

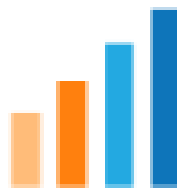


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# Voices from the Field

## *Factors Influencing Academic Growth*



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# Executive Summary

**What are the specific local policies, educator practices, strategies, and/or systems that you would identify as the primary factors influencing the high academic growth in your school or district on [Connecticut's student growth model](#)?**

In response to this question, educators from 16 communities identified a variety of factors that are organized below into six themes.

## 1) Climate, culture, and social and emotional factors for students and teachers

- Identify strength-based models such as resiliency and connectedness to foster a growth mindset among students, promote cultural competency, and forge strong relationships (e.g., student-to-student, staff-to-student, staff-to-family, teacher-to-teacher)
- Empower teachers to lead, take risks, and view both student academic performance *and* student behaviors as requiring teaching
- Prioritize family/community engagement, open communication, and shared responsibility to foster a sense of connectedness within the school community
- Provide interventions and supports to students – incorporate researched models such as PBIS, Second Step, Responsive Classroom, Social Thinking curricula as necessary – so students can assess and adjust their own behaviors

**Rationale:** All schools will face challenges, but when there is a sense of trust across the school community, solutions are achieved efficiently, ensuring that teaching and learning continue with minimal disruption. Social and emotional learning, and improved attendance are outcomes of creating and sustaining a positive school climate that is inviting and restorative/reflective. A trusting culture among teachers is also a vital ingredient for any major curriculum/instructional shifts to take hold.

## 2) Targeted and focused improvement of curriculum and instruction

- Establish and implement district-wide curriculum initiatives that are aligned to the Core Standards
- Expect rigorous learning and evidence-based instruction, and nurture fidelity of implementation through teacher leadership, structured peer observations, etc.
- Embed systems and structures for collaborative dialogue and planning such as grade level or vertical teams, common planning time, coaching, and co-teaching
- Give teachers opportunities to work with Smarter Balanced items through the use of the Interim Assessment Blocks – this is not to try and “teach-to-the-test” because that is no longer possible with a computer-adaptive test but to help teachers see how the assessment elicits evidence of student understanding relative to the standards and makes obvious the rigor embedded in the standards
- Help students to manage their own learning through guided reflection, goal setting, self-monitoring, and formative practices that are aligned to the Core Standards.

- Ensure that students are familiar with the technology platform and the assessment format through exposure to sample items or the IABs so that the summative test is not the first time that the student is seeing the testing platform

**Rationale:** Standards should guide instruction, not the assessment blueprint. High-quality assessment items have a way of clearly illustrating the cognitive demands and expectations of the content standards. Opportunities for thoughtful communication within and across grade levels is necessary for teachers to develop the requisite deep understanding of the content standards and learning progressions.

### 3) Data-based decision making

- Establish a district-wide approach and structure for data-based decision making that:
  - supports professional learning and continuous communication/feedback at all levels (e.g., Central Office, Building, Teacher);
  - is centered around student learning and improving instruction;
  - encourages the use of data as a “flashlight” and not a “hammer”;
  - nurtures a climate of transparency in data sharing and action planning; and
  - makes adult behavior the locus of change
- When making decisions, bring multiple forms of evidence that go beyond the state assessment and includes student work, teacher observations, and peer feedback
- Align improvement planning across all levels: teacher, school, and district e.g., teacher goals should align with building goals, which should align with district goals
- Practice goal-setting with students based on the data; continuously monitor goal attainment and provide feedback

**Rationale:** Today, educators have more data than ever before. The current challenge is understanding what information the data provide, setting priorities, and reimagining what “counts” as data. Big data are helpful in framing a problem, but student work provides educators with the necessary detail to correctly identify the problem or misunderstanding and in turn, generate instructional solutions that will work. Vertical alignment of goals can breed coherence and purpose.

### 4) Responsive and effective professional learning

- Establish systems where teachers can learn from others in the organization (e.g., coaching cycles that are determined collaboratively with teachers, coaches, and administrators, or peer observations that are focused on a goal or “problem of practice”)
- Engage all staff, including paraprofessionals, in high-quality professional learning
- Ensure that professional learning is strategic, purposeful, on-going, and tied to school and/or teacher goals
- Determine PD needs based on data, teacher feedback, district vision
- Balance emphasis on content *and* mindset (learning to learn behaviors for students)
- Protect PD time

**Rationale:** As schools strive to personalize learning for their students, successful districts also provide personalized professional learning opportunities for their staff. Some districts are making a strategic investment in their paraprofessionals by providing structured professional learning opportunities designed to meet the individuals' needs and the needs of the students they serve.

## 5) Personalized learning

- Instill a strong belief in the school community that all students and teachers can succeed at challenging work – start with the adults first
- Assess the learning needs of each students and use that information to offer strong intervention programs that meet those needs
- Ensure that personalized learning brings complex learning opportunities to all students, including “intervention” students
- Provide opportunities for student voice and choice through the use of technology, blended learning, and non-traditional learning spaces while remaining focused on mastery and growth

**Rationale:** Educators in successful schools are continuously monitoring what students know and can do and what they need in order to progress. Ideally, this is carried out in partnership with the learners while encouraging goal setting and a sense of autonomy. Schools demonstrating strong growth universally acknowledge the importance of addressing the learning needs of students across the achievement continuum. Attention to academic growth means that all students need intervention and support to improve.

## 6) District wide coherence

- Develop a vision in a collaborative manner so that understanding and ownership of the desired student outcomes extends to all stakeholders
- Provide key supports for implementation of the vision including:
  - prioritizing funding for interventionists, coaches, and paraprofessionals;
  - having clear talent management policies for recruiting, hiring, and retaining high-quality personnel;
  - school schedules that are aligned to the vision; and
  - social/emotional supports for students and staff.

**Rationale:** Successful districts take deliberate steps to develop a vision and long-term plan that is purposefully informed and supported by a broad range of stakeholders. When extensive input has been incorporated into the plan and there are clear goals, decision making becomes significantly easier. Effective leaders situated in districts with coherence are skilled at reflecting and letting go of processes, procedures, and activities when they do not match the vision, and these decisions are supported.

The remainder of this document provides a more in-depth look at some of these factors through the experiences of several Connecticut educators.

# Introduction

In July 2010, Connecticut adopted rigorous new academic standards aligned to college and career readiness expectations and then began the process of developing and implementing assessments aligned to those standards. The new assessment system in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics – Smarter Balanced – was designed to provide results that enable valid interpretations of not only student achievement but, more importantly, growth over time. Educators have long held that matched student growth results are often a better indicator of the effectiveness of educational interventions than simply comparing achievement scores or proficiency rates from one year to the next.

After extensive analyses, research, and consultation with educators and other stakeholders, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) developed a [student growth model](#) based on the Smarter Balanced assessment for students in Grades 4 through 8. This model provides ambitious yet achievable individual student growth targets for all students. The aggregate results from this growth model are reported publicly and have been used for two years as a key component (i.e., Indicator 2-Growth) of Connecticut's Next Generation Accountability System for districts and schools.

The CSDE strongly believes that growth results can illuminate promising educational practices in different educational contexts for students at all levels of achievement. The CSDE is also committed to learning about successful education practices from schools and districts with promising growth results, as well as sharing them with all Connecticut educators to further accelerate student growth throughout the state.

To this end, in May 2018 the CSDE convened school and district leaders from 16 communities to discuss local practices that are leading to strong academic growth for students based on the Smarter Balanced growth model results. Collectively, the group identified a variety of key strategies for success organized around six themes:

- 1) Climate, culture, and social and emotional factors for students and teachers;
- 2) Targeted and focused improvement of curriculum and instruction;
- 3) Data-based decision making;
- 4) Responsive and effective professional learning;
- 5) Personalized learning; and
- 6) District wide coherence.

The report that follows is organized by theme. The discussion of each theme is based on participant comments during the convening as well as in-depth follow-up conversations with school and district leaders. Although the discussion of each theme is not exhaustive, we hope that enough information is provided so that readers will gain insight into successful local efforts and identify areas to probe further.

# The Process

## Phase One: May 2018 Convening of District and School Leaders

Following introductions, participants were randomly assigned to five groups. All participants were provided sticky notes and asked to independently document specific responses to the prompt below.

**What are the specific local policies, educator practices, strategies, and/or systems that you would identify as the primary factors influencing the high academic growth in your school or district on Connecticut's growth model?**

Participants left their sticky notes on the table, and every group rotated to a different table to review others' responses. Groups were asked to organize the notes into like groupings with limited discussion. Then, the groups rotated again and were invited to make changes to the *next* groupings. Every group had the opportunity to see and review the notes at every table.

When every group returned to its starting point, the next step was to create headers for the groupings. The participants were asked to create headers of four to seven words and were directed to make the headers not too general, but not overly specific either. This exercise required that participants have rich discussions grounded in their shared experiences.

When the headers were complete, every group brought the headers and related sticky notes to the front of the room. Based on the variety of headers collected across the five tables, six themes emerged. In fact, four of the six themes emerged at every table, showing tremendous overlap across the schools and districts.

For the final stage of the activity, every participant was randomly assigned again to one of six thematic tables. The group at every table was asked to discuss their theme (e.g., responsive and effective professional learning) and all of the notes associated with the theme. The groups were asked to identify the most important topics driving student growth under each heading, and using a shared electronic document, record those topics under each heading. To wrap up, every table reported out on their group discussion to all participants.

## Phase Two: Summer 2018 Follow-up Conversations with District and School Leaders

Performance Office staff scheduled follow-up telephone conversations with representatives from five districts. Each call lasted one hour and focused on the themes that emerged during the May convening. CSDE staff posed specific questions about information district and school staff shared with the large group in May. The goal of the telephone conversations was to probe deeper and provide an opportunity for district and school staff to share their stories about what is working best for them and to explain the variables that allow for their success. The one-hour conversations were particularly effective in allowing for a more in-depth exploration of the factors leading to academic growth.

The summaries that follow are an attempt to capture the essence of the May 2018 in-person discussions with additional details gathered during the follow-up telephone conversations.

# Factors Influencing Academic Growth

## 1) Climate, culture, social and emotional factors for students and teachers

Universally, participants recognized the importance of forging strong relationships (student to student, staff to student, staff to family, teacher to teacher, etc.) and fostering a sense of connectedness for everyone within the school community. One participant noted the need to make schools a destination for kids. In her school they focus on the invitation to come to school and the importance of being there.

The group acknowledged that despite best efforts, things will go wrong. A strong positive climate with open communication and shared responsibility helps everyone get through the problems and learn from them. One participant noted that all interventions require teaching, so of course behavior interventions require this as well. Patricia Ciccone, superintendent in Westbrook, pointed out that as educators we will not allow students to fail in core academic subjects; we do everything to help students master the content. We must think the same way about behavior. We must provide intervention and support to students as they learn to assess and adjust their own behaviors.

At Side by Side Charter School in Norwalk, they view everything they do through their unique cultural lens. Side by Side was founded in 1997 by public school educators. Twenty-five percent of the teachers at Side by Side today are founders, so they, along with their colleagues, are fully committed to the school's philosophy and mission. Their mission ensures that every student voice is heard. They take a constructivist approach to teaching, placing a high value on experiences that students bring to school. These are deeply held beliefs ingrained in the school culture. Therefore, when the staff are faced with implementing new initiatives, they work together to find ways of integrating them in a manner that aligns with their beliefs and the school's mission.

The staff have worked tirelessly to achieve this consistency when faced with big changes such as the implementation of Connecticut Core Standards (CCS). Mary Newbery, assistant director, explained that prior to implementation of CCS, there was a considerable amount of exploratory learning for their students. This fits well with a constructivist pedagogy, but Side by Side faculty knew that successful implementation of CCS for their students was going to require changes in curricular content and instructional approach, and it was going to be challenging.

Constructivist pedagogy can be very language based, which introduces significant barriers for some learners. Side by Side made changes that incorporated greater balance by including more targeted and explicit instruction without abandoning their focus on student experience and voice. An example of this shift is their adoption of the Eureka mathematics curriculum. Eureka incorporates fluency lessons to build skills, but every lesson also encourages students to apply their knowledge to solve problems and requires that students debrief by sharing their thinking with the class and drawing conclusions.

Change can be particularly difficult in a school like Side by Side that does not have a typical district-level infrastructure in place to provide support to teachers in making curricular and instructional changes. Given staffing levels, they cannot form grade-level teams. In response, the staff have used a four-person vertical data team model to evaluate their success, identify challenges, and formulate solutions. The commitment of the staff is evident in their willingness to provide and respond to feedback from their peers and in their flexibility and perseverance in improving student learning.

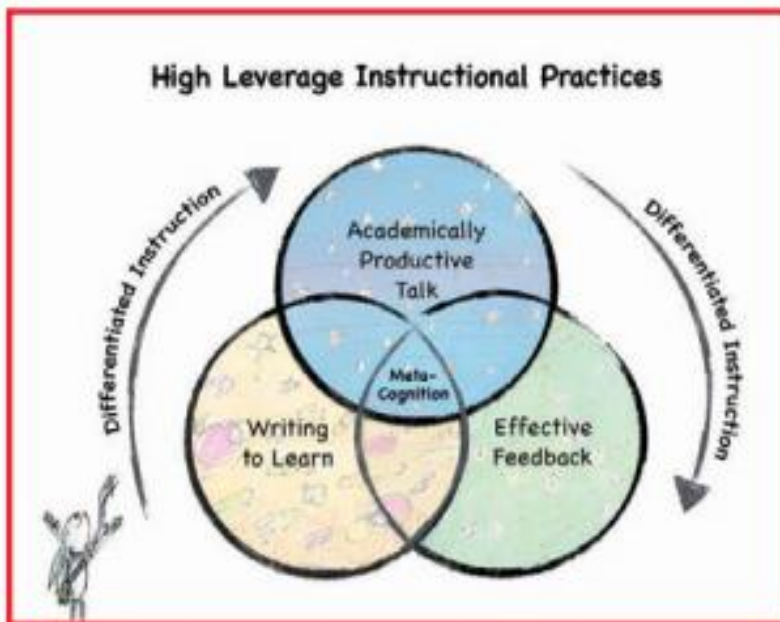
## **2) Targeted and focused improvement of curriculum and instruction**

The participants at the May 2018 convening agreed that the adoption of the CCS and the implementation of the Smarter Balanced assessment has redirected attention to content standards rather than an overreliance on the assessment. They explained that providing teachers opportunities to work with Smarter Balanced items through the use of the interim assessment blocks helps teachers see how the assessment elicits evidence of student understanding relative to the standards and makes obvious the rigor embedded in CCS expectations. Ultimately, the items help one to see how the standards are operationalized.

Participants expressed the importance of ensuring that students are familiar with the technology platform and the assessment format. Jonathan Budd of Trumbull explained and others agreed that lack of familiarity has the potential to create an inequitable assessment experience for some students. Therefore, it is necessary to schedule time for students to become comfortable with the assessment environment and to know what to expect during a test session. However, developing a familiarity is very different than traditional “test prep.” One participant reminded the group that during the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) era, it was common practice to pose questions frequently to students using item stems mirroring the CMT format. This was a superficial approach to preparing students for the assessment. This type of “test prep” is no longer possible. Instead, instructional time is focused on ensuring students can demonstrate evidence of having developed the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities outlined in the standards.

Participants identified well-articulated district initiatives for learning standards and high level instructional practices as key drivers of student growth. One example of this can be found in Guilford. The district, in partnership with the Institute for Learning (IFL), focuses on High Leverage Instructional Practices (see figure 1). Implemented together, these practices encourage metacognition. Students enhance their own understanding of how they learn and can assess what they still need to learn and how best to accomplish that.

Figure 1: High Leverage Instructional Practices



Taken from Guilford Public Schools [State of the Schools 2017](#)

Westbrook shared its district approach to curriculum development, implementation, and ongoing improvement. In this case, there is a key structural component to improving teaching and learning. The district has one teacher who serves in the role of curriculum/professional development lead teacher. This is a unique leadership position for an individual with teaching responsibilities. The teacher selected to serve in this additional role assists with the implementation and development of all curriculum in collaboration with Professional Learning Committees (PLCs), ensuring alignment to standards and appropriate vertical articulation across elementary, middle, and high school. The lead teacher also serves as the co-chair of the Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC). The individual works closely with administrators, the administrative council, the PDEC, and PLC leaders to ensure that professional learning opportunities meet the needs of staff and will lead to improvements for students. Ultimately, the lead teacher reports directly to the superintendent, providing a unique, direct view for the superintendent into classrooms.

The position of lead teacher requires an individual with impeccable communication skills and an ability to support others through change. The lead teacher is seen as the “diffuser of curriculum” throughout the district. Given the breadth of the lead teacher’s responsibilities, the individual must be highly skilled at forging strong collaborative relationships and have a deep understanding of curriculum development even when the content area may not be one in which the individual is an expert.

Westbrook’s efforts directed at improving curriculum and instruction are inextricably linked to professional development efforts. Superintendent Ciccone characterizes this connection as a “long journey” but one that has been worthwhile. The lead teacher is a critical partner with PLC chairs and other members of the PDEC in coordinating these efforts. While the PDEC has responsibilities connected to evaluation, the committee focuses intently on professional

development. They have worked hard to make the professional development directly tied to curriculum and the needs of the PLCs. Westbrook Middle School Principal Taylor Wrye shared that the district's professional learning system is powerful. Teachers feel empowered and are unafraid to take risks and seek feedback. Staff are excited to learn and to share.

### 3) Data-based decision making

A discussion centered on using data to inform decisions will inevitably include the importance of state summative assessment data. Among this group of representatives from schools demonstrating strong growth, many remarked that when they focused less on improving their scores and more on improving student learning, they experienced greater success. One administrator called it a "leap of faith."

Donna Funk, principal of Thomas W. Mahan School in Norwich, explained that her staff uses data strategically to form intervention groups, but consider other data beyond standardized test scores, including student work. Their tiered instruction framework has been in practice for more than three years and the results have shown a significant increase in the success rate of moving lower performing students to grade level. At the same time, Mahan has implemented programs that encourage academic excellence for students that are meeting or exceeding grade level standards. One participant summed it up simply with two questions: "What do these kids need? Now that we know, how can we give it to them?"

Kara Wanzer, Danbury's administrator for data, research and assessment, explained that Danbury's student population has changed dramatically over the last nine years. They cannot rely on what has always been done because it is not necessarily what their students today need. In an effort to make adjustments and address the needs of their learners, educators use student data to frame their improvement efforts. Specifically, Danbury uses the [Data Wise Improvement Process](#) developed by the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Central Office staff including the Superintendent were trained in the Data Wise process and all administrators are active participants with their instructional leadership teams and grade level teams.

The Data Wise Improvement Process is graphically represented by an arrow that comes back on to itself. It shows a recursive process that requires educators to ask how are we going to plan, implement, monitor, and plan again? If the conditions aren't improving, what do we need to add or take away? Specifically, the steps to the process are:

1. Organize for collaborative work
2. Build assessment literacy
3. Create data overview
4. Dig into student data
5. Examine instruction
6. Develop action plan
7. Plan to assess progress
8. Act and assess

Kara explained key components of the process. The planning process, which is the first step, lays the groundwork. In Danbury, they struggled with finding the time to plan. They have found that when people have time to plan and meet, that is when they see the best change or the most growth. Therefore, finding the time is an ongoing priority.

Developing assessment literacy is step 2. Everyone needs to understand the data they will be examining. In Danbury, they conducted an assessment inventory and found that they were not using all of the data they were collecting. Sometimes the reason for not using the data was that there was simply too much to synthesize and in other cases there was a lack of understanding of what signals the data were providing. Now they are more intentional about ensuring that there is continuous assessment literacy development and they are collecting data in more strategic ways to fit into the improvement process.

Wanzer pointed out that it is easy to get lost in all of the big data that is readily accessible today. Danbury collects and uses big data judiciously while also examining student work extensively as part of the Data Wise process. Big data are the “neon arrows,” but they are not going to provide the answers. To do that, you need to dig deeper. Student work proves valuable as a data source when working to identify learner-centered problems to be addressed. Data are also collected through classroom observations. These data are used to identify problems of practice. The Data Wise process forces the group to make choices about the problems to be addressed and provides a structure and routine to the improvement process.

Instructional leadership teams at the schools lead the identification of the learner-centered problems. Typically, team members include school psychologists, ELA specialists, math coaches, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers, principals, assistant principals, leaders from grade-level teams, and anyone leading Scientifically Research Based Interventions (SRBI) implementation. Monthly meetings are structured and designed to efficiently identify the problem that must be addressed. Past processes took too much time to identify the problem leaving limited time for developing and implementing an action plan. Now, staff are encouraged to act, knowing that they are expected to adjust if something is not proving to be effective. The data are used as a “flashlight, not a hammer.”

The Data Wise process has dramatically improved the quality of school improvement plans in Danbury. In the past, plans were general and focused on the big initiatives of the district (e.g. the roll-out of a new curriculum, parent engagement, etc.). Now, the plans include goals focused on learner-centered problems and problems of practice, the action steps to address the problems, and how progress will be monitored along with detailed timelines. Carmen Vargas-Guevara, Principal of South Street School, is new to the district and observed that the school improvement plans in Danbury are different from plans she has seen implemented in other districts. The Danbury school improvement plans deliberately lead to instruction that is tailored to the needs of all students with an emphasis on equity.

#### 4) Responsive and effective professional learning

In a time of dwindling resources, ensuring responsive and effective professional learning is challenging. However, the meeting participants overwhelmingly reported that strategic, purposeful, ongoing adult learning remains a priority in their systems.

Greenwich has developed its Personalized Professional Learning System based on their belief that “the most important in-school determinant of a student’s success is the quality of teaching,” and high quality teaching requires high quality professional learning. In the past, professional development activities were district-directed and content area-specific. The new system implemented several years ago provides for more individual choice and self-direction. Of course, increased autonomy requires some additional accountability, but based on teacher feedback, the new system has been well received and is more meaningful to teachers. To learn more about the system, visit <https://www.greenwickschools.org/teaching-learning/professional-learning>.

Representatives from Meriden and Farmington stressed the importance of providing professional learning opportunities for paraprofessionals. Meriden has added this component to contracts with paraprofessionals. Farmington also has a formalized approach to professional learning for its paraprofessionals, and it includes an element of choice.

A few years ago, Farmington began offering professional learning opportunities for paraprofessionals by using the four early-release days that are built in to the school calendar for parent conferences. Historically, this was time when support staff were present in the building but their time was not being used in the most productive way possible. Mathematics and literacy coaches were able to repurpose these additional hours to facilitate school-specific training sessions for the paraprofessionals.

These opportunities were well received by all involved. The district capitalized on the success by expanding the number and frequency of opportunities and building a menu of options for staff. Training opportunities increased from the four sessions running concurrently with conferences to an additional six early release professional development days in December, February, and May. The district solicited input from administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff to determine training needs and created a program that allowed individuals to choose the training most interesting and relevant for their work rather than limiting the sessions to a building-based approach. The table below provides a sample of the sessions offered during one of the early release days in 2017-18.

Table 1: Farmington Public Schools - Sample of PD Sessions for Paraprofessionals

<p><b>Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS)</b> - Participants will learn about the philosophy behind CPS as well as how to use CPS to address challenging behavior in students</p>
<p><b>Assistive Technology:</b> Read and Write Google, Google extensions and Apps, iPad Apps and Accessibility functions</p>
<p><b>ELL general session-</b> Learn about Stages of Language Acquisition, how ELLs learn, and strategies to support ELLs.</p>
<p><b>ELL instruction during reading and writing workshop</b> This will expand upon the background knowledge presented in the previous session.</p>
<p><b>Mindset:</b> Have you ever worked with a student who seems to over rely on you for support to complete a task? Do you often wish that the student could see in themselves what you see in them? Want to learn some strategies to help this student gain independence AND confidence? Then this is the session for you! Together, we will learn about how to effectively foster a growth mindset in our students, while developing independence. We will learn ways to shift student mindset so that we are hearing less of “I can’t” and more of “I’ll try”.</p>
<p><b>Literacy - Updates for Comprehension Changes for Benchmark and LLI running records.</b> We will become familiar with changes in administering running records for progress monitoring as well as prompts to use when reading with students to support these new expectations.</p>
<p><b>Singapore Math Methods:</b> This workshop is for paras that are unfamiliar with the math methods we are using at FPS. This workshop will provide background on Singapore Math and experience using unfamiliar tools and strategies such as: number bonds, bar models, area models, etc. It will also cover the 3 parts of a typical math lesson - so that paraprofessionals are able to implement any or all parts of the lesson should they be asked to do so.</p>
<p><b>Math Fact Fluency:</b> This workshop is for paras who want to learn basic math fact strategies (beyond memorization). We will learn how to break apart numbers and practice strategies such as “double the doubles” to make math fact proficiency more attainable for our struggling learners.</p>
<p><b>Using Literacy Learning Progressions to Guide Comprehension Conversations-</b>This workshop is for paras who lead literacy interventions OR push-in to classrooms to provide reading support for students. This workshop is designed to help you understand the comprehension expectations and become familiar with the types of prompts you can use to guide a comprehension conversation. This PD is most applicable to paras who work with students in grade 2 and up.</p>
<p><b>Basic Classroom technology training</b> including SmartBoard, Chromebooks, and projectors. Learn how to use the technology in the classroom as well as support students using the technology.</p>
<p><b>Writing- Elaboration Strategies for Push-In Writing Support</b> This workshop is for paras who push-in to classrooms to provide writing support for students. Do you ever feel stuck when trying to help a student with their writing? When you ask questions to help a student come up with an idea, do they respond with, “I don’t know.” This workshop is designed to give you a menu of strategies to teach a student when they need to elaborate and they aren’t responding to your questioning techniques. We will learn some strategies and apply them in some pieces of student writing. This PD is most applicable to paras who work with students in grade 2 and up.</p>
<p><b>Supporting Writers in Grades K and 1</b> This session will explore prompting, methods of support, and fostering independence with students in writing. Techniques used in Reading Recovery (letter learning/formation, make and break, cut-up sentence, sound boxes) will be modeled and a question/ answer session will follow.</p>

The district conducts surveys following all training to monitor satisfaction with the offerings and to plan future sessions. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. Alicia Bowman, principal of West Woods Elementary School, remarked that extending professional learning opportunities to all staff equips everyone with the tools necessary to help ALL students. The professional learning also serves to ensure that everyone in the organization has the same beliefs and a deep understanding of the vision. Farmington has made a deliberate choice to invest in paraprofessional staff and, as a result, to communicate clearly that paraprofessionals are a valuable resource.

## 5) Personalized learning - meeting students where they are

Several participants in the May session talked about the importance of beliefs when personalizing learning for students. They agreed that there must be a strongly held belief throughout the organization that all students *and* teachers can succeed at challenging work. Many in the group shared the importance of targeting efforts toward adults in the system first. This was seen as a critical first step toward initiating significant change. In Wethersfield, staff engaged in learning about growth mindset and began to change their own behaviors. Eventually, they started to see students experiencing greater success, which reinforced that their efforts were making a difference. One participant reported that even slight changes in the way questions are posed in a classroom can show a positive impact quickly.

Educators report that the incorporation of academic growth into the accountability system is a welcome change and encourages a more personalized approach to instruction. Measuring student growth against individualized targets, rather than whether a student has or has not reached Level 3, encourages educators to concentrate on the progress that students are making rather than focusing solely on the fact that a student has not yet met the expected performance standard for the grade. It also shines a light on high performing students who may not be growing enough. One participant remarked that every student deserves personalized instruction, not only students who require intervention. Similarly, Laurie Pallin, acting superintendent in Montville, remarked that all students require access to complex learning, including students in intervention.

Many schools have committed a part of the school day to providing intervention and acceleration simultaneously to avoid removing students from instruction. At South Street School in Danbury, students were missing too much core instruction when using a pull-out model for intervention. In response, they implemented the “What I Need” or WIN block. The principal, Carmen Vargas-Guevara, stressed the importance of looking at everyone, not just the students who are behind. During this protected time, students are provided small group instruction that is highly differentiated. They take an “all hands on deck” approach with ESL and special education staff as well as coaches providing services during the 30-minute block. The scheduling was not easy to accomplish, but the need for a coordinated plan to provide “expert support” to students was and remains a priority. During the block, students performing above grade level are getting an extension of core instruction to provide opportunities for enrichment and acceleration, ensuring that every minute of the instructional day is being used effectively to improve student learning regardless of where a student is on the learning continuum.

At Hillcrest Middle School in Trumbull, there is a block of time in the middle of the day that is called the Extended Learning or XL block. They were able to build the XL block into their schedule two years ago by working with the lunch periods, shortening homeroom, and using what had been their sustained silent reading time. This change was implemented at the same time that the school gained a math interventionist. They use the block three days each week to focus on ELA and for two days there is a Math focus. Their school has ELA and Math chairs who do not have traditional teaching assignments. During the XL block, small groups of students meet with those chairs or the interventionists for support, avoiding the sacrifices incurred with a pull-out model. About 10 percent of students are involved in this small group

instruction. Since every student at Hillcrest Middle is provided a Chromebook, the remaining 90 percent of students are working on digital assignments with certified teachers running the blocks.

The group also noted the power of mastery-based learning, which lends itself to personalization. At West Woods Elementary in Farmington, a 30-minute block of time during the day is set aside for “responsive teaching.” The staff work across teams to provide students with options that are flexible and purposeful. Their approach to teaching in a mastery-based system is that if students aren’t there, they need time to get there. For kids who are already there, they need to be allowed time to extend their work. Carving out protected time daily supports the process.

## 6) District-wide coherence

Successful districts and schools have a shared vision and clear goals, and understanding extends to all stakeholders. Coherence requires focus and a sense of ownership among administrators, teachers, other staff, and the community. Leadership within a coherent organization provides key supports to ensure continued focus and creates a sense of alignment to promote success. Meeting participants shared examples of these supports including continuous funding for interventionists, coaches, and paraprofessionals; clear talent management policies that consider recruiting, hiring, and retaining high-quality personnel; scheduling that is reflective of the vision; mentoring systems; and social/emotional support for students and staff.

When discussing the six themes in this report with representatives from Farmington, they said that they are proudest of their district’s efforts to develop and sustain coherence. They have worked diligently over the last 10 years to ensure coherence in all that they do. They have a clear mission and vision articulated in their [Vision of the Graduate](#). This was developed with extensive educator involvement. They started slowly and eventually secured buy-in from all stakeholders. Everything they do in Farmington is linked back to this vision, providing school and district leadership with a clear focus. School development plans available on the district website tightly align to the vision. In reading the plans of different Farmington schools, a visible through-line appears. School leaders in Farmington are adept at reflecting and letting go of processes, procedures, and activities when they don’t match the vision, and they are fully supported when doing so.

Shelton is another district that has demonstrated a commitment to coherence. In its strategic planning process, which began in 2016, success was defined in part as de-cluttering initiatives and creating a clear path from kindergarten to Grade 12 for students. The process focused on a theme of coherence. During the initial planning phase there was an acknowledgement that many excellent things were going on in the district, but there were too many people unaware of those programs and initiatives. The strategic planning process was a way to build upon and improve the work already being done, ensure better coordination of efforts, and more effectively communicate the systematic connections and consistency districtwide while avoiding unnecessary standardization.

All the educators who shared their insight about strategies and policies promoting academic growth can point to district mission statements, formal documentation of goals, and often a theory of action. These conditions are necessary but not sufficient. Coherence requires extensive stakeholder input and support, shared understanding, strategically aligned adult actions, and a system to monitor and ensure continuous improvement.

## Conclusion

The large group activity in May resulted in the identification of the six themes explored in this report. The fact that the unique contributions of more than 30 individuals can be distilled into six themes shows that there is tremendous similarity among schools demonstrating success as it relates to academic growth for students. However, the themes are simply a starting point. When administrators were provided opportunities to discuss local efforts in more detail, it was obvious that implementation differed in significant ways based on contextual factors including school staff, the community served, and leadership at the school and district level. This finding is unsurprising. The answers are far from simple.

The overlapping nature of the themes in this document demonstrates the need for district-wide coherence. In explaining the connections in their simplest form, one can make the case that improving curriculum and instruction depends on effective professional learning. Accurate and timely data serve an accountability function that informs program improvement. Decision making about what students need also requires data, and understanding students' specific needs is a necessary condition for developing and implementing a personalized learning approach. The relationships between and among students, administrators, educators, staff, and families are the backdrop for all of this work. There is a synergy across the themes. When there is weakness in one component, the system suffers.

The goal of this report was to share stories and explore strategies that can be carefully considered, knowing that decisions always must be shaped by local needs and context to be effective.