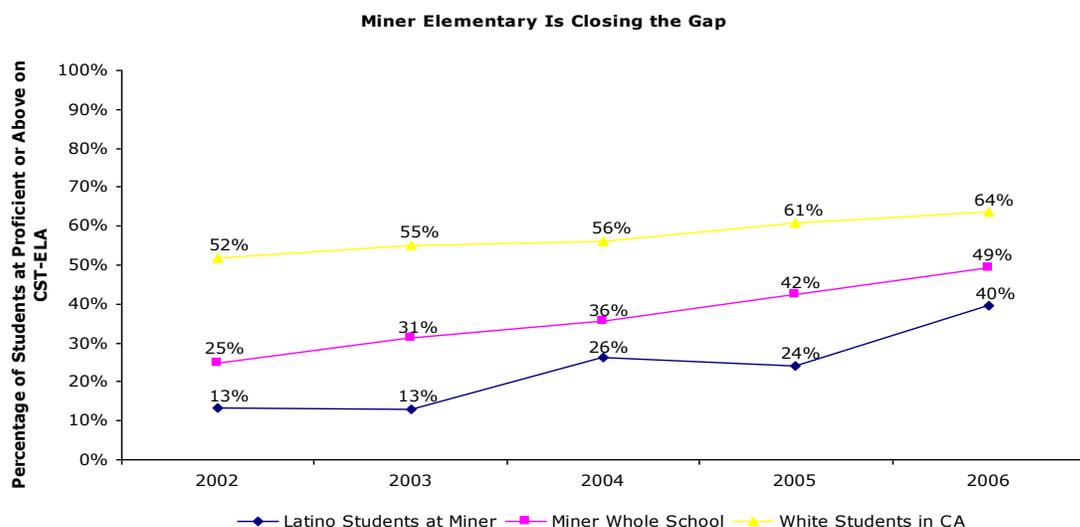


Accelerating Closing the Achievement Gap Through the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry: The Miner Story* (Abridged Version)

In the late 1990s Miner Elementary School was the lowest performing elementary school in the Oak Grove School District, a district of 11, 500 K-8 students in southern San Jose. In the year 2000, Susan Mispagel became principal of Miner, and the school began a slow, sustained rate of improvement. Its pace of improvement accelerated considerably in 2005-2006. Miner has seen the following successes:

- Houghton Mifflin Summative Assessment: From the 2004 to the 2006 Assessment, the percentage of Latino students achieving Proficient and Advanced increased from 44% to 71%, and the achievement gap between Latino and white students diminished from 26% to 5%.
- California Standards Test: From the 2002 to the 2006 Test, the percentage of Latino students achieving Proficient and Advanced increased from 13% to 40%. The percentage increased 16% from 2005 to 2006 alone.



These assessment results are impressive, and we believe that Miner will continue to make dramatic growth in the course of the next two years.

* This draft is based on Principal Susan Mispagel’s account of Miner’s work, given at Springboard Schools’ June, 2006 Best Practice Institute, supplemented by my (Julien Phillips’) interview of Poonam Singh regarding Miner’s breakthrough this year, and by my own experience in working with Miner over the past three years.

Miner: Year to year growth

2000-2001

Principal Susan Mispagel began at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year by setting expectations; in particular, she focused her teachers' attention on the District's performance standards for students and on the use of assessments keyed to the standards. Teachers resisted these new assessments, but Susan insisted. She knew that they were an essential building block in her efforts to strengthen the teaching of reading at Miner. She also began to encourage teachers to learn how to use guided reading with deep knowledge of the practice, both because research has shown, if implemented well, it is an important component in children's development of reading skills and because Oak Grove's Literacy Plan, which Susan helped to develop, calls for each teacher to lead guided reading groups every day.

2001-2002

After laying the foundation and with teacher concurrence, Susan committed the school to participation in the first group of Oak Grove schools enrolled in the Noyce Foundation's version of Writer's Workshop (Every Child a Reader and Writer, or ECRW). She also continued to encourage the use of guided reading.

2002-2003

During the summer prior to the school year, Susan participated in Harvard's program for new principals. Roland Barth's thinking about school culture and Douglas Reeves' work on standards and assessment had a particular impact on Susan's thinking. When the year began, she went right to work on improving her school's collaborative culture.

In particular, Susan wanted to encourage the kind of collaborative culture that research suggested was important to sustained improvement of instruction. She told the staff that she owed much of her own development as a teacher to the shared learning she experienced with a series of grade level teammates. She set one expectation—that teachers meet regularly as grade level teams. The agenda was theirs to define, but they had to meet and collaborate, even if they had personal issues with colleagues. In hiring new teachers, Susan began consciously looking for candidates whose experience and personalities would complement continuing members of Miner's grade level teacher teams. And she talked candidly about the camaraderie and shared learning that she expected from her teams.

ECRW "demonstration" teachers began to apply in their own classrooms what they had learned through professional development, and the literacy coaches worked with them every week. The coaches also freed other teachers from their classrooms so that they could observe the demonstration teachers as they applied the new Writers' Workshop approach.

2003-2004

In 2003 the District adopted the Houghton Mifflin (HM) reading program. Susan and the literacy coaches were torn between setting HM aside in order to broaden use of ECRW to all classrooms, and shelving ECRW in order to focus all attention on the new HM program. In the end, they gave greatest emphasis to HM but tried to maintain ECRW as well.

The District provided three days of introductory training in HM, but teachers struggled to learn to use it well. Unlike most literacy programs, which in principle are designed to help students master one skill before moving on to the next, HM takes a “spiraling” approach in which students are exposed to a new skill but then go on to others before “spiraling” back to the first. In addition, the teacher must become familiar with a number of HM teaching resources before using the program to its maximum potential.

During this first year, the teachers “paced” their progress through the HM curriculum in sync with the dates the District Office had set for submission of HM quarterly assessment data. This turned out to be a further source of strain, as they were pushing to cover the whole year by the May date the District Office had set for the end of year Summative Assessment.

Before she had fully appreciated the extent of the staff's over burden, Susan used two or three staff meetings to introduce teachers to Douglas Reeves' thinking about “power standards” and then to engage them in identifying the power standards for each grade level. Reeves argues that teachers simply cannot teach students in-depth all the skills they need to meet all of the State's many standards for student performance; there are simply too many of them. Teachers are better off to address the relatively few “power standards” that, if mastered, will enable students to meet a broader range of standards.

California had only introduced its literacy standards two years earlier, and few teachers were familiar with them, despite Susan's encouragement to learn them. Furthermore, they didn't yet know the HM curriculum very well. So selecting power standards for Miner forced teachers to get to know the California Standards in much more depth and helped them to make more informed choices about how to use HM materials. Miner teachers continue to use the power standards as a reference point today.

In 2003, PartnersSI began working with Miner, and mid-year we introduced the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry (ROCI) in two “intensive” grades: 3rd and 4th. Each teacher selected five Latino and African American “focal students” on whom they would focus as they sought to learn how to improve their instruction, and they selected spelling as their “focal skill,” the area in which they wanted to accelerate students' learning. They selected spelling both because prior-year CST analyses showed it to be one of students' weakest skills, and because the teachers had recently received training on how to teach spelling.

Early in the first cycle, the 3rd grade team was especially resistant to adopting the ROCI process. Susan stepped in promptly to listen to their concerns and then, despite her own uncertainty about the ROCI, she insisted that the teachers

continue; they were the School's pilot group, and Miner needed them to complete a full implementation so that it could reach valid conclusions.

By the end of two cycles, the 3rd grade focal students had achieved significant improvement in spelling, while the fourth grade focal students had not. In particular, the 3rd grade teacher who implemented the approach most fully achieved the most substantial gains. The 3rd grade results were enough to encourage Miner teachers to embrace continued introduction of ROCI the following year.

But while ROCI seemed promising, the principal, literacy coaches and teachers were concerned that focusing on a single skill at a time (e.g., spelling) would be too narrow to achieve the rate of acceleration they needed. Their concerns were confirmed when they received the results of the CST, and saw that neither 3rd nor 4th grade had achieved dramatic improvements. This result led them to a broader focus in the following school year.

Just as important, Susan reflected recently that "we had not yet learned the importance of laser like focus." During the 2003-2004 school year, staff had clearly worked on too many major innovations simultaneously: Writers' Workshop, guided reading, Houghton Mifflin, power standards and ROCI. Teachers were not able to master any of these, much less integrate them into a cohesive approach to accelerating the learning of Latino and African American students.

2004-2005

At the end of the 2003-2004 school year, Susan engaged the grade level teams in a review of the pacing problems they had experienced with HM. In particular, student performance on the mid-year HM Summative Assessment had dropped significantly below first quarter results, which the teachers attributed partly to rushing through the material in order to finish before the District Office's target date for submitting assessment data. Based on this review, each grade level defined its own 2004-2005 pacing calendars. When they compared them, not all grade levels were in sync with each other or with the District assessment calendar, but the teachers found that their revised pacing gave them the control they needed to differentiate instruction based on the needs of the students in their classrooms. Moreover, they were pleased to have worked out their own solution to the pacing problems and even more pleased when Susan backed them in the face of District pressure to conform their pacing to the District's assessment calendar.

During Miner's second year with ROCI it designated 3rd, 5th and 6th as its intensive grades, because these grade levels had done the least well on the California Standards Test administered in April 2004. The School chose direct instruction through strong lesson design as its instructional approach for three reasons. First, both research and teachers' experience suggests that many students from low-income backgrounds and many English language learners need explicit

instruction and modeling of skills. Second, direct instruction is applicable to many components of the HM curriculum, and the staff felt HM should continue to be the focus for at least one more year. Third, most of Miner's teachers had learned the basic "architecture of the mini-lesson," one good approach to direct instruction, as part of their ECRW training, even though few were yet practicing it frequently at a high level.

By the end of the year, most teachers had used the architecture of the mini-lesson more frequently and proficiently, and student learning results had improved incrementally, even in the 3rd grade. But teachers, literacy coaches, the principal and PartnersSI staff were frustrated that direct instruction, in combination with the ROCI, did not seem as powerful as it should be. During each ROCI, lab classroom discussions and grade level team meetings focused mainly on teachers' use of the mini-lesson. In practice, few grade level team discussions really pinned down whether focal students actually achieved specific learning goals; at best, teachers had specific discussions about one or two focal students who did not seem to be doing well, but the discussions were mostly of a "have you tried X?" nature. For the most part, teachers felt that these discussions were "going through the motions" but not leading to knowledge that would improve their instruction.

End of cycle reviews analyzed the results of the HM Quarterly Assessments—identifying focal students and others who achieved Proficient and Advanced, and those who did not. They also looked at item analyses—i.e., which questions on the assessment were most students able to answer correctly, and which did most answer incorrectly? The item analyses gave the teachers good information about which skills needed more attention during the next cycle, but otherwise the end of cycle reviews seemed to contribute little to teachers' knowledge about what they needed to do to improve their instruction.

In form, the intensive grade level teams had fully implemented the cycle of inquiry. What seemed to be missing? Three main things, as they reflected on the year:

1. Primary focus on focal students: We realized that teachers were not engaging in an in depth analysis of individual focal students' learning strengths and needs. The great majority of grade level teams' discussion was about instructional practice, especially the mini-lesson. More frequent and proficient use of the mini-lesson clearly contributed to greater student learning. But without greater understanding of what specific students really needed, teachers' efforts to reach them were falling short.

For success, we hypothesized, teachers would have to give such close attention to their focal students that they actually learned how to accelerate them to Proficient; focal students are not just indicators or "temperature checks," but carry with them specific challenges and strengths that teachers must learn how to meet successfully.

2. A real results orientation: At the end of each cycle, teachers asked which focal students had achieved progress and which had not. They formulated

some general ideas about how changes they had made in their instruction might have contributed to progress, and what might be missing. But they did not acknowledge how few focal students actually achieved their cycle goals, nor did they analyze the results in sufficient depth to form confident hypotheses about how to achieve better results in the next cycle or develop specific plans for doing so.

Even more important, the teachers were not asking, on a week-to-week basis, whether their focal students were on track to achieve the end of cycle goals, and what they needed to do day-to-day in their instruction and relationships to ensure that the focal students would get there.

3. Strong discussion leadership: Most grade level team discussions remained at a superficial level. In part, this may have occurred because teachers, like most people, can be generally uncomfortable exposing their uncertainties and failures to their colleagues, and even more uncomfortable expressing anything about their colleagues' teaching that might possibly be taken as critical. But even more, teachers simply didn't know what questions to ask each other and how to ask them; we were expecting them to engage in a new kind of dialogue about their instruction without giving them enough guidance.

These three hypotheses heavily influenced plans for the next year.

2005-2006

In 2005-2006 Miner implemented the most complete and cohesive approach to the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry since they began working with PartnersSI:

1. We gave primary attention to focal students, rather than solely to the implementation of the instructional approach. This shift in attention was the key element of Miner's strategy for 2005-2006. Over the summer, after looking at the CST results for the previous year, Susan Mispagel concluded that making this shift was essential to achieving real acceleration. "The first two years [of ROCI]," Susan reflected, "we did data assessment, including item analysis, and then zeroed in on a key standard or strategy. But we saw that our focal students simply were not moving rapidly enough. We asked ourselves why not. Our answer was that the cycle has to be about the focal student, not the teacher strategy, about moving the focal student to Proficient... When teachers get together [in grade level team meetings], they need to know their kids well and talk about what they need. And trust that the whole content piece [choice of effective instructional strategies] will follow... We found that when we began our grade level team discussions with attention to our focal strategy, teachers didn't always get to the student. We decided that we had to focus directly on the student."
2. We developed ambitious end of year goals geared as directly as possible to Proficiency on the California Standards Test. During the previous two years, teachers at Miner (and other schools) were disappointed to see that their students who achieved Proficient on the end of year HM Summative

Assessment did not necessarily achieve Proficient on the CST; some did, and some didn't. So they began complaining that the end of year HM Assessment was not correlated with the CST and therefore was a poor assessment to use.

During the summer of 2005, a Partners employee, Cindy Lee, did a regression analyses to learn whether results on the two tests are correlated. When she compared raw scores on the end of year HM Assessment with CST results, she found that the two tests were actually correlated statistically at a fairly high level, but that only students who achieved Advanced or the high end of Proficient on the end of year HM Assessment were highly likely to score Proficient on the CST; students at the low end of Proficient on the end of year HM were most likely to score Basic on the CST.

Therefore, Miner raised its year of end goals from Proficient on the end of year HM Summative Assessment to the higher cut points for each grade level that were indicated by Cindy's analysis.

3. We introduced a second assessment of student performance. The HM Quarterly Assessments give teachers some information about which standards students are mastering and on which they need more work, but Miner leadership and PartnersSI concluded that they provide insufficient information about what specific skills focal students most need help with. The primary grades could get good information from well done Running Records, but the upper grades had nothing comparable. They decided to adopt Reading Results; it seemed to provide additional helpful information, and they lacked the time to research assessments extensively.
4. We engaged all seven grade level teams, instead of just two or three "intensive" grade levels. As Susan said, "Last year, we had little groups of teachers who met weekly and loved the cycle. But the majority of the staff was not really a part. So this year we asked ourselves: 'How can we redesign our approach so that all teachers are a part of it, so that all of the grade level teams are supporting teachers in figuring out how to accelerate their focal students?'"

Megan Winters, the School Improvement Fellow (SIF) at Miner in 2005-2006¹, would work intensively with the 5th grade team and Sabrina Waining (3/5 time, and the only literacy coach at Miner for 2005-2006) would work at 6th. And they would provide some help to other grade level teams as well.

5. We implemented active, results-oriented, multi-level leadership: Reflecting on the prior-year results, Susan and Sabrina concluded that in order to accelerate Miner's rate of improvement, teachers would need to receive more active, results-oriented leadership than in prior years – "We realized that we really had to push," as Susan said. Above all, that applied to Susan, Sabrina, Megan and Poonam, Miner's School Partnership Director. But it also

¹ Megan Winters, one of PartnersSI's two pilot SIFs, had several years of teaching experience in high-poverty schools and had just earned masters degrees in education.

meant that grade level team teacher leaders would need to provide greater leadership than they had in prior years.

The “pushing,” it is important to note, was to happen at the “micro” level, rather than the “macro” level. Susan had no intention of heightening the anxiety teachers already felt as a result of the federal government’s No Child Left Behind expectations, and the threat of Program Improvement status if they fell short. Rather, Susan realized that leaders would have to lead individual teachers into deeper examination of individual focal students and what it would take to accelerate their learning. Likewise, they’d have to sustain this micro-level attention, while supporting teachers to learn to push themselves and each other.

6. We used the Continuous Improvement Team (CIT) to develop the ROCI leadership of grade level team leaders. Miner, like the other Title I schools, had created a CIT in 2003-2004; it was comprised of a team leader from each grade level, along with the principal, literacy coach(es) and PartnersSI staff. In prior years, Susan had used the CIT as a professional development vehicle focused on instructional strategies; for example, the members read and discussed *Strategies that Work* by Stephanie Harvey (for reading comprehension), then helped to lead staff development on key strategies and reinforced these strategies in grade level team meetings. In addition, it served as a consultative body to the principal and as a communications link with teachers.

In 2005-2006, “We realized that we needed really strong grade level teams.” Susan said, “Not to plan lessons together, but to look at student work and figure out how to accelerate our focal students. For that, we needed stronger grade level team leadership, and we would have to build that through the CIT. We needed to front load our team leaders.” Capitalizing on Christopher’s experience from the year before, Susan used each CIT meeting to develop ROCI leadership skills.

7. We implemented a broad scope instructional approach that could be adapted to the specific needs of each focal student: In 2004-2005 the architecture of the mini-lesson had worked well in strengthening teachers’ direct instruction. But now, especially with the emphasis on identifying and responding to the specific learning needs of each focal student, teachers needed a powerful instructional approach that they could use to differentiate instruction. With strong influence from Susan and Sabrina, the CIT chose guided reading.

Guided reading is central to Oak Grove’s Literacy Plan, which they had adopted several years before the adoption of Houghton Mifflin. It is an approach to reading instruction that can, if implemented well, meet a range of student needs. If tailored to the needs of individual students – e.g., books chosen for the appropriate level of reading proficiency, targeted front loading of key vocabulary and attention primers, adroit use of “think-alouds” to engage the students in explicit work to deepen their reading

comprehension—guided reading can greatly accelerate students' reading proficiency.

2006 Pre-Cycle

During the first staff meeting of the year, Susan gave each grade level team their prior-year results, by student name. A few focal students had achieved Proficient, but most had not; overall, only 30% of the focal students were accelerated from Basic to Proficient. This public sharing of successes and shortfalls, along with the explicit acknowledgement that the School as a whole had not achieved its overall goal, gave them a concrete picture showing that—despite great efforts and some encouraging signs—they were not doing as well as they aspired to do. As Poonam said later, "It was heavy, beginning the year this way. But I still stand by it. This is what Jim Collins (in *From Good to Great*) calls 'looking at the brutal facts.' In the long run, I think the 'heat' really helped teachers."

The first three weeks of the school year, teachers gave priority to getting to know their students well, their focal students most of all. They put together profiles of each of the focal students, and they engaged with each personally. Toward the end of that period each grade level team agreed on the specific goals they would seek to achieve in the first cycle. The upper grades set two parallel goals:

1. On the HM Quarterly Assessments, the specific cut points associated with achievement of Proficient on the CST.
2. On Reading Results, 85% correct.

1st and 2nd grades set similar parallel goals, substituting Running Records for Reading Results.

2005-2006 First Cycle

During the first ROCI, beginning in late September, each grade level team met weekly (often for only a half hour, during their lunch period) and followed a protocol in which each teacher:

- Put forward a single focal student
- Sketched the student's need what she had done in response
- Stated her objective for the student that week
- Showed some example of the student's work relative to the objective.

Her colleagues then asked four questions:

1. Does the student work provide evidence that the student did, or did not, achieve the objective?
2. What are the student's strengths and needs? What does the student need next? What is the student objective for next week?

3. What should the teacher do next in order to accelerate the student's learning (either building on what worked or doing something different in order to overcome a shortfall)? What is my teacher goal?
4. How does considering the teacher's interaction with the student through a racial lens influence what I should do next?

Megan participated in almost every team meeting at every grade level, Sabrina and/or Poonam participated in many as well, and Susan participated in one each week. They actively led the team discussions in the upper grades (4th, 5th, and 6th), but relied on the team leaders in earlier grades. In both cases, their primary purposes were a) to push thinking deeper regarding focal student needs and what teachers could do to meet these needs more effectively, and b) to cultivate teachers' determination to actually move each focal student from Basic to Proficient rather than just monitor their progress.

The CIT met once a month. The meetings addressed a series of topics that would strengthen the leadership of the grade level team leaders—e.g., what kind of evidence of student work should teachers bring to the team meeting? How should a grade level team discuss that evidence together? In each, Sabrina, Megan and/or Susan first gave a mini-lesson, telling the grade level team leaders their objective, modeling (the selection or use of student work samples, for example), then asking the teachers what they had seen, etc. Subsequently the CIT discussed how the team leaders could carry what they had just learned into their grade level team meetings. Describing the purpose of these CIT meetings, Susan said, “We had to devote a lot of time to developing the grade level team leaders' understanding of what we were doing, as well as their knowledge and confidence... We had to instill a passion.”

In every monthly meeting of the whole staff, Susan stressed that accelerating focal student learning through the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry was the School priority, and she devoted most of the meeting to some specific topic related to this priority. In addition, she made sure to avoid distracting teachers with other matters, even potentially valuable ones; for example, when the District Office asked her to send teachers to additional training on “front loading” for English language learners, she declined to send anyone.

Throughout the cycle, Megan, Sabrina and Poonam met each Monday to reflect on what they'd seen the prior week, surface particular problems they saw teachers facing and agree on what needed special attention during the week. Then they met with Susan as an informal “ROCI leadership team,” both to gain her perspective and to enlist her help with the initiatives they thought necessary—e.g., to observe a specific teacher, meet with a grade level team or explain a part of guided reading more effectively.

At the end of the first ROCI, even though progress was encouraging, Susan and her leadership colleagues saw that few of the focal students actually achieved the first cycle goals. Reflecting on this finding together, in the context of what they were seeing in classrooms and hearing in grade level team meetings, they concluded that greater rigor was necessary, both in discussions about individual

focal students and in the use of guided reading. "Rigor" became the watchword for the second cycle; the members of the "ROCI leadership team" began to introduce it into the end of cycle grade level team reviews.

At the end of the cycle, Susan gave each team a half day of release time to review the results of the first ROCI, learn all they could from the experience, and plan for the next cycle. She personally attended four of these meetings, mostly listening but pushing the discussion deeper or redirecting when necessary, offering ideas from her experience for addressing particular focal students' needs and emphasizing the importance of rigor in the use of guided reading.

The first task for each team was to post the first cycle assessment results for each individual focal student, by teacher. "There were a lot of zeroes [focal students who had not achieved the first cycle goals]," Susan remembered. "There were lots of tears. 'We're working as hard as we can,' the teachers said. 'We can't work any harder.' They didn't believe they could move the kids. We let them know that we really knew how hard they were working and that wasn't the question. Together, we had to figure out how to work smarter. And then we introduced the idea of greater rigor in what we were doing, rather than more work."

During these sessions, several teams said that their weekly meetings had been increasingly productive, but that it was hard to accomplish their purposes in half hour meetings squeezed out of lunchtime. Susan responded by turning over an hour of staff meeting time every other week to the grade level teams; this was a powerful signal about the importance she gave to ROCI as the vehicle for accelerating Latino and African American students' learning.

2005-2006 Second Cycle

During the second cycle, the series of team meetings, lab classrooms and weekly coaching in the intensive grades, CIT meetings and informal ROCI leadership team meetings continued. Every other week, all grade level teams held their meetings simultaneously in different areas of one room. This made it possible for the principal (as well as Sabrina, Poonam and Megan) to move from team to team, helping where asked and always pushing toward greater clarity about whether focal students were on track to achieve the end of cycle goal, deeper discussion of focal students' needs and more sharply defined action plans for the coming week.

The principal, coach and SIF took increasing initiative with particular teachers and grade level teams where needed to accelerate improvement, and the principal exercised increasing instructional leadership with selected teachers. For example, at Poonam's suggestion about a 2nd grade teacher's need for greater rigor, the principal observed the teacher as she conducted a "story walk" at the beginning of a guided reading lesson. After the lesson, Susan talked with the teacher:

- "Tell me more about the book you're using?" When the teacher's answer had to do with the content of the story, Susan pressed further, "What is the

reading level of this book?" After the teacher's answer, "What is the reading level of the focal student in this group?" When the teacher realized that her book selection was not really appropriate for a guided reading lesson with the student, Susan reinforced her understanding about how to fit the level of a text to the reading level of a student.

- Then the principal referred back to the story walk; the teacher had essentially told the whole story as she showed students each of the pictures. Susan reminded her that a story walk is most powerful if it is short and carefully targeted on key vocabulary the students may not know and one or two things she wants the students to notice about each picture.
- Finally, Susan asked, "Did Juan achieve the objective you had in mind?" The teacher responded that she wasn't sure, but he seemed to follow pretty well. "What was your objective?" When the teacher stated a reading comprehension objective, the principal asked, "What evidence would let you know whether Juan achieved that objective?" The teacher realized that she needed a more sharply defined objective, which would enable her to observe whether the focal student demonstrated that he'd achieved the objective.

Even though teachers had the "Pre-cycle" and the first cycle behind them, they found that the sustained attention to the focal students led them to get to know the students better and better, far better than they had known them the previous year.

At the end of the second ROCI, teachers in most grade levels had enabled more focal students to advance to Proficient, and some to surpass the higher cut points. Grade level teams sought to understand what made the difference by asking each teacher first to reflect on the success of a focal student who achieved the goal, and then on one who didn't. Many teachers expressed the view that knowing their individual focal students well, strengthening their relationships with each and interacting more frequently with them had made a big difference—often, bigger than any changes in instructional strategies employed for teaching content.

For example, teacher Kristina Clecak talked about one of her focal students: "During the first cycle, Sam was one of my lowest focal students. But now, just one cycle later, he's one of my highest. I am amazed at his transformation. What did I do? Well, I made a point to connect with him personally every day. He's interested in a lot of bling bling, so often I commented about something he was wearing; but I talked with him about other interests too, or about some work he had just completed. I gave him higher expectations, which I realized I had not done during the first cycle. 'Today I want you to...'. With him, goal setting was almost daily. I also made sure to call on him every day... Sam had been the class clown. I realized that I should capitalize on that, so I began setting him up for little leadership roles. His leadership potential really came out..."

As the 'informal ROCI leadership team' reflected on the second cycle, they noticed that few grade level team conversations seemed mechanical or

superficial any more. "The focus on focal students led teachers to diagnose their needs better and to get really specific about what they needed," Poonam said. "It really brought the teachers together on a practical level; when they used to talk about focal strategy, they could get lost in philosophical debate, not what the focal students need. All of this led teachers to be more successful, and as they've felt more successful, they have gotten much more motivated."

2005-2006 Third Cycle

The major activities of the third ROCI occurred as in earlier cycles. But there was one critically important new ingredient: explicit attention to addressing racial factors in order to contribute even further to growing racial equity. As a result of several years of racial consciousness raising work in the District, led by Glen Singleton (Pacific Strategies) and Manny Barbara (Superintendent), Susan was acutely aware that she and her largely white teaching staff were much less effective than they would like to be in working with her largely Latino and African American students and their families. But she did not know what to do about it.

As she began to see the pieces of Miner's approach to accelerating CTAG through ROCI fall into place, Susan sensed that it was time to address racial factors more directly, and she had built sufficient confidence to acknowledge to her staff and others that she did not know enough to exercise confident and helpful leadership in this area. Earlier in the year, she had been very impressed with a District sponsored training session for principals on conducting "equity walk-throughs." Edwin Javius (EdEquity) had led this session; she engaged him to talk with her CIT about racial equity and to lead them in "equity walk-throughs" through each others' classrooms and follow-up discussion. Their goal was to help teachers see practical ways to change their behavior so that they would become better teachers for their Latino and African American students.

The CIT members responded enthusiastically. In response, Susan enlisted Edwin in leading two sessions with Miner's whole teaching staff. The staff responded very positively to several basic ideas, among them:

- You have got to believe that closing the racial achievement gap is really possible. Edwin began by writing the following API scores on the board: Latinos: 970; African Americans: 945; Asians: 875; whites: 800. Then he asked teachers what they felt about these numbers, first talking in small groups, and then as a whole staff. Most teachers realized that they did not really believe that such results were possible; this awareness brought home to them that they were not yet acting on the basis of uniformly high expectations for all students.

"You don't believe this is possible, or you lack confidence in your ability to achieve it?" Edwin asked the staff. After some discussion, a number of staff members indicated that they did not see how to close that gap in a year with their current resources. "Do you believe that you can help your Latino and African American students to make more than a year's progress each year?" Edwin asked. When the staff affirmed the practicality of this

accomplishment, Edwin pointed out that several years of such acceleration would ultimately arrive at “Latinos: 970.”

“Latinos: 970” has now become an oft-cited reference point for Miner staff's expectations of itself.

- Begin with an equity mindset; don't just bring it in at the end of your thinking. Edwin said it was great that the grade level team meeting protocol addressed equity explicitly, but asked why it was the last question. Did teams get to it very often? He proposed that the protocol move race up front: how might the race of the student and the race of the teacher be affecting his/her learning? By holding the answers to this question in mind as they address the other questions in the protocol, all of teachers' thinking about their teaching of focal students will be influenced by what they see through the racial lens.
- Equitable does not mean equal. All students do not have to be treated equally, much less the same, all the time. Those who need more or different instruction in order to accelerate their learning toward ultimate equality of outcomes should receive it. It is okay to give extra attention to focal students. Doing so will not harm the learning of other students who don't need that extra attention.
- Build first on each student's strengths. Rather than going directly to work on the focal student's skills gap, first learn his/her strengths and interests. Build on those. The student will feel more respected, motivation to succeed will deepen and his/her learning will accelerate.

As one grade level team leader said, “Edwin showed us things about our kids and about our interaction with them that we were not aware of. It was eye-opening.”

At the end of the year, Miner's focal students had done far better than in prior years. Specifically, 77% of focal students accelerated from Basic to Proficient on the end of year HM assessment. Except for 6th grade, which implemented ROCI less deeply than other grades, every teacher accelerated at least 60% of her focal students to Proficient. Excluding 6th grade, 33% of all focal students met the higher cutpoints correlated with Proficient on the CST; Miner intends to raise this percentage substantially in the coming year, but clearly the School achieved major improvement in 2005-2006.

When the teachers reflected on the year, most said that this was their best year yet. They experienced growing success, and they were much more confident that their basic approach was working. Far from being resentful of the more active, results-oriented, “pushing” leadership they experienced, they saw this leadership as an important contributor to their success.

Main contributors of progress

As in any case of organizational success, numerous factors have contributed to the progress Miner Elementary School has made in recent years. It is probably

useful to distinguish between contextual factors that have contributed to improvement at Miner over the past several years and ROCI-specific contributors that have led to recent acceleration.

Contextual Factors

This list could be longer, but four factors stand out:

1. Strong principal leadership: Susan Mispagel has at least three special strengths – i.e.,
 - Deep instructional knowledge, especially in literacy: Susan taught in a number of different grade levels and areas, including special education, before she became a principal, and she was also a District literacy specialist. Her knowledge and experience amply equip her to be an instructional leader.
 - Will to lead: Susan is determined to lead her School to improving performance. She is deeply committed to the professional growth and satisfaction of her teachers, but she expects a lot of them, and she is willing to take leadership initiatives that risk some teachers' liking for her. When she thinks that the District Office is asking the School to attend to more priorities than she believes the teachers can handle well, she will also do all she can to reduce these expectations to manageable proportions. (Susan's willingness to risk everyone's "liking" her cannot be over-emphasized; many promising principals we have seen let their needs to be liked dramatically inhibit their leadership initiative, and consequently the value they add.)
 - Commitment to continuous learning and improvement: Susan pays close attention to initiatives intended to improve instruction at Miner—e.g., adoption of Houghton Mifflin, implementation of the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry. She observes directly, and she asks the teachers, literacy coach, and PartnersSI to give her their thoughts. She reflects on what seems to be working well, where there seem to be problems, and what options she has for addressing the problems. She develops her thinking in dialogue with others, and then takes action on the improvement initiatives she has concluded are necessary.
2. A relatively cohesive, hard working staff committed to growth in student learning: Susan has cultivated a culture of professionalism at Miner—teachers who aspire to be very good at what they do and enable their students to be successful. Every staff meeting is about teaching and learning and so are the great majority of her conversations with individual staff members. Teachers come to Miner, and remain, because that is the kind of school in which they want to work.
3. A sound literacy curriculum: The Houghton Mifflin program that the District adopted three years ago is research based and is broadly compatible with the District's own literacy program.

4. Establishment of the Results-Oriented Cycle of Inquiry: As described earlier, by the beginning of 2005-2006, Miner's teachers were all familiar with ROCI and those in 3rd-6th grade had received intensive, ROCI-based coaching for at least one year.

Miner has also benefited greatly from a well-run District Office ROCI as a key instrument for pursuing that goal and from the help provided by Barbara Service, the District's Title I coach.

ROCI-Specific Contributors to Recent Acceleration

When thinking about what led to the more rapid rate of acceleration in 2005-2006, the following six ROCI-specific factors seem most important:

Teaching and Learning

1. Primary emphasis on focal students: For Miner, and for PartnersSI, shifting teachers' primary attention from an instructional approach to focal students was a fundamental breakthrough. In practice, our earlier, balanced emphasis on focal students, focal standard, and instructional approach had led to far more attention to the mechanics of implementing an instructional approach than to the focal students. While understanding what good implementation of an instructional approach is critical, the conversations teachers have must focus on the impact of that approach on individual students, who have individual needs. In 2005-2006, for the first time, most teachers really got to know their focal students in depth, and this made a decisive difference in their ability to engage those students and accelerate their learning.

When concerns arose that the special attention to focal students might be benefiting them at the cost of other students' progress, the teachers were reassured to discover that the improvements in their instruction to which the focal students led them were also having a positive impact on other students in the classroom.

2. Increasing attention to teacher-student relationships: Prior to 2005-2006, Miner's teachers were certainly respectful, caring and encouraging to their focal students (as well as other students). One teacher who was truly focused on her Latino and African American focal students last year began to appreciate how much the focal students' engagement depended on the quality and intensity of her communication with them. As the focal students' engagement increased, so did their opportunity for learning. As the teacher communicated well-chosen expectations and encouragement daily, called on each focal student daily and provided well-informed coaching to each, the students began to experience more and more success in their schoolwork. As they experienced more success, they became even more engaged and more trusting of the teacher, and their learning accelerated.
3. Commitment to a true results orientation: For the first time in 2005-2006, many teachers really "got" the results orientation. They truly adopted the expectation that they would enable each focal student to achieve the goals

that the grade level teams set for each cycle. And they learned that the way to succeed was to monitor each focal student very closely, at least weekly and usually more often, so that they could quickly identify a focal student who was not on track to meet the cycle goals and then modify and improve their instructional approaches and their communication with the student in order to get her/him on track.

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These first three factors, taken together, are the keys to the teachers' 2005-2006 success in accelerating the rate of improvement in their students' learning. The next two factors are keys to the productive changes in teachers' practice.

(A year from now, this list is likely to include key equity ideas flowing from Edwin Javius' work with the Miner staff. This work began too late in 2005-2006 to have a major impact on student results for the year, but he has already achieved a major impact on staff members' ways of thinking and teaching. Reinforced and deepened by Miner's leaders and PartnersSI, this will certainly lead to tangible impacts on student learning in 2006-2007.)

School Leadership

4. Strong leadership from core leadership team: At the start of the year, Susan communicated her expectation for even better student learning results than in the prior years, and, with the help of Sabrina and Poonam, she communicated the central elements of the refined approach to ROCI that Miner would take. She made sure that every staff meeting was a professional development session focused on accelerating the learning of the Latino and African American focal students through the ROCI. She brought Edwin Javius into the School as soon as she saw the fit between what Miner needed regarding racial equity and what he could bring. She, Sabrina, Poonam and Megan met weekly to monitor, analyze and reflect on progress and problems and plan for the next week or two.

Sabrina and Megan worked intensively with each teacher in the intensive grade levels, and they exercised strong thought leadership in the lab classroom discussions, the grade level team meetings, and ROCI review and planning sessions. Susan participated strategically in selected grade level team meetings and virtually all of the cycle review and planning sessions.

In all of this activity, and more, Susan, Sabrina, Megan and Poonam were "pushing" for:

- Deeper understanding of each focal student
- Closer relationships and communication with each
- More effective use of guided reading—geared to the specific needs of each focal student

- Close monitoring and prompt changes in teacher behavior where needed to keep each focal student on track
- Whatever else might be needed to accelerate the learning of each focal student.

Despite Susan's term, "pushing" leadership, in truth their leadership was mostly collaborative—working with the teacher to gain deeper understanding of the focal student and his/her needs—that it might better be called "engaged and engaging" leadership. Neither Susan nor Sabrina and Megan were "issuing directives on high," "exhorting the troops," "praising and punishing," "bearing down on teachers," or otherwise doing the kinds of things that people sometimes associate with strong leadership. Rather, they were constantly modeling and communicating about each specific element of the ROCI process, and they were engaging closely with grade level teams and individual teachers to help the teachers accomplish their goals. Sabrina and Megan, especially, were much more like integral members of the grade level teams than like external leaders, even though they clearly exercised strong thought leadership.

5. Development of grade level leaders: The powerful thought leadership that Susan, Sabrina and Megan exercised was absolutely essential to bringing about the changes in teacher understanding and practice that Miner experienced in 2005-2006. But it was also critically important for Miner to develop grade level team leaders who could serve as important allies in the near term and as the main grade level thought leaders who would sustain the trajectory of accelerating improvement in the longer term.

"Insider-Outsider" Thought Leadership

6. Collegial thought leadership and support from PartnersSI and the District's Title I coach: With rare exceptions, when organizations are trying to adopt a dramatically new way of working in order to achieve dramatically greater results, they need external partners who embody that new way of working in order to succeed. Without such external partners, they find it almost impossible to break out of deep-set patterns of thinking and practice.

Susan Mispagel and Miner have embraced PartnersSI as "insider" colleagues although we are clearly an "outsider" organization. They have made us an integral part of the school's leadership team, and yet they fully understand and value our independent thinking and initiatives, trusting that we are deeply committed to their goals and fully committed to their leadership.

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