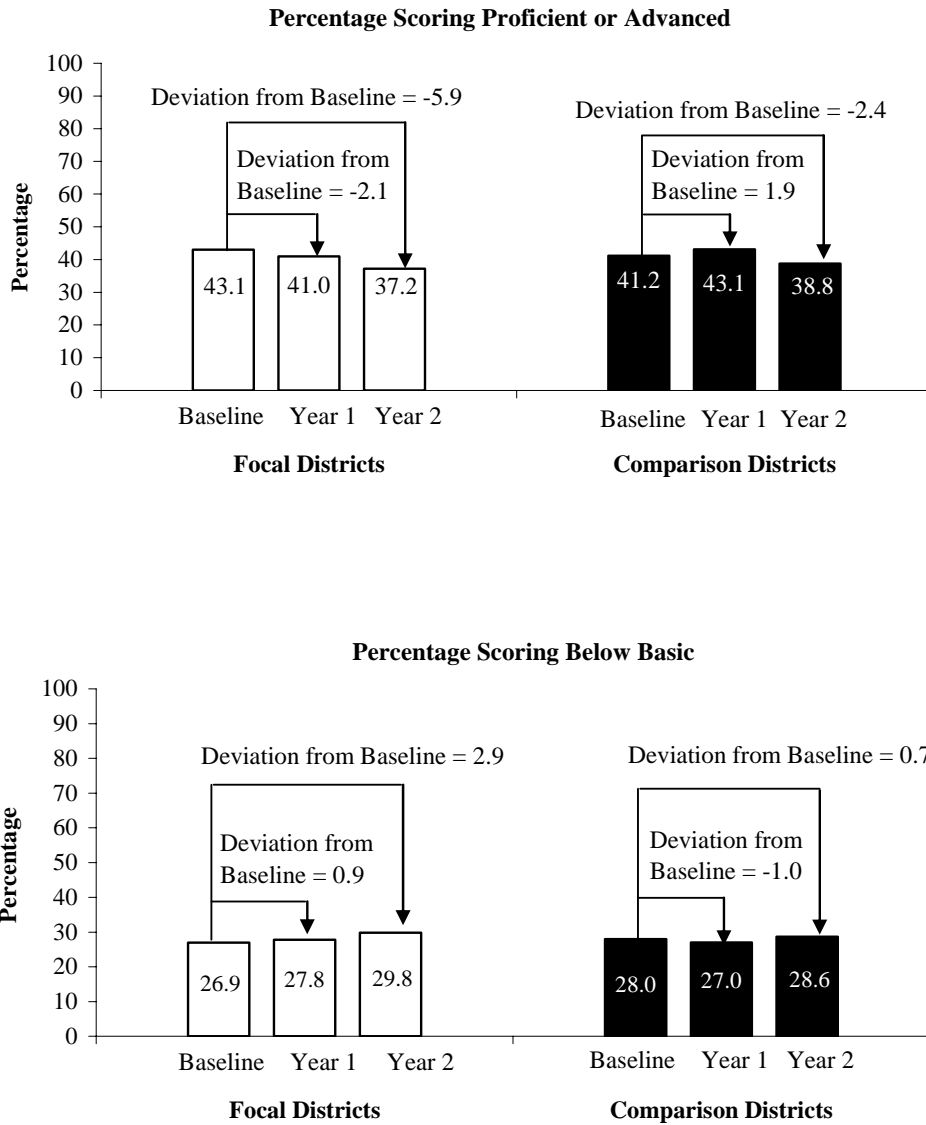
Figure 4.1 shows the average percentage of third-grade students who scored proficient or advanced on the language arts portion of CST during the baseline period and each of the two follow-up years.¹¹ Figure 4.1 also shows the same data for those who scored below or far below basic. The white bars represent the outcomes of students in the BASRC focal districts, while the dark bars show the outcomes in the comparison districts. Figure 4.1 shows that in the BASRC

¹¹As mentioned earlier, CST data allowed for just two years from which to determine a baseline average.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.1

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

focal districts, the percentage of students performing at or above the proficient level declined over time. In the years immediately preceding implementation of the focal reform strategy, an average of 43 percent of third-graders in the BASRC focal districts performed at or above proficient on the language arts portion of the CST. In follow-up Years 1 and 2, district proficiency levels were 41 percent and 37 percent, respectively.¹² In the comparison districts, the baseline average proficiency rate was 41 percent, the average in Year 1 was 43 percent, and the average in Year 2 was 39 percent. In short, over the first two years of the focal strategy, proficiency rates in the BASRC focal districts declined by approximately 6 percentage points, compared with a decline of 2 percentage points in the comparison districts. It is possible that the difference in the deviations from baseline suggests a small *negative* association between student achievement and the BASRC focal reforms. However, the difference is not statistically significant and may be due to chance.¹³

Figure 4.1 also illustrates a slight *increase* in the percentage of third-grade students performing below basic in the BASRC focal districts. In particular, 27 percent of students at BASRC focal districts scored below or far below basic during the baseline period, but this percentage increased to 30 percent by spring 2004. At the same time, the percentage of students scoring below or far below basic in the comparison districts essentially stayed the same. Again, the difference between focal districts and the comparison districts' deviation from baseline is small and not statistically significant. In other words, the association between BASRC focal reforms and progress over time is negative, but the difference is small and could be due to chance.

One explanation for this decline in test scores is that students in all of the districts were still adjusting to recent changes in the CSTs. The pattern is also found across all districts in the Bay Area and across all districts in the state (as shown in Appendix C). On the other hand, the patterns do not suggest that the focal strategy was an effective means of improving third-grade achievement.

Figure 4.2 presents the same CST outcomes for cohorts of fifth-grade students. Interestingly, the figures suggest improvements in language arts achievement in the focal districts at both points on the achievement scale. The average percentage of focal district students scoring at or above proficient increased from 38 percent to 51 percent by the end of follow-up Year 2. A similar change, from 39 percent to 50 percent, occurred in the comparison districts. These patterns are in line with upward trends across the Bay Area (and across the state as well). Figure 4.2 also suggests that the BASRC focal districts reduced the number of students performing

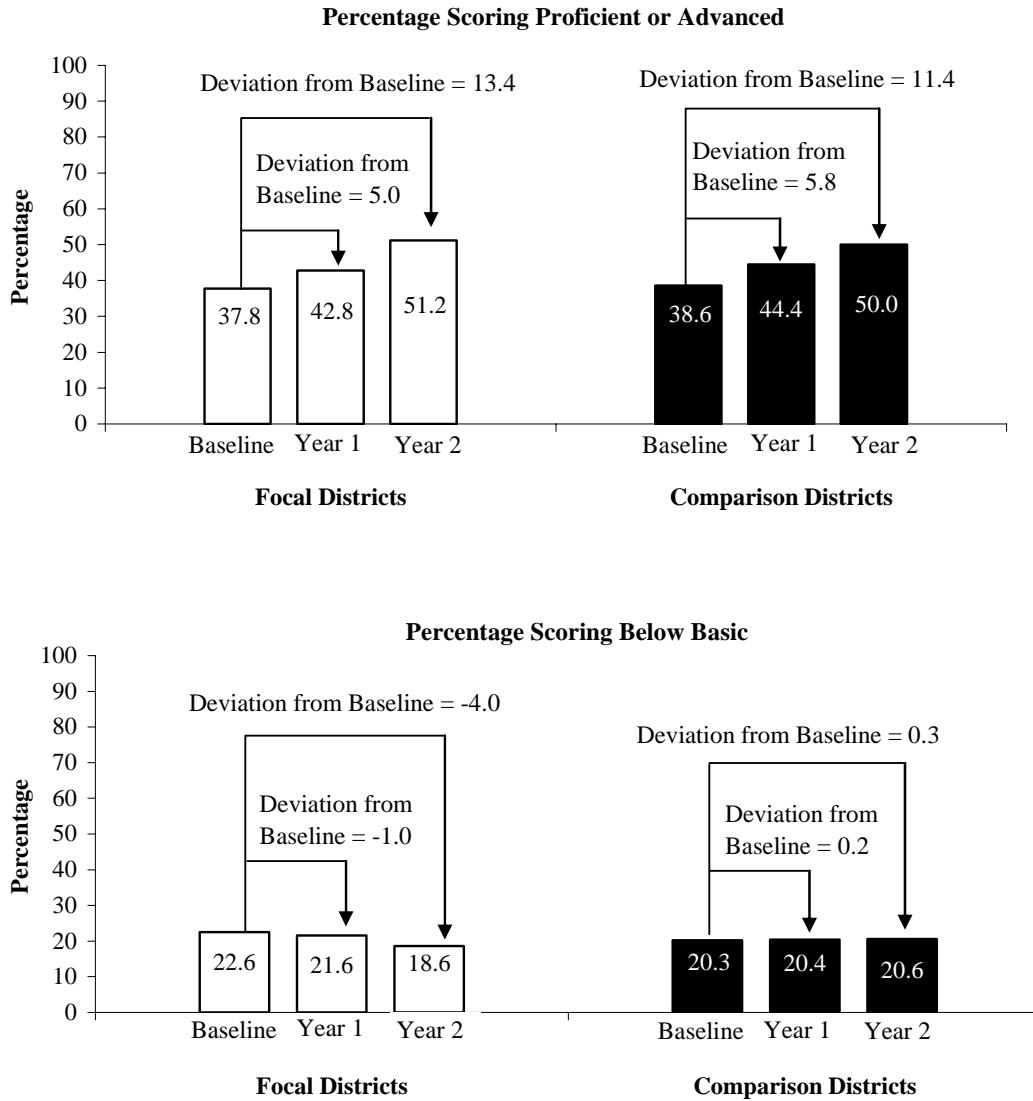
¹²The number of questions on the CST changed somewhat between the last year of baseline and the first year of follow-up; therefore, small changes during this time should be interpreted with caution. The test did not change between follow-up Year 1 and follow-up Year 2.

¹³By statistically significant, the authors mean that there is less than a 10 percent chance that the actual difference between progress at the program and comparison groups is actually zero.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.2

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

below basic, and that, in Year 2, these changes may have outpaced those that occurred in the comparison districts. In particular, the percentage of students scoring below basic dropped by 4 percentage points in the focal districts compared with essentially no change in the comparison districts, suggesting a net difference of 4 percentage points in the amount of progress in the focal districts and their comparisons.

Together these two graphs suggest a positive trend in the percentage of fifth-grade students meeting state standards in language arts. They also suggest the *possibility* of a positive association between the BASRC focal strategy and language arts achievement among fifth-graders, particularly among lower-performing students. However, the differences between progress in the focal and comparison districts are relatively small and not statistically significant.

Student Performance on the CAT-6

The next set of figures shows achievement levels on California's norm-referenced tests. As discussed above, the state of California administered the SAT-9 in the several years prior to BASRC implementation, and changed to the CAT-6 in the first year of the BASRC focal reforms (spring 2003). As students and schools get used to new assessments, it is logical to expect percentile scores to drop when a new test is introduced, and improve in the years following the first administration of a new test.¹⁴ Moreover, the CAT-6 and the SAT-9 are developed and published by two different companies and use different national groups of students as the comparison groups.¹⁵ As a result, it is difficult to interpret changes in test scores over time. However, absent any program effect, this change in test instruments should affect BASRC focal districts and comparison districts the same way. Therefore, to the extent that the focal strategy had a systematic effect on student performance, we might still observe *differences* in the extent of these changes in test scores over time.

Figure 4.3 presents the percentage of third-grade students who performed at or above the 50th percentile and below the 25th percentile on the nationally norm-referenced tests administered in California. During the preimplementation period, the outcomes for the focal districts and the comparison districts looked nearly identical. In particular, approximately 60 percent of students in the focal districts and the comparison schools scored above the 50th percentile on the SAT-9. In the first two years of the BASRC focal reforms, when the CAT-6 administration began, the percentage of students performing above the 50th percentile in both the focal and non-focal districts dropped to approximately 43 percent. This most likely does not reflect a substantive change in

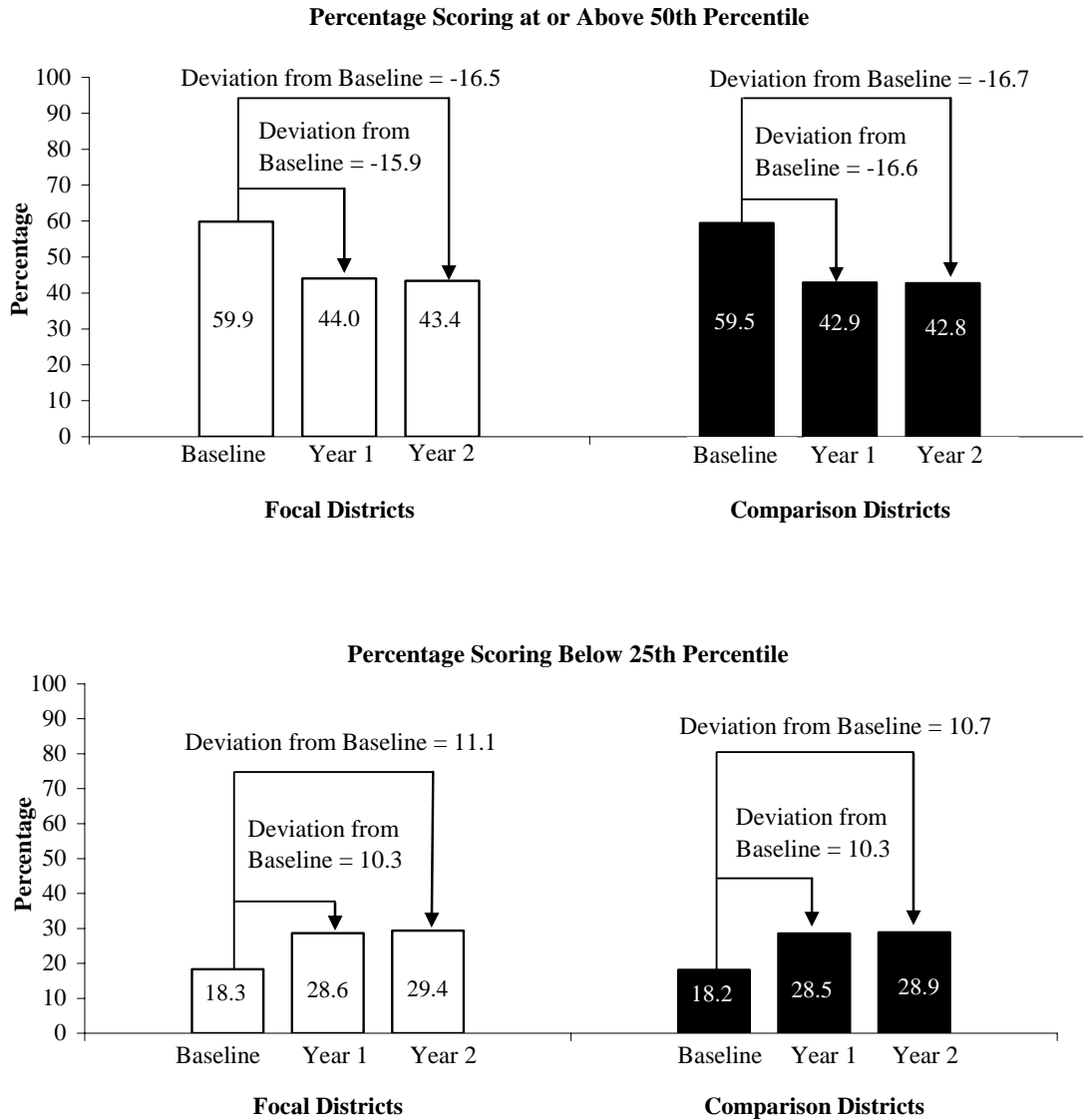
¹⁴Koretz (2002) and Linn (2000).

¹⁵California Department of Education, Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Results Web site (2005).

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.3

Third-Grade Student Performance on Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.
 NOTES: The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) was replaced by the California Achievement Test (CAT-6) in the 2002-2003 school year. The baseline years for the SAT-9, language arts, consist of school years 1999-2000, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-3003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year for the CAT-6. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

teaching and learning, but a drop in scores due to the change in tests. However, there were no differences between the patterns in the BASRC focal districts versus their comparison counterparts. Figure 4.3 shows the same pattern for students who scored below the 25th percentile.

Figure 4.4 presents the same results for fifth-grade students. It shows that in the first follow-up year, the percentage of students in focal and non-focal districts who exceeded the 50th percentile fell by the same amount (about 9 percentage points) in the focal districts as well as in the comparisons. But in the second year of the focal strategy, scores in the focal districts increased, while those in the comparison districts remained the same. In particular, the percentage exceeding the national norm in the focal districts increased to 50 percent, 6 percentage points lower than the baseline average. On the other hand, the average remained at approximately 48 percent in the comparison districts, 9 points lower than their baseline average. Figure 4.4 also shows a similar story for students who scored below the 25th percentile, although the differences are smaller. In both of the cases illustrated in Figure 4.4, however, the differences in deviations from baseline are not statistically significant.

Findings for Key Student Subgroups

A key part of BASRC's mission is "to raise student achievement and narrow the gap in performance between children of color, poor children, English Language Learners and their higher-achieving peers; and to create a more equitable system of schools."¹⁶ This section explores whether the focal strategy is associated with changes in student achievement for students for which BASRC aims to accelerate achievement.

This section presents the same figures for performance on the CST as for the full samples of third- and fifth-grade students, but for each of three subgroups: economically disadvantaged students (defined as students who qualify to receive a free or reduced-price lunch program), black and Hispanic students, and English Language Learners.

Economically Disadvantaged Students

- While the performance of economically disadvantaged third-graders in the focal districts declined, the performance among economically disadvantaged fifth-grade students increased in the years after implementation of the BASRC focal reforms.¹⁷

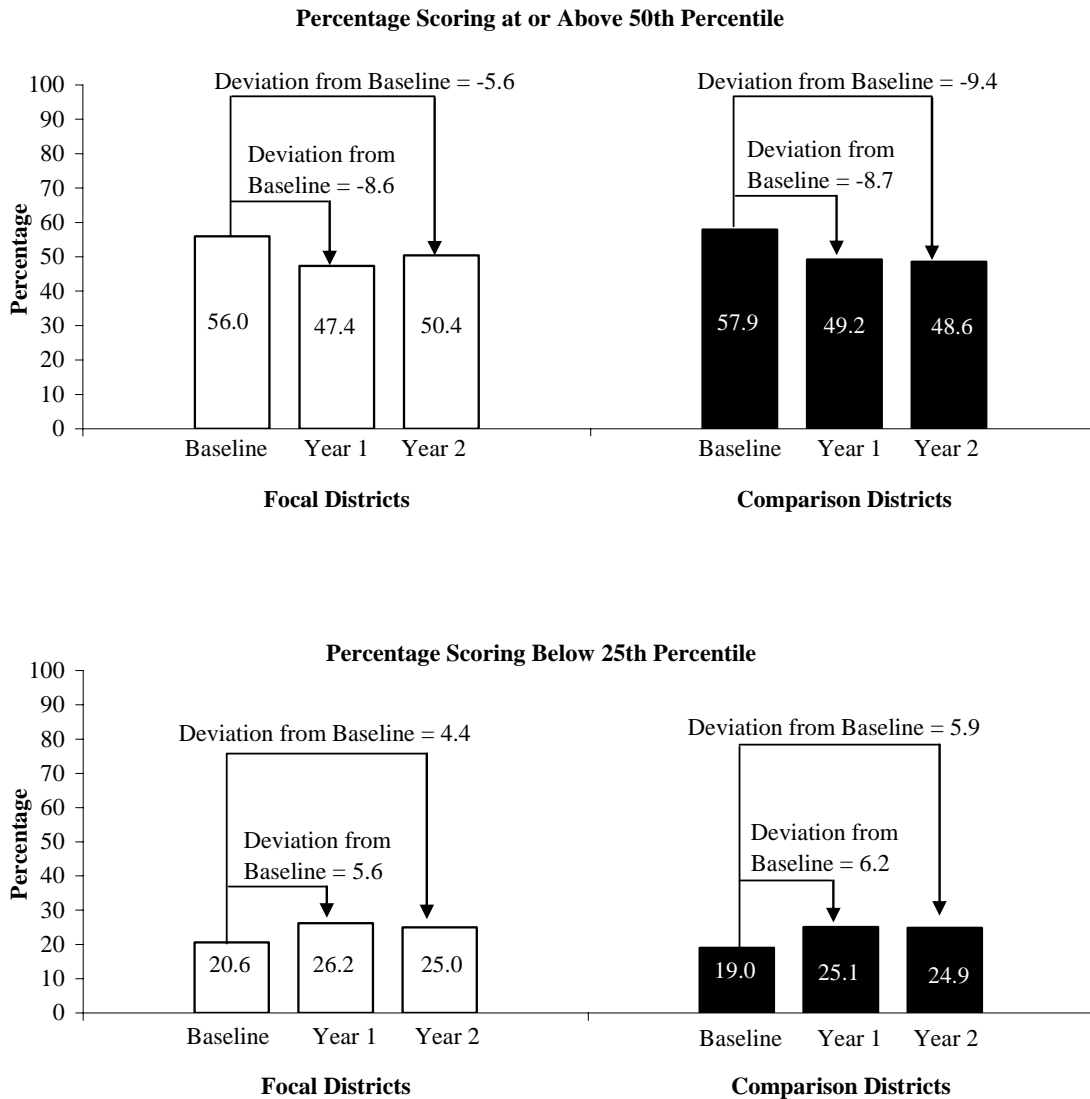
¹⁶BASRC Web site (2003).

¹⁷As illustrated in Appendix C, this pattern is observed across the Bay Area as a whole as well as throughout the state of California.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.4

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on Nationally Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) was replaced by the California Achievement Test (CAT-6) in the 2002-2003 school year. The baseline years for the SAT-9, language arts, consist of school years 1999-2000, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year for the CAT-6. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

- The improvements among lower-performing fifth-grade students were larger in the focal districts than in the comparison districts, but only in Year 2. The differences were not statistically significant.

Approximately 30 percent of students in the elementary schools in the BASRC focal districts receive a free or reduced-price lunch, a common proxy for economic disadvantage. This proportion is constant through all years in MDRC's analysis, including both the baseline and follow-up periods. On average, economically disadvantaged students scored much lower than average on state reading assessments. For example, during the baseline period, 38 percent of all fifth-graders in the focal districts scored proficient or above on the language arts section of the CST, but the same could be said of only 20 percent of economically disadvantaged fifth-graders.

In the focal districts, the performance of economically disadvantaged third-grade students on the CST declined slightly over the follow-up period, while in the comparison districts, there was little change. This is shown in Figure 4.5. However, the pattern among fifth-graders is somewhat different. Figure 4.6 shows the percentage of economically disadvantaged fifth-grade students who scored proficient or above on the language arts portion of the CST, as well as the percentage of economically disadvantaged fifth-graders who scored below or far below basic. As the figure illustrates, test scores among these students improved during the first two years of focal reforms. In particular, the percentage of fifth-graders scoring at or above proficient improved from 20 percent to 31 percent by Year 2 in the BASRC focal districts, and from 19 percent to 30 percent by Year 2 in the comparison districts. At the same time, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students scoring below basic fell from approximately 36 percent to 30 percent by Year 2 in the BASRC focal districts and from 36 percent to 34 percent by Year 2 at the comparison schools. Interestingly, the differences in improvements favored the comparison districts in Year 1. However, by the spring of Year 2, the differences in progress favored the BASRC focal districts. In both cases, the differences were not statistically significant.

Black and Hispanic Students

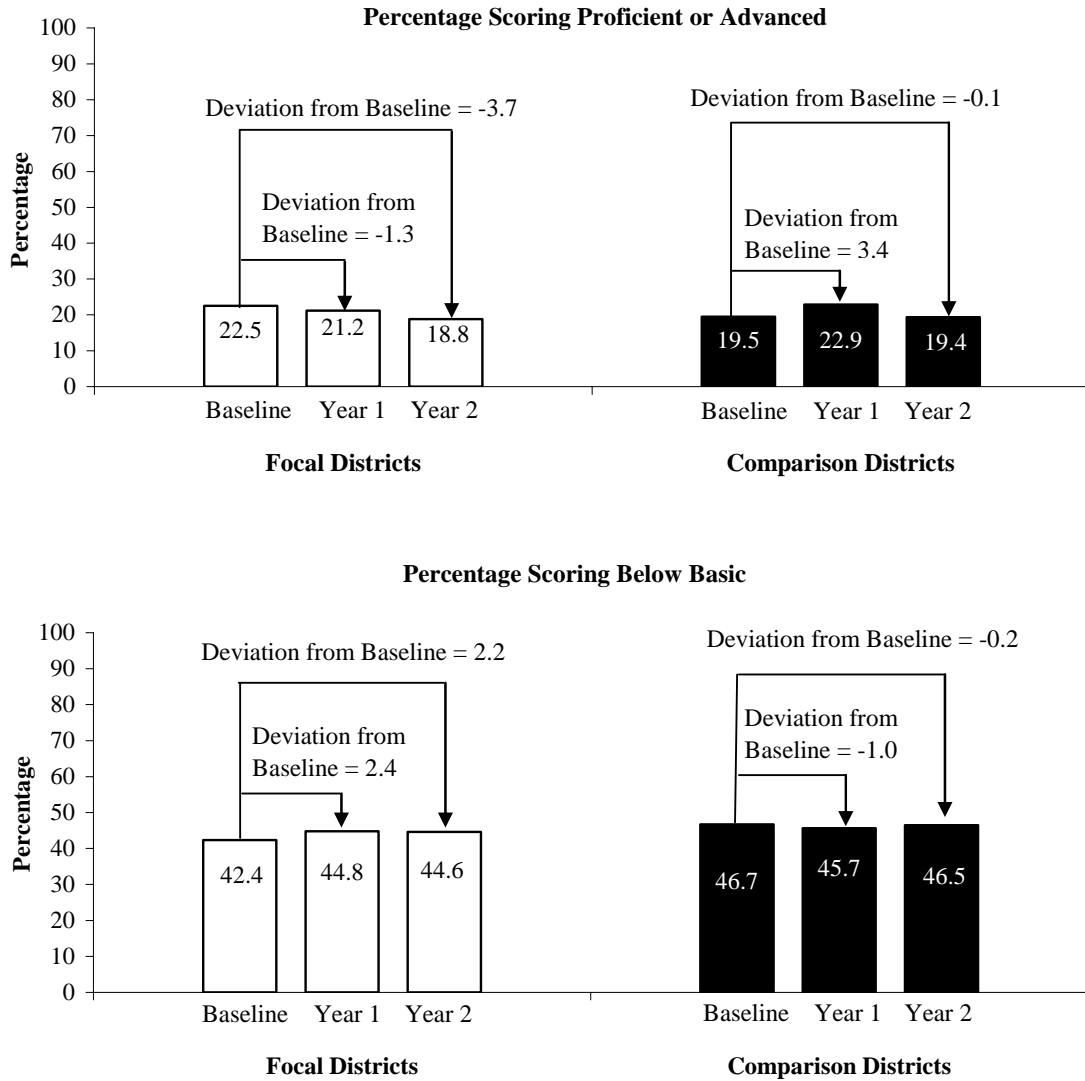
This section focuses on trends among black and Hispanic students, two groups for which there are often achievement gaps.¹⁸ During the baseline period, more than 30 percent of students in the elementary schools in the BASRC focal districts were black or Hispanic. In general, these students performed slightly lower than average.

¹⁸See, for example, Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998).

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.5

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
Economically Disadvantaged Students



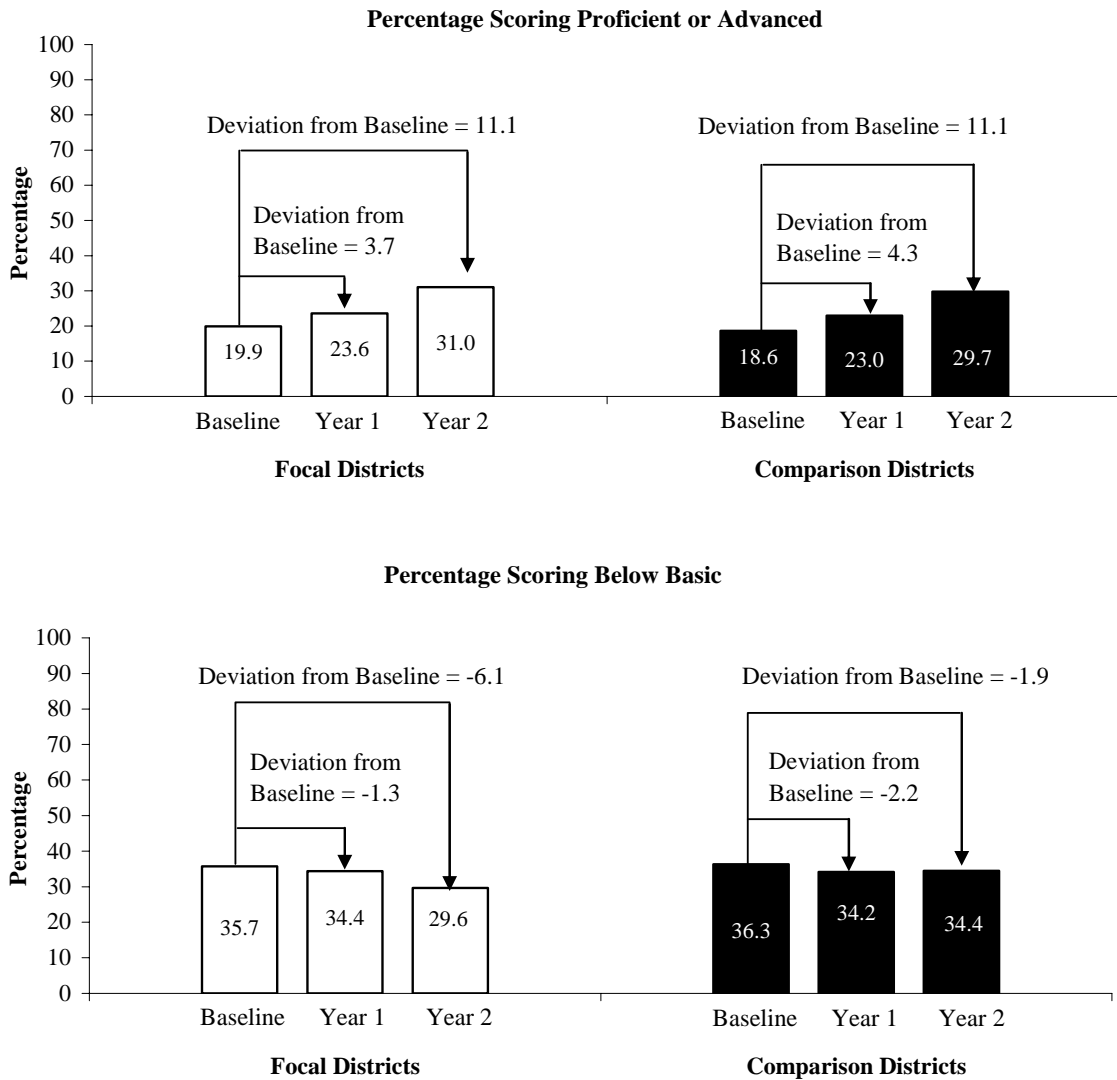
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.6

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
Economically Disadvantaged Students**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

- Among third-graders, performance among black and Hispanic students in both focal districts and the comparison group fell in Year 2 of BASRC implementation. Though the differences were not statistically significant, the declines in the percentage of black and Hispanic third-graders performing at the proficient or advanced level appeared to be somewhat larger in the BASRC focal districts.
- Performance among black and Hispanic fifth-graders appeared to improve. Though the differences were not statistically significant, the reduction in the percentage of black and Hispanic fifth-graders performing at the lowest levels appeared to be somewhat larger in the BASRC focal districts.

Figure 4.7 shows the percentage of black and Hispanic third-graders scoring at or above proficient on the CST, as well as the percentage scoring below basic.¹⁹ The figure reflects overall declines in achievement levels among black and Hispanic third-graders. The figure also shows that these declines are slightly larger in the focal districts. On the other hand, among fifth-graders, CST proficiency scores improved relative to the baseline. As shown in Figure 4.8, during the baseline period, 20 percent of black and Hispanic students in the focal districts scored as proficient or advanced. By the second year of implementation, proficiency rates among these black and Hispanic fifth-graders had improved by 10 percentage points. Proficiency rates among fifth-graders in the comparison districts followed a nearly identical trend, growing from 21 percent in the baseline period to 32 percent in Year 2 of the reforms.

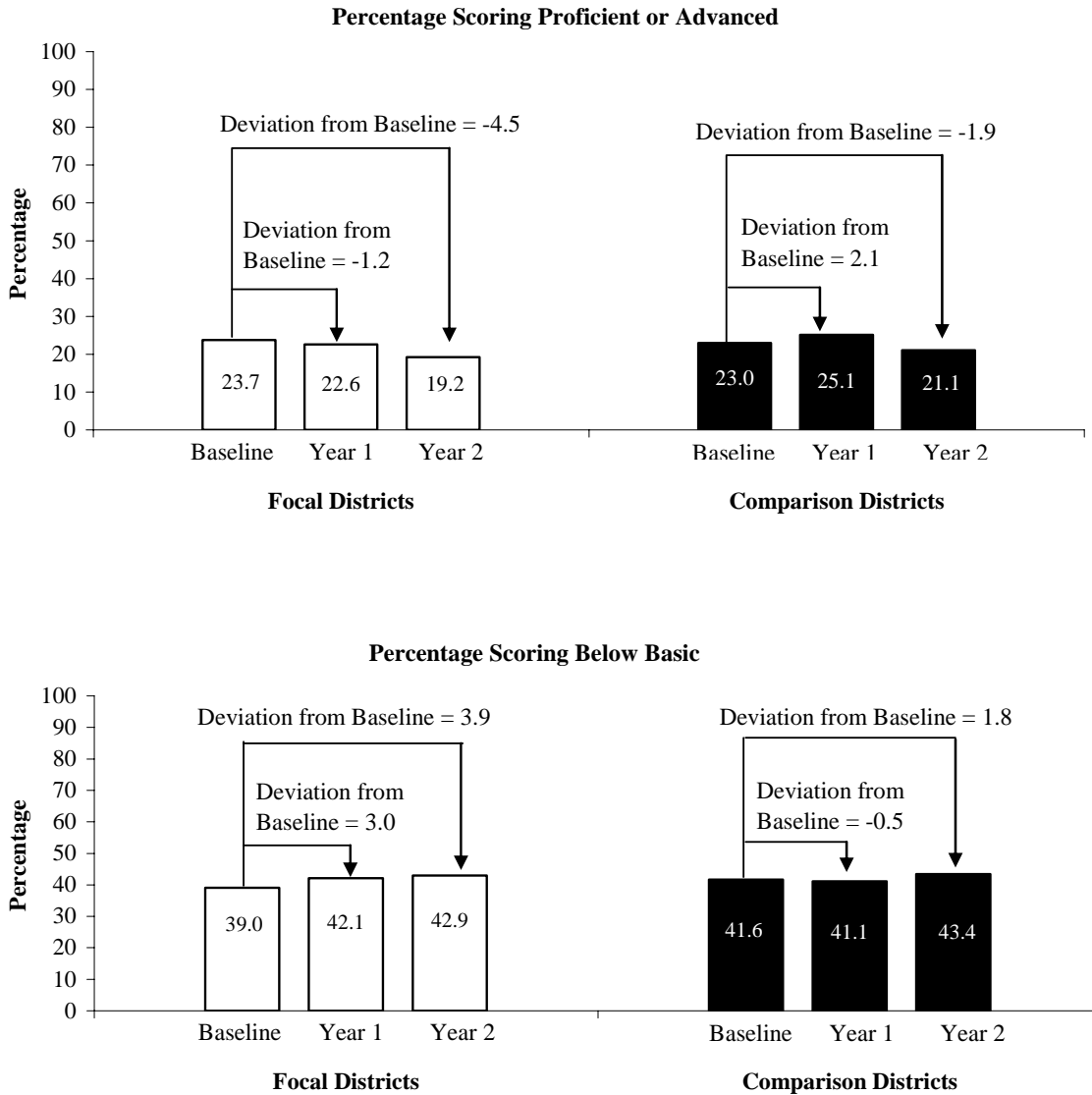
Figure 4.8 also shows reductions in the percentage of black and Hispanic students performing at the lowest levels of achievement. As the figure illustrates, the percentage of fifth-grade students scoring below or far below basic declined from 36 percent to 29 percent over the first two years of the focal reforms, a 7 percentage point difference. The percentage of fifth-graders scoring below basic in the comparison districts fell from 36 percent to 32 percent over the same period. Again, while the differences between the focal districts' improvement and comparison districts' improvement are small and not statistically significant, by the second year of implementation, they favor the BASRC focal reform districts.

¹⁹Data for students scoring below or far below basic are not available for racial/ethnic categories in the 2001-2002 school year. Therefore, the baseline average for this subgroup is based on only one year, 2000-2001.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.7

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
Black and Hispanic Students



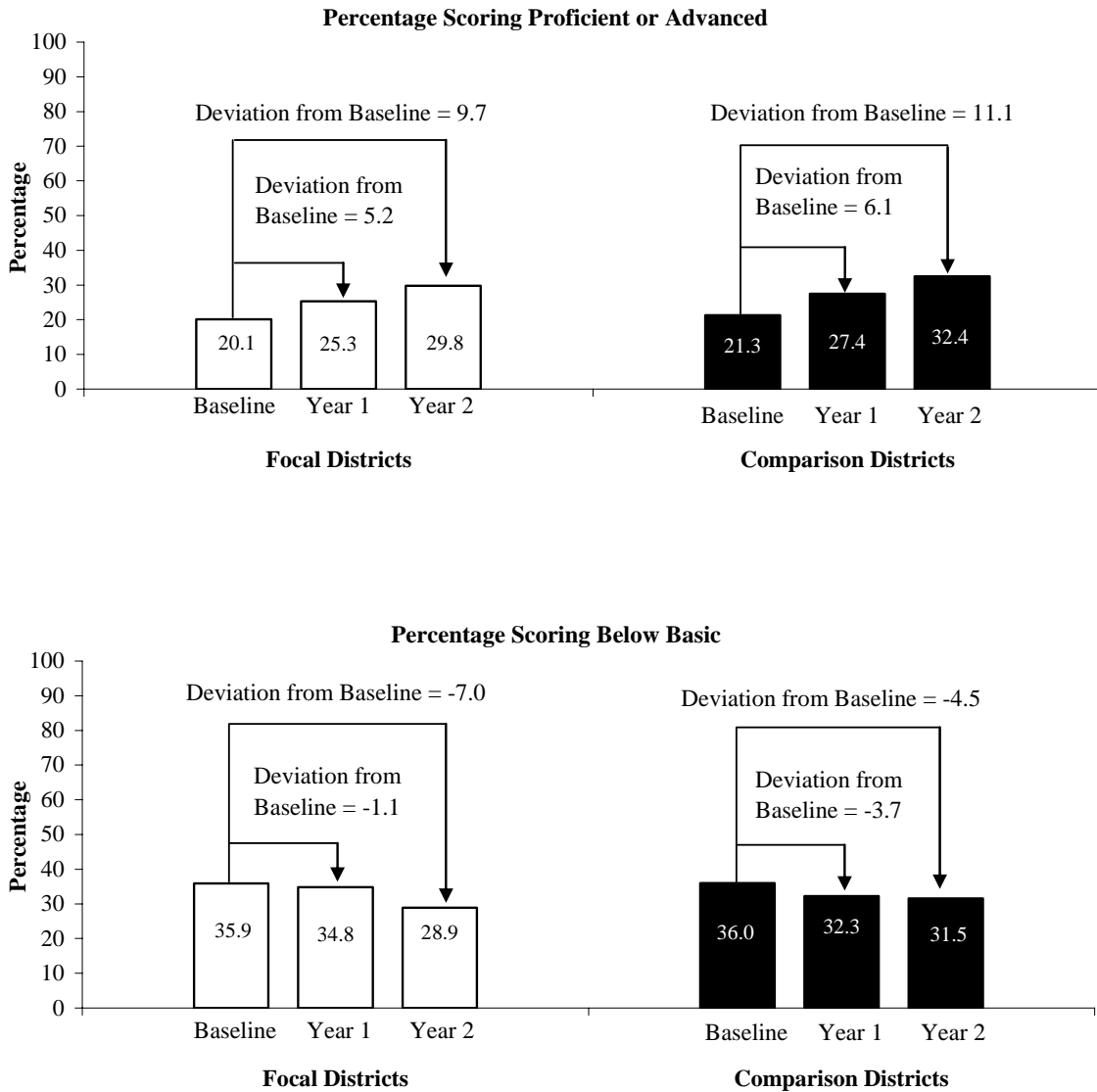
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.8

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
Black and Hispanic Students



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

English Language Learners

The final subgroup analysis looks at students classified as English Language Learners (ELL). In the BASRC focal districts, 23 percent of students are classified as English Language Learners in third grade and 16 percent in fifth grade.

- Test scores among third-grade English Language Learners declined slightly over the course of the follow-up period. The declines were somewhat larger in the focal districts than in the comparison districts, but the differences in declines were not statistically significant.
- Among English Language Learners in the fifth grade, student performance appeared to increase and outpace that of students in the comparison districts in both follow-up years, particularly at the lower end of the achievement spectrum. Though the magnitude of the differences could be considered policy-relevant, the differences in increases between the two groups of districts are not statistically significant.

Overall, English Language Learners performed at much lower levels than the full sample of students in the focal districts. For example, during the baseline period, an average of 11 percent of fifth-grade English Language Learners in the focal districts scored as proficient or advanced on the CST compared with 38 percent of all fifth-graders.

Figure 4.9 shows the percentage of ELL third-graders who scored proficient or above, as well as the percentage of ELL third-graders who scored below basic. Figure 4.10 shows the same data for fifth-grade ELL students.

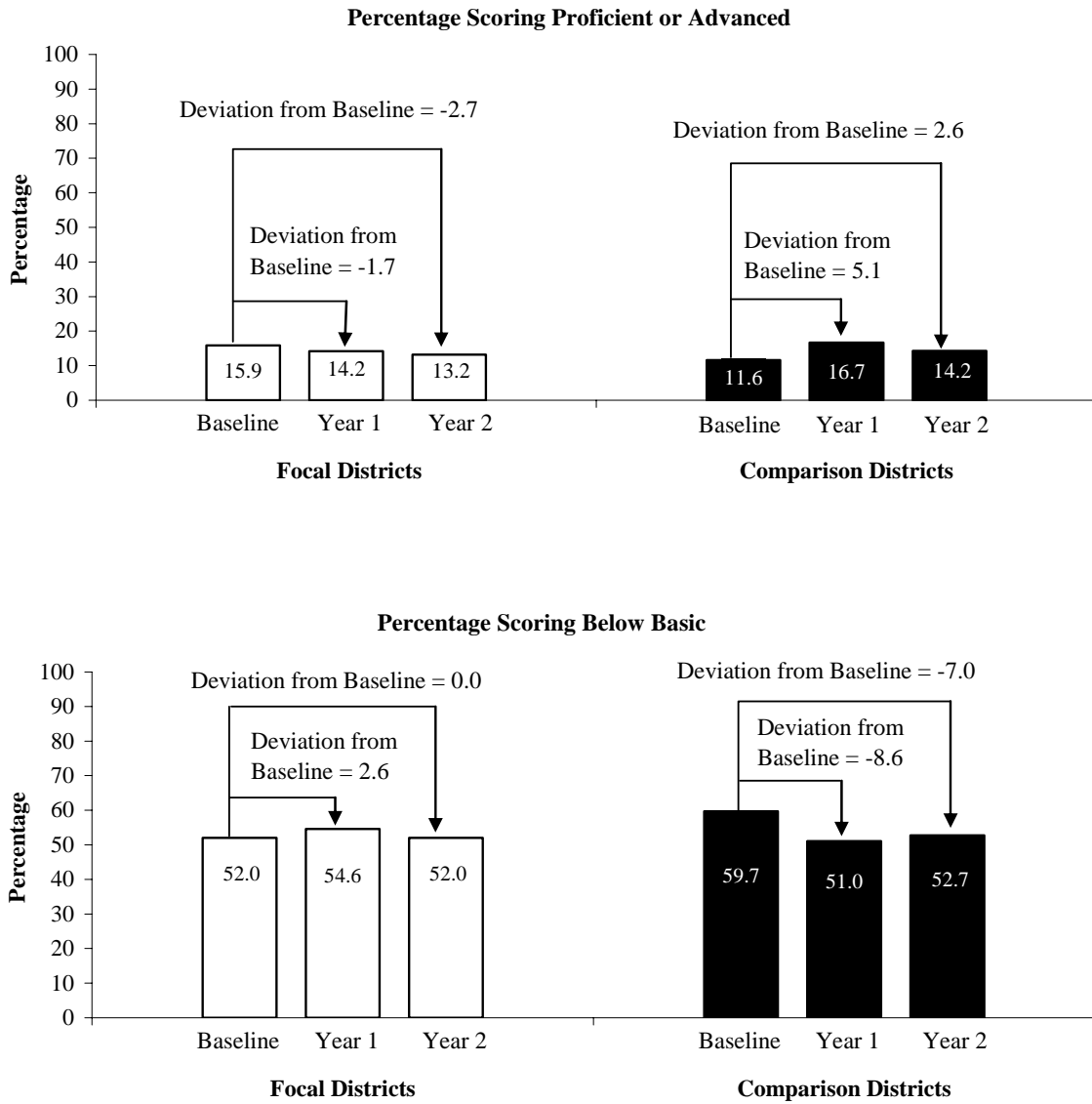
In general, the figures show that — among both third- and fifth-graders — the vast majority of ELL students did not score proficient, and there was not much change over the course of the two years since implementation of the BASRC focal reform strategy. However, the changes in the percentages of ELL students who performed below basic show interesting patterns. Among third-grade ELL students in the focal districts, the percentage of students scoring below basic averaged 52 percent during the baseline period and remained at a similar level during the follow-up. In the comparison districts, the percent of ELL third-graders scoring below basic fell from 60 percent in the baseline period to 53 percent in the second year of the follow-up period.

In the fifth grade, on the other hand, there were substantial changes in the percentage of ELL students performing at low levels of achievement in the focal districts. During the baseline period, 55 percent of ELL fifth-graders in the focal districts scored below or far below basic. By the second year of follow-up, only 41 percent of these students scored below or far below basic, a reduction of 14 percentage points. In the comparison districts, the percentage of students performing below basic fell by 2 percentage points by Year 2, from 52 percent to 50 percent. This

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.9

Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
English Language Learners



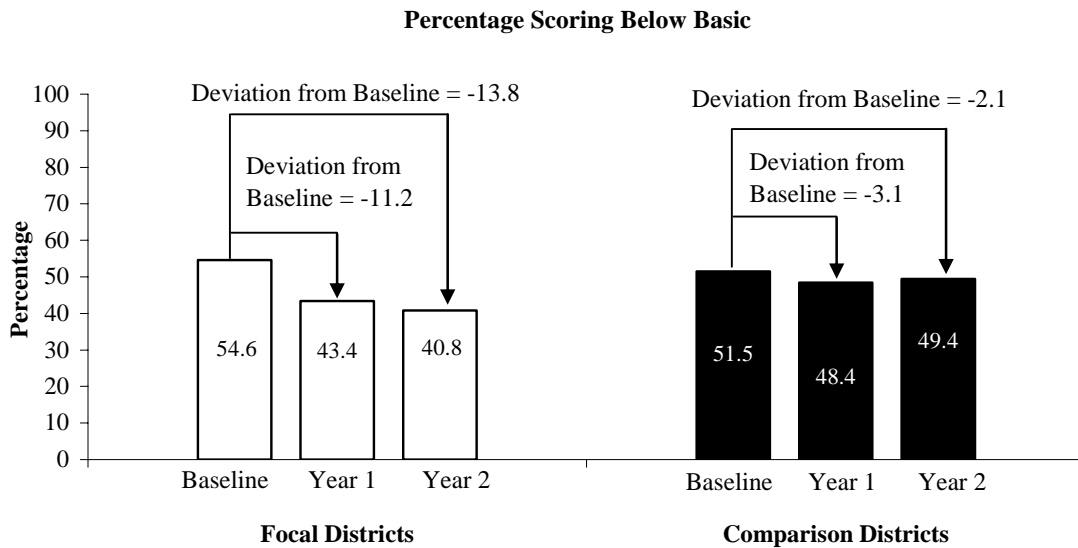
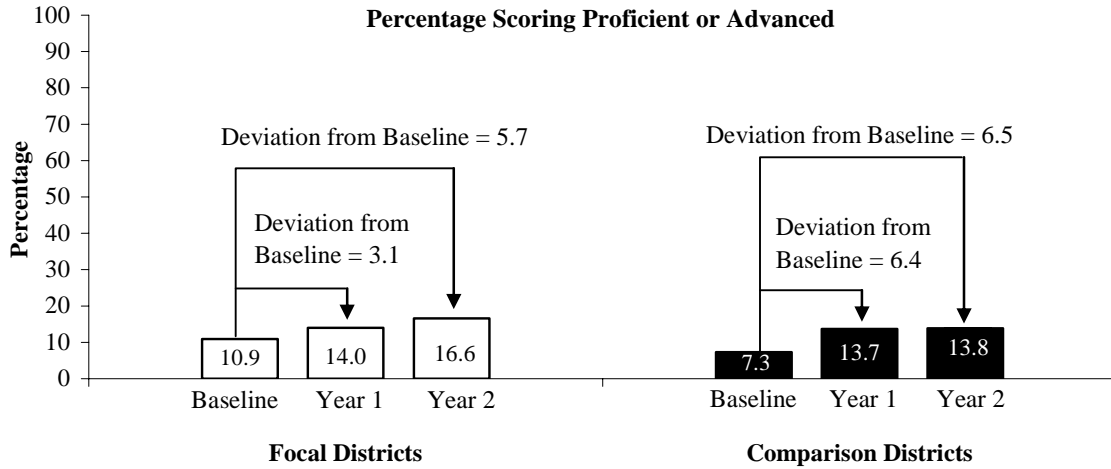
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Figure 4.10

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
English Language Learners**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

suggests a positive association between participation in the BASRC focal reforms and improvements among ELL fifth-graders. Though this 12 percentage point difference is large enough to be considered policy-relevant by many, it is not statistically significant.

Conclusions

As mentioned at the outset of the chapter, MDRC's design is not sufficient to determine for certain whether a causal link exists between the BASRC focal strategy and changes in student achievement in participating districts. Nevertheless, the analysis sheds some light on the relationship between the intervention and progress in student performance on literacy tests. In the years following implementation of the BASRC focal reforms, achievement levels among third-grade students in the BASRC focal districts fell slightly relative to California state standards. A similar pattern occurred among third-graders in similar districts throughout the Bay Area, as well as in the state as a whole. Though the differences were small and not statistically significant, the decline was somewhat greater in the BASRC focal districts than in similar districts throughout the Bay Area. This appeared to be the case among all third-grade students as well as among subgroups of third-grade students.

The analysis of fifth-grade achievement results suggests a somewhat different pattern. Average CST scores among fifth-graders in the focal districts and in the comparison districts improved over time, mostly in terms of an increase in the proportion of students scoring proficient or advanced. The focal districts' improvements in proficiency rates are actually smaller than the comparison districts' in Year 1, but surpassed the comparison districts by Year 2. However, in both years, the focal districts' reductions in the percentage of students scoring below basic marginally exceeded the comparison districts' reduction. In general, however, the differences between improvements among fifth-grade performance in focal and comparison districts are small and not statistically significant.

When focusing on fifth-grade achievement among economically disadvantaged students, black and Hispanic students, and English Language Learners by Year 2, performance in the focal districts appeared to surpass the improvements in the comparison districts. The differences were most evident with respect to reductions in the number of fifth-grade students performing at the lowest levels of achievement. However, these differences were generally small, generally limited to Year 2, and not statistically significant. As a result, MDRC cannot discern whether the observed patterns represent systematic differences between focal and non-focal districts or fluctuations driven by chance. Nevertheless, the fact that the differences in achievement patterns are consistent across all three disadvantaged subgroups suggests the possibility that the BASRC focal strategy is associated, albeit modestly, with improved achievement among low-performing fifth-graders. MDRC's next report will include an additional year of follow-up, which will indicate whether the improvement patterns are sustained or even strengthened over time.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

The BASRC “theory of action” specifies a set of reforms built around coaching, networking and collaboration, and the use of inquiry- or evidence-based decision-making in order to improve student achievement and reduce achievement gaps between different racial/ethnic groups and students with different socioeconomic backgrounds. The BASRC focal reform strategy intensifies efforts along these dimensions, while adding more coaching at both the district and the school levels. What the BASRC focal strategy does *not* do is prescribe the specific instructional changes, or even specific instructional supports (for example, professional development focused on adopted curricula or coaching focused on particular instructional improvements) that should be put in place in schools or classrooms to bring about this progress.

In other words, even in theory, the model’s proximity to what it intends to change — teaching and learning in the classroom — is limited. Other reforms, particularly school-based efforts such as Success for All, recommend a specific instructional strategy and a set of supports and training designed to supplement and reinforce the implementation of that strategy. Moreover, some districts’ reform agendas are focused — at least in part — on the adoption and implementation of, as well as professional development for, particular reading and math curricula.¹ In contrast, the BASRC focal reform strategy does not focus on implementing particular classroom instructional strategies. Rather, the BASRC theory of action and the focal reform strategy emphasize a process through which schools and teachers can come to learn how best they can support improved teaching and learning for the students that they serve.

The implementation data gathered by MDRC underscore this dynamic. The data suggest that the BASRC focal strategy primarily targeted district leadership, and that the intensity of the reforms tended to wane with their proximity to the classroom. While district-level coaching continued throughout the implementation of the BASRC focal strategy, in most districts, *school-level* coaching by BASRC staff was among the first components of the strategy to fall by the wayside. Moreover, though BASRC was designed to support a process of inquiry, sharing, and collective problem-solving, teachers were still reluctant to allow observation or critique of their classroom practices as part of this process. Finally, though a goal of the BASRC focal strategy was to intensify the core BASRC reforms, it was unclear whether the reforms implemented resulted from the focal strategy. It is possible that the schools would have mounted many of these reforms even in the absence of the focal strategy (either as part of other/earlier phases of BASRC, or as a function

¹Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002).

of other school improvement efforts already underway). The implementation data indicate that many of the BASRC reform strategies were in fact implemented prior to the focal strategy at many of the schools in the BASRC focal districts.

Given the nature of the reforms and the implementation patterns, perhaps it is not surprising, that, on average, no strong and pervasive association is found between districts' participation in the BASRC focal reform strategy and changes in average student proficiency rates on state-mandated literacy tests. At the third-grade level, student performance changed little and even declined throughout the sample over the first two years after implementation of the BASRC focal reforms. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis that both proximity to instruction and intensity of reforms are necessary in order to generate improvement in student achievement. On the other hand, it can also be argued that, because systemic approaches such as the BASRC focal reform strategy require years to take root, they would have to be in place for a longer time to yield an effect. Moreover, advocates of this type of approach would argue that, once in place, such reforms have the potential for more powerful sustained effects on teaching and learning throughout school systems than do school-based reforms based on "one size fits all" instructional strategies.

At the same time, though the results are not statistically significant, evidence presented in this report suggests the possibility that the BASRC focal strategy is associated with progress at the fifth-grade level, particularly among disadvantaged, minority, and lower-performing students. This is consistent with BASRC's goal of reducing achievement gaps among students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. This finding is also consistent with bringing evidence-based decision-making to bear on regular assessment and attention toward "target" students, or those students who need additional support. In other words, it is possible that the dimensions of BASRC that relate most directly to student performance, particularly among low-performing students, were beginning to affect progress among the neediest students, or that other efforts in these reform-minded districts in addition to BASRC were making a difference for their neediest students.

It is important to remember, however, that these differences were modest, generally limited to Year 2, and not statistically significant. Moreover, the evaluation design does not permit definitive causal inferences from these associations. It may be that the focal districts opted to participate in the focal strategy *because* they were focused on raising the achievement of lower-performing students. So, while the findings in this report may reflect the limitations of the study rather than those of the reform, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the focal reforms actually made a difference, even for disadvantaged and minority students.

It is possible that the BASRC focal strategy is associated with modest improvements for some students. Overall, however, the question remains as to why improvements in achievement

in the BASRC focal districts were not larger and more pervasive. The findings suggest two possible interpretations.

- The BASRC focal reforms were not intense enough to affect students' academic performance.

While the core components of the BASRC focal reforms are potential drivers of improved student achievement, the implementation of the focal reform strategy may simply not have been intense enough to yield systematic changes in student performance. While the BASRC theory of action suggests that reforms should take place at every level of the system, the primary supports for the reform strategy are at the district level. It may be that the district-level reforms are not sufficiently focused on the core reforms or are not sufficiently concentrated or consistent enough to lead to systematic changes throughout the district. As such, rather than generating reforms aimed at teaching and learning, the BASRC focal strategy may simply provide general support at the district level. To the extent that this is true, it suggests that, if BASRC is to have an impact, BASRC must increase the intensity of its district reform efforts, provide a consistent focus for district reforms, and perhaps provide additional reinforcement for the reforms at the school level.

- The BASRC focal reform components are not effective levers for improving student achievement.

On the other hand, it is possible that BASRC focal reforms were implemented with sufficient intensity, but that the reforms themselves simply are not effective strategies for improving student achievement. The BASRC focal strategy did not make specific changes in teaching and learning the direct target of its intervention. Instead, it focused on a set of processes that were thought to lead to changes in teaching and learning. It can be argued that, in order to affect teaching and learning, the focal strategy must intervene in ways that are more proximal to the classroom. And while coaching and focal interactions may affect school and classroom practice, improvements in average proficiency rates on tests did not appear to be associated with the focal reforms. This suggests that coaching and focal interactions do not systematically improve teaching and learning over and above what would have happened without the program. In other words, to the extent that the BASRC focal reforms actually affect the classroom, the resulting changes may not be any more effective than support strategies already being undertaken in similar districts. Again, the analysis presented in MDRC's next report will explore this issue by examining the correlation between survey measures of school reform practices and changes in student performance since the implementation of BASRC.

In sum, it can be argued that successful district reforms require intensity, a direct link to classroom instruction, and components that are effective drivers of improved teaching and learning. More research is needed to understand the extent to which the BASRC focal reforms

incorporated these characteristics. MDRC's next report will shed light on these issues by reporting on district-level field research and exploring both the intensity and the focus of district-level reforms in the BASRC focal districts. It will also examine the relationship between specific BASRC reform practices and school-level changes in student performance. Finally, the next report will follow progress in the BASRC focal and comparison districts for an additional school year. This will allow an assessment of whether the improvements in student outcomes in the focal districts grow, fade, or are sustained over time, and whether these changes continue to outpace those in the comparison districts.

Appendix A

**Background Information on the California Standards
Tests, the Stanford Achievement Test, and
the California Achievement Tests**

The California Standards Tests

The California Standards Tests (CSTs) are a series of tests administered to California public school students in grades 2-11.¹ While most questions are multiple-choice, students in the fourth and seventh grades complete a composition or writing section. CSTs include somewhere between 65 and 75 language arts questions depending upon the grade and 65 mathematics questions. Strands for the language arts questions include: word analysis, reading comprehension, literary response and analysis, writing strategies, and written conventions. In addition, students in grades 8, 10, and 11 answer 60 to 80 history/social science questions, and those in grades 5 and 9-11 answer approximately 60 science questions. Tests are typically administered over the course of one to three days.

CSTs are standards-based or criterion-referenced tests. In other words, the tests attempt to measure whether students are meeting the content standards adopted by the California Department of Education. Results are reported according to a five-point proficiency scale as advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic (with the exception of the year 2000, in which CST scores were reported by the average number correct and total number possible).

Stanford Achievement Test and California Achievement Tests

Both the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9), administered from 1998 to 2002 in California public schools, and the California Achievement Tests, Sixth Edition (CAT-6), administered from 2003 to the present, are nationally norm-referenced tests. In other words, results for the SAT-9 and CAT-6 report how well students compare with a nationwide sample of students. Scores are reported in terms of a raw score, which is converted into a scaled score based on test difficulty, and a national percentile rank.

The SAT-9 and CAT-6 are in many ways similar in content and format. Both tests consist entirely of multiple-choice questions that are unchanged from year to year, with tests for grades 2-11 including reading, language, and mathematics content sections. Tests for grades 2-8 also include a spelling section. Both tests for grades 9-11 include a science section, while the SAT-9 for grades 9-11 also includes a social sciences section. While there are indeed some similarities, results for the SAT-9 and CAT-6 are not directly comparable to one another since the different publishers (Harcourt and McGraw-Hill, respectively) produced each test at different times, employing different national samples, and created tests of different difficulty levels.

¹Sources referenced for this appendix include the California Department of Education Web pages on testing (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/>) and the California Standardized Testing and Reporting Web pages from 2000, 2002, and 2004 (<http://star.cde.ca.gov/>).

Appendix B

Selection of Comparison Districts

Comparison districts were selected with the goal of finding districts that were as similar as possible to the BASRC focal districts in terms of student demographics and the history of academic performance. As the analysis focused on elementary achievement through the fifth grade, MDRC selected comparison districts according to average demographic characteristics and achievement levels among the fifth-grade students in each district. Based on annual data obtained from the California Department of Education, demographic characteristics and achievement levels were averaged across three baseline school years (1999-2000, 2000-2001, and 2001-2002), and districts were matched based on those averages.¹ The following are the criteria used to identify comparison districts for each of the five focal districts:

- The district existed and had more than 10 students in fifth grade in all baseline years.
- The district is in the San Francisco Bay Area (in one of the following counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara).
- The baseline mean percentage of fifth-grade students scoring proficient or above on the language arts portion of the California Standards Tests (CST) is within 20 percent of the baseline mean percentage at the focal district.²
- The baseline mean percentage of fifth-grade students scoring at or above the 50th percentile on the reading portion of the SAT-9 is within 20 percent of the baseline mean percentage at the focal district.³
- Looking at the most prevalent racial/ethnic group among fifth-grade students in the focal district, the average percentage of that racial/ethnic group in a comparison district is within 20 percentage points of the focal district average.
- Looking at the second most prevalent racial/ethnic group among fifth-grade students in the focal district, the average percentage of that racial/ethnic group in a comparison district is within 20 percentage points of the focal district average.
- The number of fifth-grade students is within 50 percent of the number of fifth-grade students enrolled in the focal district.

¹California Standards Test data are available only in 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 for the language arts section and 2001-2002 for the math section. Therefore, district selection was based only on the average across these years.

²Note that “language arts” is the broadest subtest on the CST and includes reading, spelling, etc.

³Note that “reading” is the broadest strand on the SAT-9 and includes language arts and spelling.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the process for selecting comparison districts produced the following results. Overall, 15 distinct districts within the Bay Area matched with the five focal districts, with some comparison districts matching with more than one focal district. Each of the five BASRC focal districts matched with between two and five comparison districts. Overall, the two sets of districts look very similar.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table B.1

Characteristics of BASRC Focal and Comparison Districts by Year, Third-Grade Students

Characteristic	2000		2001		2002		All years	
	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison
<u>Demographic characteristics of 3rd-grade students</u>								
Average number of 3rd-grade students	512	610	511	599	492	592	505	601
Average number of elementary schools ^a	8	6	8	6	8	7	8	6
Race/Ethnicity (%)								
White	42.0	49.9	38.8	47.2	38.9	45.8	39.9	47.7
Hispanic	27.2	27.5	29.4	29.2	30.0	29.8	28.9	28.8
Asian	21.0	16.6	21.2	17.6	23.2	17.9	21.8	17.4
Black	5.7	4.9	5.7	4.4	5.1	5.1	5.5	4.8
Other	4.0	1.0	4.9	1.6	2.9	1.4	3.9	1.3
English language learners (%)	19.8	16.9	23.4	17.0	24.8	20.7	22.7	18.2
Free/reduced-price lunch (%)	29.3	25.6	28.9	24.1	31.1	24.4	29.8	24.7
<u>Achievement levels of 3rd-grade students</u>								
California Standards Test								
Language arts								
Proficient or advanced (%)	.	.	41.7	38.6	44.4	43.8	43.1	41.2
Basic (%)	.	.	30.6	32.2	29.2	29.6	29.9	30.9
Below or far below basic (%)	.	.	27.7	29.2	26.2	26.7	26.9	28.0
Mean scale score	.	.	.	.	341.8	339.3	341.8	339.3
Math								
Proficient or advanced (%)	.	.	.	.	49.4	46.2	49.4	46.2
Basic (%)	.	.	.	.	27.2	26.8	27.2	26.8
Below or far below basic (%)	.	.	.	.	23.6	26.8	23.6	26.8
Mean scale score	.	.	.	.	350.8	346.1	350.8	346.1

(continued)

Appendix Table B.1 (continued)

Characteristic	2000		2001		2002		All years	
	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison
<u>Achievement levels of 3rd-grade students</u>								
Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition								
Reading								
At or above 50th national percentile ranking (%)	59.4	57.8	59.0	59.5	61.2	61.1	59.9	59.5
25th national percentile ranking (%)	20.8	23.1	23.8	22.2	20.8	21.9	21.8	22.4
Below 25th national percentile ranking (%)	19.8	19.1	17.2	18.4	18.0	17.0	18.3	18.2
Mean scale score	623.6	622.8	627.8	624.5	628.0	626.7	626.4	624.7
Math								
At or above 50th national percentile ranking (%)	63.8	66.0	70.0	68.6	73.2	69.7	69.0	68.1
25th national percentile ranking (%)	21.0	19.1	18.0	17.8	15.6	17.7	18.2	18.2
Below 25th national percentile ranking (%)	15.2	14.9	12.0	13.6	11.2	12.6	12.8	13.7
Mean scale score	615.5	615.9	622.2	619.1	624.7	620.9	620.8	618.6
Total number of districts	5	14	5	14	5	14	5	14

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: Comparison district columns represent the average of the average across each comparison district cluster. Note that some comparison districts match with more than one focal district. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aElementary schools include any school with a fifth-grade class, since comparison districts were selected from fifth-grade outcomes.

^bThese National Percentile Ranks correspond to the percentage of students in the district with scores corresponding to those of students in the top 50%, 25%, and below 25% of the national sample.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table B.2

Characteristics of BASRC Focal and Comparison Districts by Year, Fifth-Grade Students

Characteristic	2000		2001		2002		All years	
	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison
<u>Demographic characteristics of 5th-grade students</u>								
Average number of 5th-grade students	490	575	515	617	492	604	499	599
Average number of elementary schools ^a	8	6	8	6	8	7	8	6
Race/Ethnicity (%)								
White	44.5	50.7	43.8	48.4	41.1	48.5	43.1	49.2
Hispanic	25.8	25.3	25.4	27.7	27.4	27.5	26.2	26.8
Asian	21.6	17.3	21.4	16.9	22.7	18.0	21.9	17.4
Black	6.2	5.5	6.8	5.4	5.7	4.9	6.2	5.3
Other	1.9	1.3	2.6	1.7	3.1	1.0	2.5	1.3
English language learners (%)	15.2	14.3	14.9	12.8	16.4	14.8	15.5	14.0
Free/reduced-price lunch (%)	29.3	25.6	28.9	24.1	31.1	24.4	29.8	24.7
<u>Achievement levels of 5th-grade students</u>								
California Standards Test								
Language arts								
Proficient or advanced (%)	.	.	36.7	37.1	38.8	40.2	37.8	38.6
Basic (%)	.	.	39.1	40.2	40.4	41.9	39.8	41.1
Below or far below basic (%)	.	.	24.1	22.7	21.0	17.8	22.6	20.3
Mean scale score	.	.	.	.	338.4	341.1	338.4	341.1
Math								
Proficient or advanced (%)	.	.	.	.	37.2	36.9	37.2	36.9
Basic (%)	.	.	.	.	32.6	33.5	32.6	33.5
Below or far below basic (%)	.	.	.	.	30.4	29.6	30.4	29.6
Mean scale score	.	.	.	.	335.6	335.7	335.6	335.7

(continued)

Appendix Table B.2 (continued)

Characteristic	2000		2001		2002		All years	
	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison	Focal	Comparison
<u>Achievement levels of 5th-grade students</u>								
Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition								
Reading								
At or above 50th national percentile ranking (%)	55.4	57.1	56.2	57.6	56.4	59.1	56.0	57.9
25th national percentile ranking (%)	24.6	23.8	23.2	22.1	22.4	23.4	23.4	23.1
Below 25th national percentile ranking (%)	20.0	19.1	20.6	20.3	21.2	17.5	20.6	19.0
Mean scale score	658.7	659.4	659.1	658.7	659.6	661.0	659.1	659.7
Math								
At or above 50th national percentile ranking (%)	61.2	59.4	63.2	64.0	66.2	67.2	63.5	63.5
25th national percentile ranking (%)	20.0	20.0	16.8	17.3	16.4	16.4	17.7	17.9
Below 25th national percentile ranking (%)	18.8	20.6	20.0	18.7	17.4	16.4	18.7	18.6
Mean scale score	656.1	655.3	659.5	659.6	663.1	663.4	659.6	659.4
Total number of districts	5	14	5	14	5	14	5	14

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: Comparison district columns represent the average of the average across each comparison district cluster. Note that some comparison districts match with more than one focal district. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aElementary schools include any school with a fifth-grade class, since comparison districts were selected from fifth-grade outcomes.

^bThese National Percentile Ranks correspond to the percentage of students in the district with scores corresponding to those of students in the top 50%, 25%, and below 25% of the national sample.

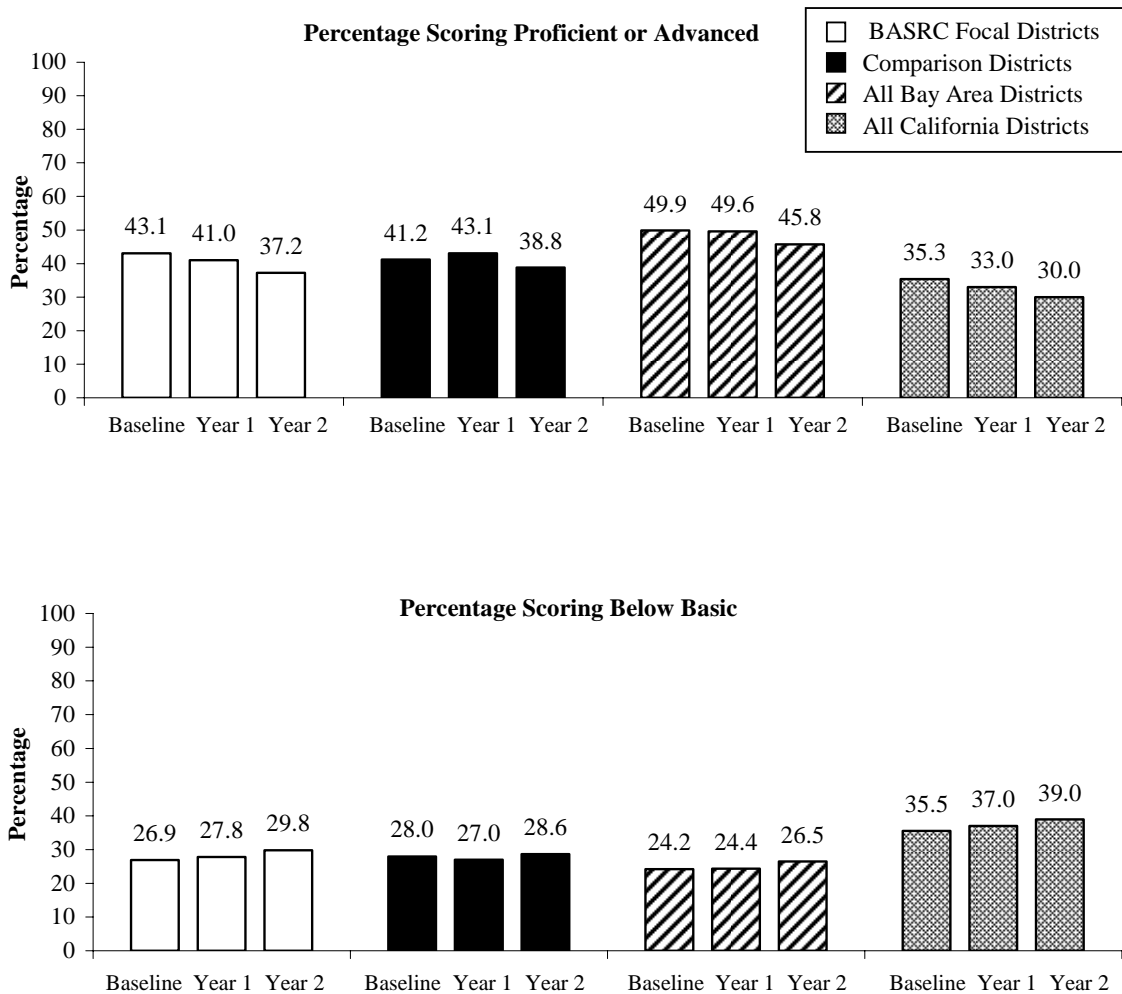
Appendix C

**Comparing Trends with All Bay Area
and California State Districts**

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.1

**Third-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts**



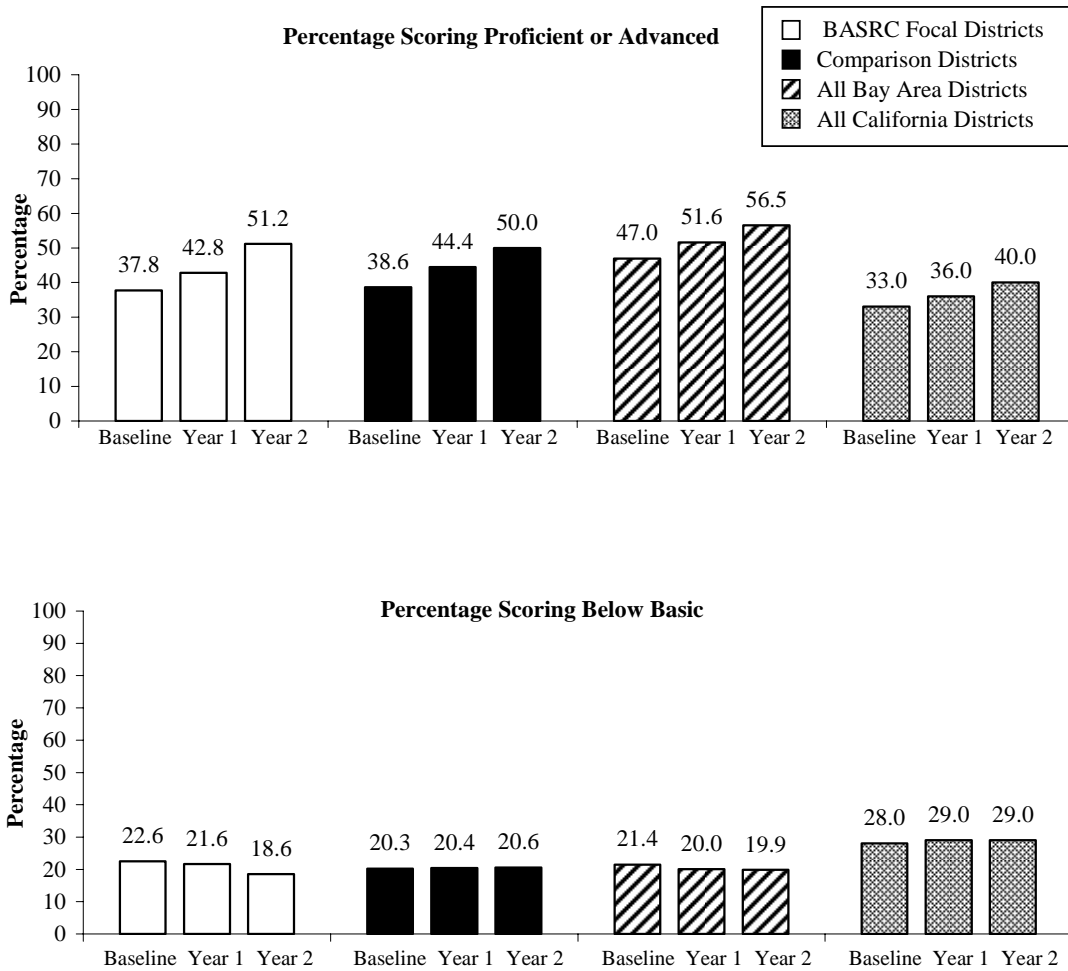
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.2

Fifth-Grade Student Performance on the California Standards Test, Language Arts:
Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts



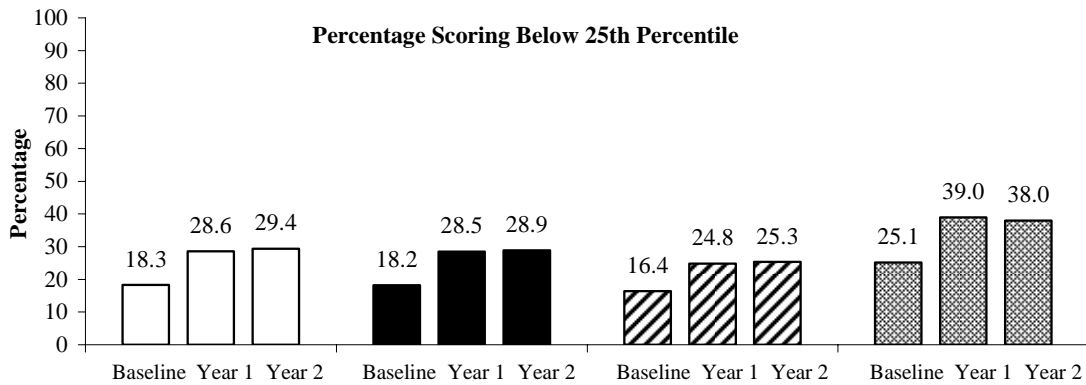
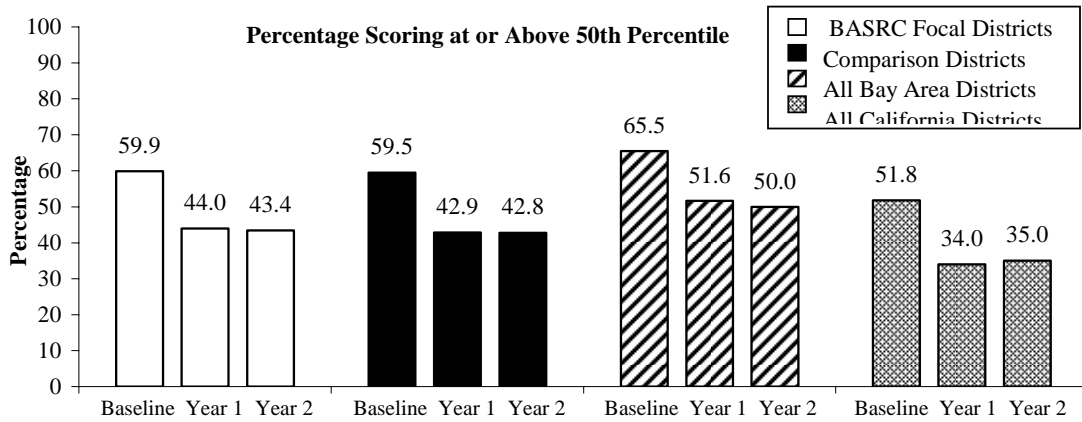
SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up (2003-2004) school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.3

**Third-Grade Student Performance on Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading:
Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts**

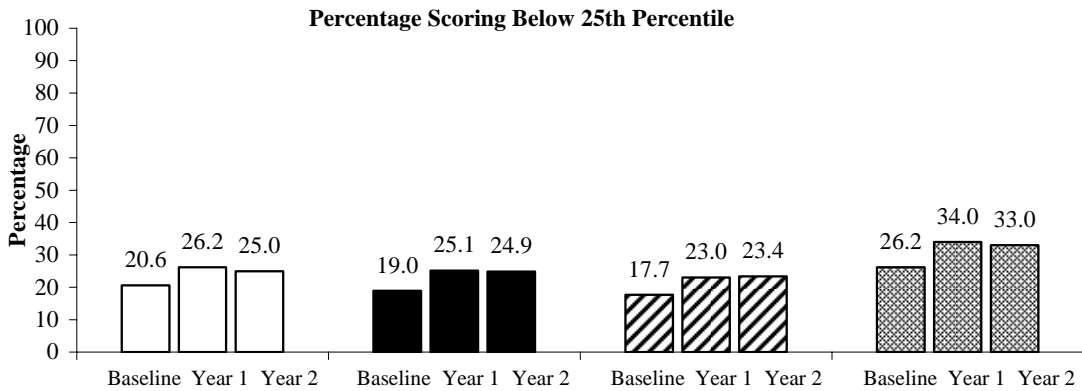
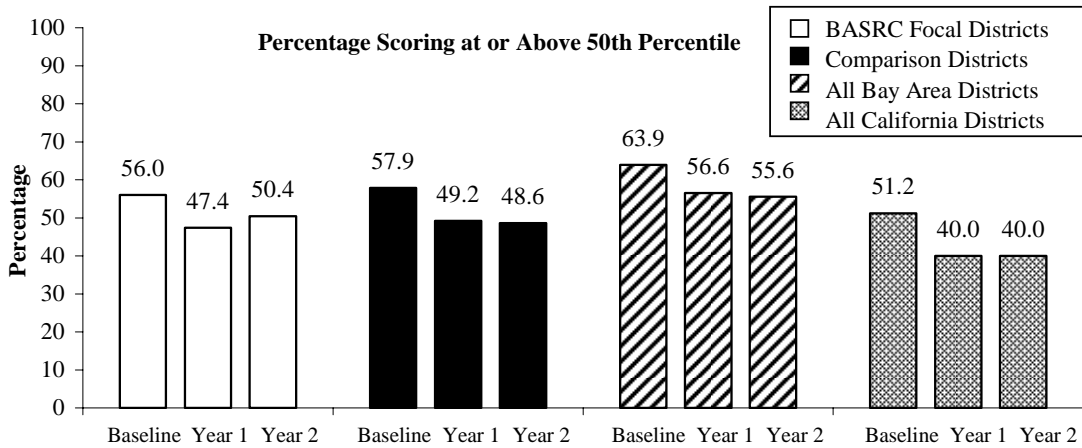


SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.
 NOTES: The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) was replaced by the California Achievement Test (CAT-6) in the 2002-2003 school year. The baseline years for the SAT-9, language arts, consist of school years 1999-2000, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year for the CAT-6. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Figure C.4

**Fifth-Grade Student Performance on Norm-Referenced Tests (SAT-9/CAT-6), Reading:
Focal, Bay Area, and California Districts**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) was replaced by the California Achievement Test (CAT-6) in the 2002-2003 school year. The baseline years for the SAT-9, language arts, consist of school years 1999-2000, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year for the CAT-6. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

Appendix D

Analysis of Achievement Outcomes

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.1

Third-Grade Outcomes, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	341.8	338.0	334.5	339.3	337.5	334.8
Deviation from baseline average		-3.9	-7.3		-1.8	-4.5
Below basic	26.9	27.8	29.8	28.0	27.0	28.6
Deviation from baseline average		0.9	2.9		-1.0	0.7
Proficient or advanced	43.1	41.0	37.2	41.2	43.1	38.8
Deviation from baseline average		-2.1	-5.9		1.9	-2.4

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Differences^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	-2.1	-2.7	-1%	-1%
p-value	0.8	0.7		
Below basic	1.8	2.2	7%	8%
p-value	0.6	0.6		
Proficient or advanced	-3.9	-3.4	-9%	-8%
p-value	0.3	0.4		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aPercent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.2

Fifth-Grade Outcomes, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	338.4	341.0	352.4	341.1	343.3	349.0
Deviation from baseline average		2.6	14.1		2.2	7.9
Below basic	22.6	21.6	18.6	20.3	20.4	20.6
Deviation from baseline average		-1.0	-4.0		0.2	0.3
Proficient or advanced	37.8	42.8	51.2	38.6	44.4	50.0
Deviation from baseline average		5.0	13.4		5.8	11.4

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Difference^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	0.4	6.2	0%	2%
p-value	0.9	0.3		
Below basic	-1.1	-4.3	-5%	-19%
p-value	0.7	0.2		
Proficient or advanced	-0.8	2.0	-2%	5%
p-value	0.9	0.6		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^a Percent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.3

Third-Grade Outcomes, English Language Learners, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	303.2	299.8	300.4	298.0	301.0	299.4
Deviation from baseline average		-3.4	-2.8		3.0	1.4
Below basic	52.0	54.6	52.0	59.7	51.0	52.7
Deviation from baseline average		2.6	0.0		-8.6	-7.0
Proficient or Advanced	15.9	14.2	13.2	11.6	16.7	14.2
Deviation from baseline average		-1.7	-2.7		5.1	2.6

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Differences^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	-6.4	-4.2	-2%	-1%
p-value	0.5	0.7		
Below basic	11.2	7.0	22%	13%
p-value	0.2	0.4		
Proficient or Advanced	-6.8	-5.3	-43%	-33%
p-value	0.2	0.3		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aPercent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.4

Fifth-Grade Outcomes, English Language Learners, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	301.5	307.3	311.9	299.4	308.4	304.2
Deviation from baseline average		5.8	10.4		9.0	4.8
Below basic	54.6	43.4	40.8	51.5	48.4	49.4
Deviation from baseline average		-11.2	-13.8		-3.1	-2.1
Proficient or Advanced	10.9	14.0	16.6	7.3	13.7	13.8
Deviation from baseline average		3.1	5.7		6.4	6.5

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Differences^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	-3.2	5.6	-1%	2%
p-value	0.7	0.5		
Below basic	-8.1	-11.7	-15%	-21%
p-value	0.4	0.2		
Proficient or Advanced	-3.3	-0.8	-30%	-7%
p-value	0.5	0.9		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aPercent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.5

Third-Grade Outcomes, Economically Disadvantaged Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	314.3	310.9	308.6	309.9	307.8	306.1
Deviation from baseline average		-3.4	-5.7		-2.1	-3.8
Below basic	42.4	44.8	44.6	46.7	45.7	46.5
Deviation from baseline average		2.4	2.2		-1.0	-0.2
Proficient or Advanced	22.5	21.2	18.8	19.5	22.9	19.4
Deviation from baseline average		-1.3	-3.7		3.4	-0.1

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Differences^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	-1.3	-1.9	0%	-1%
p-value	0.9	0.8		
Below basic	3.4	2.4	8%	6%
p-value	0.5	0.7		
Proficient or Advanced	-4.7	-3.6	-21%	-16%
p-value	0.2	0.4		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aPercent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Bay Area Reform School Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.6

Fifth-Grade Outcomes, Economically Disadvantaged Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	317.7	319.5	327.9	318.7	321.6	323.4
Deviation from baseline average		1.8	10.2		2.9	4.8
Below basic	35.7	34.4	29.6	36.3	34.2	34.4
Deviation from baseline average		-1.3	-6.1		-2.2	-1.9
Proficient or advanced	19.9	23.6	31.0	18.6	23.0	29.7
Deviation from baseline average		3.7	11.1		4.3	11.1

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Differences^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	-1.1	5.5	0%	2%
p-value	0.9	0.4		
Below basic	0.9	-4.2	2%	-12%
p-value	0.9	0.4		
Proficient or advanced	-0.6	0.0	-3%	0%
p-value	0.9	1.0		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aPercent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Standard errors and statistical significance levels are adjusted to account for cohort effects. Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.7

Third-Grade Outcomes, Black and Hispanic Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	304.9	310.8	311.6	311.3	308.0	307.4
Deviation from baseline average		5.9	6.7		-3.3	-4.0
Below basic	39.0	42.1	42.9	41.6	41.1	43.4
Deviation from baseline average		3.0	3.9		-0.5	1.8
Proficient or advanced	23.7	22.6	19.2	23.0	25.1	21.1
Deviation from baseline average		-1.2	-4.5		2.1	-1.9

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Differences^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	9.2	10.6	3%	3%
p-value	0.4	0.3		
Below basic	3.6	2.1	9%	5%
p-value	0.5	0.7		
Proficient or advanced	-3.3	-2.6	-14%	-11%
p-value	0.4	0.5		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the CST Language Arts consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^aPercent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Bay Area School Reform Collaborative Focal Strategy Evaluation

Appendix Table D.8

Fifth-Grade Outcomes, Black and Hispanic Students, California Standards Test, Language Arts Analysis

Outcome	<i>I. Outcome Levels Compared to Baseline Year and Follow-up Years</i>					
	BASRC schools			Comparison schools		
	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2	Baseline	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	313.9	320.3	313.8	315.5	324.9	325.4
Deviation from baseline average		6.4	-0.1		9.4	9.9
Below basic	35.9	34.8	28.9	36.0	32.3	31.5
Deviation from baseline average		-1.1	-7.0		-3.7	-4.5
Proficient or advanced	20.1	25.3	29.8	21.3	27.4	32.4
Deviation from baseline average		5.2	9.7		6.1	11.1

Outcome	<i>II. Difference in Deviation from the Baseline</i>		<i>III. Percent Differences^a</i>	
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1	Year 2
Mean scaled score	-2.9	-10.0	-1%	-3%
p-value	0.7	0.2		
Below basic	2.7	-2.6	7%	-7%
p-value	0.6	0.6		
Proficient or advanced	-0.9	-1.5	-5%	-7%
p-value	0.8	0.7		

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from district and school records from the California Department of Education.

NOTES: The baseline years for the California Standards Test, language arts, consist of school years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. Year 1 (2002-2003) is the first follow-up school year and Year 2 (2003-2004) is the second follow-up school year. The estimates in the table represent averages across all districts, regardless of size.

^a Percent differences are calculated from the baseline level.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

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About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.