

# Aligning an Instructional System to Close the Gap

Illinois School District U-46

By Kiley Walsh



A heartfelt thanks to all the many Stupski and U-46 staff members who made this report possible.

Two Belvedere Place  
Suite 310  
Mill Valley, CA 94941

T 415.384.2400  
F 415.384.2401

[www.stupski.org](http://www.stupski.org)

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# Executive Summary

## Overview

Illinois School District U-46 has been making strong achievement gains, particularly with English Learners (EL)s. How has a large, urban district helped more children achieve? They've developed and supported a comprehensive aligned instructional system that teachers are excited about and actively using.

The news in U-46 is how the district has responded to pressures, rising to new standards of excellence. Instead of simply trying to adjust to rapid EL growth, the district aimed for and attained better EL achievement results than ever before. When faced with fiscal crisis, U-46 didn't just balance their budget, they boldly re-allocated resources to support the neediest students. In a context defined by strong site-based management, the district intentionally engaged teacher voice and supported instructional changes to cultivate the elusive element that drives real, sustainable improvement: teacher ownership.

This report is part of the Stupski Foundation's multi-faceted initiative to advance a systemic, results-oriented approach to district reform. Through reports such as this, the Foundation hopes to shed light on elements of district improvement, spotlighting successes when and where they occur and helping to illuminate any structures, practices or processes that can catalyze improvement.

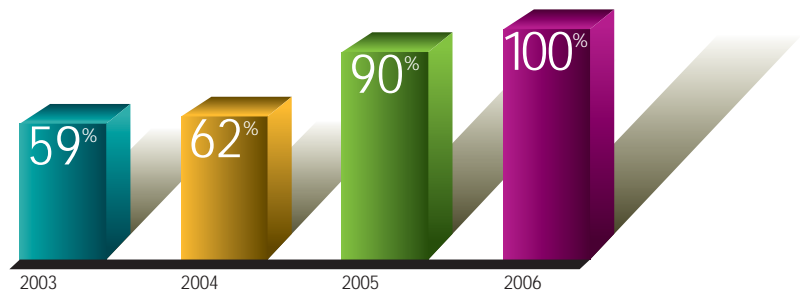
## District Context

Located in the fast-growing region northwest of Chicago, School District U-46 is the second-largest K-12 system in Illinois serving over 40,000 students in 40 elementary, eight middle and five high schools. There are approximately 6,000 ELs in the district, representing 15% of total enrollment, and Spanish is the primary language for 98%. In the current school year, just under half the students in U-46 are White and about 40% are Hispanic/Latino, with the remaining

population almost evenly divided between African-American and Asian students.

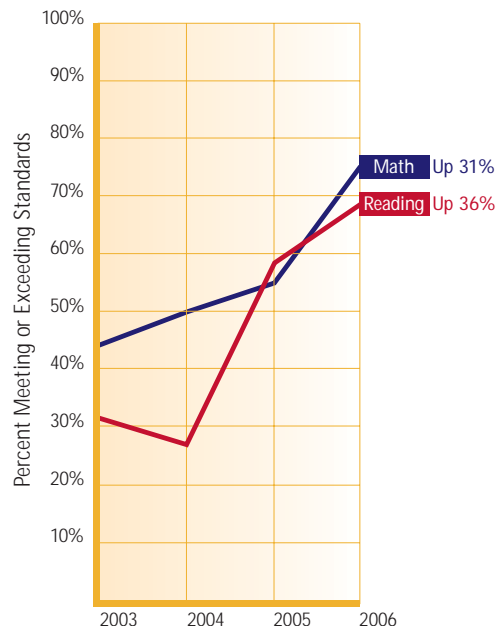
U-46 has made broad and consistent gains over recent years. In 2006, every significant subgroup in every elementary school in the district made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) – a 41% improvement in three years.

Percentage of Elementary Schools Achieving Adequate Yearly Progress



English Language (EL) student performance, measured on the Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (IMAGE), has also grown rapidly.

3rd Grade English Learner IMAGE Performance



## Key Findings and Lessons Learned

The full report provides a story of change, offering a retrospective look at what's behind the gains in U-46. It highlights the essential elements of the district's progress:

- Components of a comprehensive aligned instructional system – the Curriculum Roadmap in U-46 – plus their strategies for collaborative development and phased roll-out, and the supports and tools provided for full implementation.
- Changes to central office structures, roles and practices that promoted alignment, credibility, equitable resourcing and momentum behind change.
- Leadership from the superintendent and school board, supported by the union and communicated through U-46's District Improvement Plan, that fostered a laser-like focus on academic success for all.

What can leaders in the field take away from the U-46 story? Based on findings, we offer the following five considerations. While each component has potential use for any district, it appeared to be the sum of the parts that made the difference in U-46.

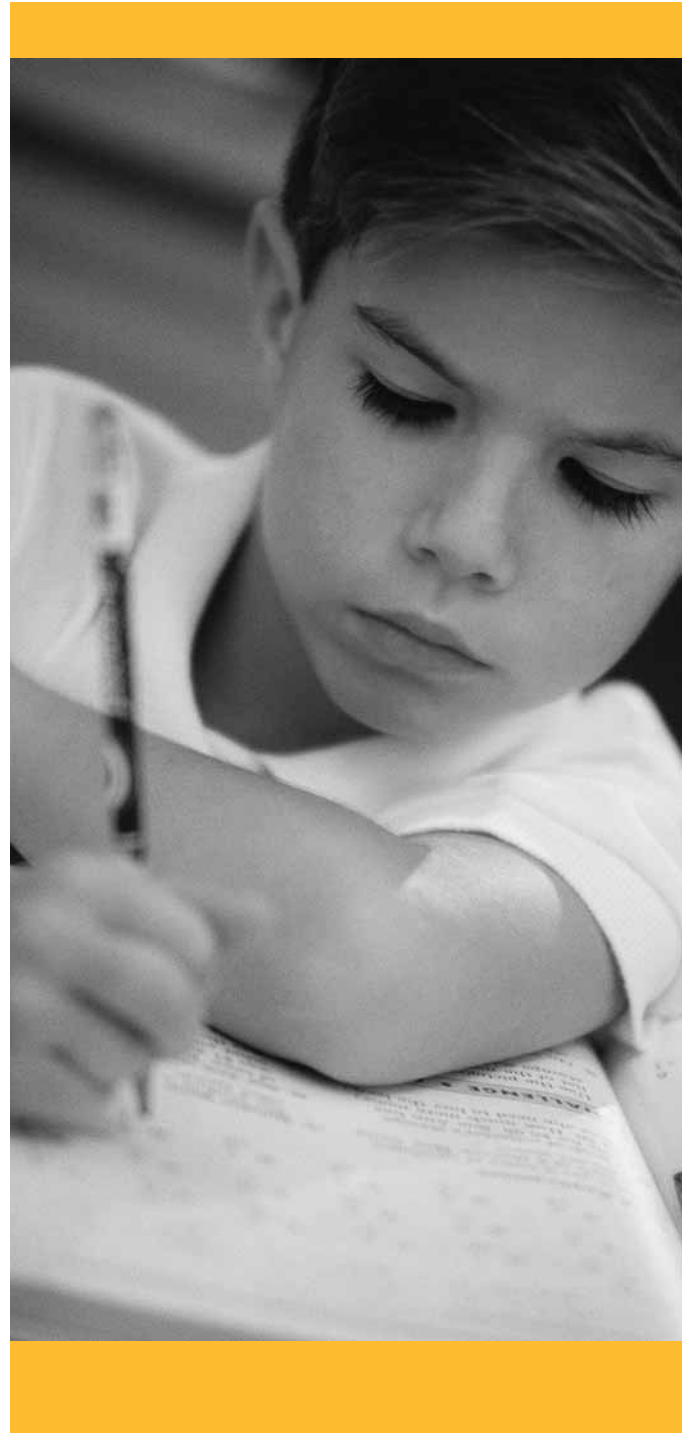
**1. Broad-Based, Visionary Leadership Focused on Equity:** develop a shared vision, focus on equity, put the vision in writing, communicate and use it.

**2. Teacher Ownership of an Instructionally Aligned System:** involve teachers, designate a central office point-person, prototype, and provide tools and support for teacher implementation.

**3. An Integrated, Collaborative and Responsive Central Office:** focus on how the parts make the whole, integrate structures, bring outside voices in, and design for flexibility.

**4. Resources Allocated According to Student Need:** get clear on numbers, prioritize and budget based on need, and be creative with resources.

**5. Critical Friends and Continual Improvement:** Use critical friends, develop a feedback/improvement process, and promote transparency.



# I. Why do we need an aligned instructional system?

Many districts function in silos with separate systems and services for different student groups. English Learners and children in Special Education frequently face this challenge, as can students who are below grade level. Without systemic alignment, these children may be tracked from an early age on a path that offers them limited life options. The concept behind an aligned instructional system (CAIS) is that learning goals are not just for some but for all students regardless of classification. A quality education shouldn't depend on the particular classroom, school or program to which a child is assigned. It should be systemic, giving every child access. If departments are operating in isolation within the central office and instructional functions are not collaborating with operational functions, resources do not get allocated according to need.

Too many education reform initiatives are piecemeal, approaching the business of improvement from a narrow perspective. Though it might be easier to get traction in a school setting rather than a whole school district, or to work on improving an assessment or curriculum department rather than the whole, isolated initiatives are easily overwhelmed by the dysfunction of the larger system. An excellent school in an unsupportive context can decline dramatically the moment its leader leaves. A crackerjack Curriculum and Instruction department will falter if assessments aren't appropriately linked to content. The development of a comprehensive aligned instructional system, therefore, is essential to articulate reform vertically from policy to classroom practice and horizontally across the many sub-systems of the district.

Without alignment, teachers are simply asked to do too much. They are inventing curriculum, creating assessments, finding materials, and relying entirely in-house for expertise on best practices, all while trying to deliver the highest quality of instruction in the classroom. If teachers must create all these support structures by default, very little

capacity remains for high-level professional practice and effective decision making in the instructional arena, specifically addressing the question of how best to help *all* students learn. With aligned support from the district, teachers can focus on refining lessons, differentiating their instruction and meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of all students.



## II. Stupski Foundation

The Stupski Foundation is committed to working within the K-12 education system, linking will with skill to help all children gain access to a wide range of life opportunities. Founded in 1996, we are an operating Foundation providing resources – a core team providing ongoing support, connections to consultants and experts in the field, information on promising practices – as well as funding to help districts improve. The bold goal of the foundation is to improve the roughly 200 high-poverty, mostly urban school districts across the country, with the aim of increasing achievement for all while closing achievement gaps.

This report aims to share some lessons learned about the real challenges and potential solutions on the road to school district improvement. The Stupski Foundation hopes to shed light on aspects of this journey, spotlighting successes when and where they occur and illuminating replicable practices and processes that can catalyze improvement. The Foundation deliberately works with districts on the move – those that have need for improvement *and* the capacity and will to work toward it. No single school district has negotiated all the hairpin turns of change or answered all the complicated questions on how to best meet the needs of all students. Many districts,



however, have arrived at certain milestones.

Built upon knowledge generated through district partnerships and field-based research, the Foundation has constructed a Theory of Action (TOA) for district reform (see inside back cover). Embedded in the TOA is a critical focus on helping districts develop a Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System (CAIS) (see Appendix A). The reports in this series are designed to illustrate and refine the TOA and the companion CAIS.

The Stupski Foundation began a partnership with U-46 School District in the 2002-2003 school year. We worked

directly with central office leadership to assess organization needs and provide supports to develop central office capacity. This report highlights what U-46 has accomplished in the past few years in its effort to align its instructional system, and offers information on the external levers for change, principally the Foundation's intervention points that helped to guide and catalyze improvement. Information for this report was collected through document review, interviews of district, school-site and teacher leaders, and interviews of Stupski Foundation staff, a survey of and focus group with EL teachers, and observations of teacher professional development.

# III. U-46 Context

## Demographics

School District U-46 is the second-largest K-12 system in Illinois. Located in the fast-growing ring west of Chicago, U-46 spans 11 widely-divergent communities and serves over 40,000 students in 40 elementary, eight middle and five high schools. In the current 2006-07 school year, just under half of the students in U-46 are white, about 40% are Hispanic/Latino and the remaining population is almost evenly divided between African-American and Asian students. Over one-third of the district's children are categorized as low-income and about one-quarter as English Learners (ELs).

Rapid growth has transformed the U-46 community. Over the past 10 years, enrollment has increased by approximately 8,500 and the district has opened 13 new schools. The district's EL enrollment has almost doubled in the last ten years. In the 1994-1995 school year, the figure was 3,283; in the current school year, that figure is roughly 6,000. At the elementary level, almost one in five children in U-46 are ELs.

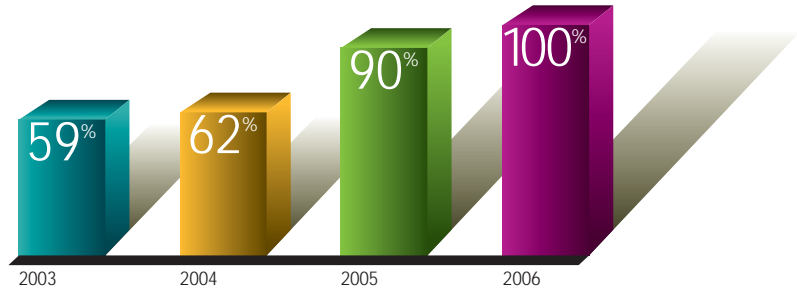
## Student Achievement

In recent years, School District U-46 has been making consistent, strong gains across all of its subgroups. In the most recent year for which data are available, 2006, over 70% of all students in U-46 met or exceeded Illinois state standards in reading and more than 80% of all students met or exceeded expectations in mathematics on the state's annual measure of student achievement, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). Moreover, the performance of students in every subgroup improved in both reading and mathematics on the ISAT.

In 2006, every significant subgroup in every elementary school in the district made what the federal government terms Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) – a 41% improvement in three years. AYP is the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year;

this level increases steadily, with the goal of all students at or above grade level by the 2013-2014 school year. Even as minimum requirements for AYP have steadily risen, U-46 has gained ground. Every significant subgroup in every middle school in the district made AYP with the exception of special education students in some subjects.

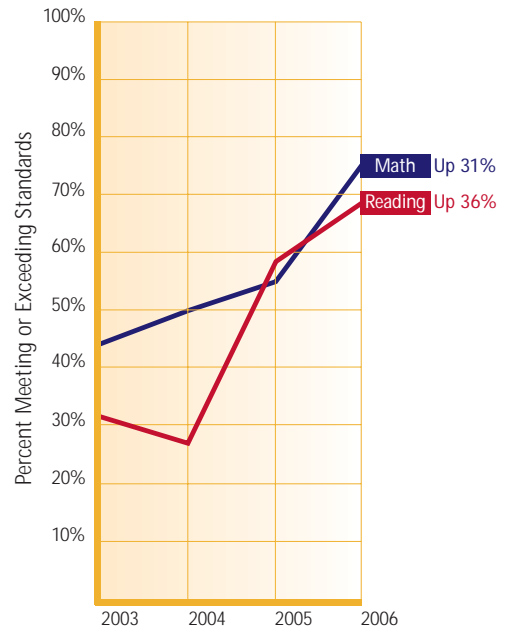
Percentage of Elementary Schools Achieving Adequate Yearly Progress



U-46's growth outpaced average Illinois state growth through the 2004-05 school year; at the time of this report's publication, state data for the 2005-06 school year had yet to be released.

English Language (EL) student performance, measured on the Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (IMAGE), also increased. In 2006, EL students increased their passing rate in reading by 10% over 2005, which was a more than 20% increase over 2004.

3rd Grade English Learner IMAGE Performance



## Launching Reform

When Dr. Connie Neale assumed leadership of School District U-46 in August 2002, she brought with her a strong track record of excellence and equity. While superintendent of the Wichita Falls School District in Texas, her district was profiled as one of the top four in the state in the Charles A. Dana Center report *Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts* (2000). During the first weeks of her new superintendency, however, myriad challenges emerged. Accounting figures began to suggest that the district's budget was not \$6.7 million in the black, as had been projected, but was actually in the red. Over the coming months, the number attached to the deficit grew exponentially – first to \$7



million, then \$14 million and on up to \$42 million by the end of the 2002-2003 school year. Sparked by the fiscal crisis, the school district became the focus of media attention and public

outrage, leading to demands that the district overhaul and improve business practices.

In addition, as district leaders conducted a review of U-46's instructional program it became clear that the district had racial, ethnic and economic achievement gaps but it was difficult to determine much about them. Data consisted of annual test results and little else in the way of interim performance data or information about inputs such as textbooks, standards or strategies used in the classroom.

The source of both the financial and instructional problems appeared to be the same. By 2000, School District U-46 had grown from a small to a large urban school system without developing support structures to meet all students' needs. Though the number of staff in the central office had grown, its infrastructure and ways of doing business essentially had remained unchanged. Departments within the central office and the district's schools operated independently of one

another with few structures in place to ensure that all students, regardless of school or program attendance, had equal opportunities and supports for academic achievement. Fiscal decisions tended to be made in isolation and were coupled with poor accounting practices. Each school in U-46 was implementing site-based management without system-wide mechanisms for implementing best practices, replicating successes or learning from challenges.

Internally, leaders began the difficult work of assessing, restructuring and, in some cases, rebuilding departments. In 2003, the district hired a new chief financial officer. To support him in the challenging months ahead, the Stupski Foundation funded a former CFO from New York City's public school system to provide coaching. The district also engaged in formal departmental audits starting in operations such as transportation and moving to academic departments such as Special Education and English Learners. The primary goal of the audits was not simply to cut costs, but to benchmark the district against best practices in the nation. In an effort to be more transparent and restore credibility with and hold themselves accountable

**“This business of the haves and have-nots, we created tremendous inequities by putting it all back on building principals... [one principal] could figure out how to do things that other principals couldn't come close to. Where was the district in making sure those things were replicated in those places?”**

*— Chief Financial Officer*

to the public, the district posted audit findings and plans for next steps on its website.

To lay a foundation that could begin to address the district's needs, the board and superintendent worked collaboratively to develop the District Improvement Plan (DIP), a guiding

document under which all district actions could be aligned. The plan outlines six key pillars of work: 1) Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, 2) High-Priority Schools, 3) Fiscal Responsibility, 4) Leadership, 5) Data Management, and 6) Public Trust and Support.



To signal a focused mission to all stakeholders, the board-adopted District Improvement Plan is only one page and accessible on the district's website. The Stupski Foundation participated in the process, working with the board and district leaders one-on-one and in retreats to analyze data and focus priorities.

The board, superintendent and cabinet also collaborated to change the district's motto from *Where America Goes to School Everyday* to one that more appropriately reflects the main goal of the system: *Academic Success for All*.

U-46 has a strong union tradition and it was critical to

**“The plan signals to everyone in the system that the district has a focus and this focus is not going away.”**

*– Board Vice President*

engage the Elgin Teacher's Association as a key stakeholder early and throughout the process. Relations between the district and the teachers association had been strained at times, with a history of multiple, long-term strikes in the 1970s and 1980s. Any movement toward greater systemic alignment had to be informed by the union's needs and interests from the start. District leaders, in conjunction with Stupski

Foundation staff, began conversations with teacher union leadership to ascertain interests. District administrators were excited to find common ground. All parties agreed that U-46's teachers desperately needed more support, in large part because all teachers were now working with English Learners along a continuum of academic mastery.

## IV. Aligning the elements of an instructional system

In the 2002-03 school year, U-46's Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction moved to another district. Faced with a vacancy exactly where the district needed expertise and leadership, U-46's cabinet worked with the Stupski Foundation to devise a unique solution – forming a project team for curriculum and instruction. The concept was to create the opportunity for a small group of individuals with expertise and credibility at all levels of the system to function with a high degree of autonomy within the district. Original team members were a consultant with a long career of service in the public education system including superintendencies and over a decade of service as the Deputy State Superintendent of Illinois, a highly respected U-46 teacher leader and union representative, and an administrative assistant. The following year, a bilingual expert with over two decades of experience working in U-46 as a bilingual teacher and program administrator joined the team. The Stupski Foundation helped the district connect with the project team consultant and identify internal talent, and provided the funding for the three individuals' full-time salaries during the start-up school year.

With support from the superintendent, board and union, the project team began formulating the concept of a curriculum roadmap. Its purpose was to help all teachers in the system understand their own instructional goals as well as how they fit into the broader district goals. The roadmap could also serve as a nexus for supports, offering a web-accessible

multitude of aligned resources to help teachers in the classroom. In January 2004, to aid in developing the content of the roadmap, the district contracted with two literacy experts who had an understanding of best practices on a national level. The Stupski-funded consultants began by reviewing existing district documentation, researching exemplar districts and identifying best practices.

Guided by the concept of triage, providing help where most needed, a draft roadmap was piloted during the 2003-2004 school year with 10 high-need schools that had failed to meet AYP requirements and had a high rate of



**“The [project team] went out and sat and really listened. And then they took the time to pull together what they heard at each site and reflected back...We thought that was really important as they began to launch the project. That probably gave it a chance.”**

*– Former Elgin Teachers*

students in poverty. Project team members and literacy consultants spent extensive time at each of the 10 schools working with teachers to use and improve the roadmap, soliciting feedback and addressing concerns. Throughout the year, project team members also brought the developing roadmap and implementation



### *Aligned Instructional System*



plans before the Instructional Council, a district-wide advisory group of teachers, administrators and community members that facilitates, monitors and provides support, direction and communication on curriculum.

The resulting document is the U-46 Curriculum Roadmap which explicitly states and aligns, for both English-proficient and English Learner students, reading and mathematics standards at each grade level K-12 and supporting instructional materials, instructional strategies and assessments.

## Standards

The starting basis for the roadmap was all the learning standards for each grade. For English-proficient students, the state of Illinois has its own learning standards; for English Learners, the state uses the K-12 standards developed through the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium, comprised of eight states and the District of Columbia. WIDA standards actually weren't available when the roadmap launched; the state of Illinois officially released English Language Proficiency standards in February, 2004. After their release, literacy consultants and EL district staff worked them into the roadmap. Literacy consultants analyzed standards for both English-proficient and English Learner students and identified the 10-12 power standards at each grade level. To distill these standards, they reviewed standards in other states with particular attention to those that had received positive national recognition, and then went through a process of teacher review after which they made some adjustments.

## Curriculum Materials

The roadmap identifies instructional materials that can be used to meet the power standards at each grade. To develop the curriculum section, literacy consultants investigated several districts within the state of Illinois that had already begun the work of curriculum alignment with standards to learn from their experiences. Though U-46 does not employ a standard adopted reading program K-12, the district began to pilot standards-aligned materials such as *Moving into English* for all K-5 EL teachers as the roadmap launched. The

district also invested in *Making Meaning*, a K-6 reading comprehension curriculum with classroom libraries provided in both Spanish and English. Grades K-8 also use *Everyday Math*, a program developed through the University of Chicago. Though *Everyday Math* had been used in different buildings, it was adopted as district curriculum two years ago.

## Assessments and Data

Prior to 2004, the district infrastructure for analyzing or using student achievement data was weak and uneven. To help develop U-46's assessment and accountability system, the district used Stupski Foundation funding to hire a former teacher, principal and data analyst as a consultant in December 2003. One of the consultant's first initiatives was to introduce benchmark assessments so that teachers would have data to inform their practice. Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments aligned to reading and math standards were piloted in elementary schools that expressed interest. By this current 2006-07 school year, every 3rd-8th grade teacher is using MAP assessments through voluntary, site-initiated participation. The district has also begun using a data warehouse, TetraData, which provides access to student achievement results. The district has been providing professional development on its use to school and central office staff. The Stupski Foundation provided coaching and financial assistance for the implementation of both MAP assessments and TetraData.

The district has invested heavily in EL assessments and professional development for EL teachers on the use of data. In the fall of 2004, the data consultant worked with project team members and EL department staff to develop a pre-test for ELs. The first EL pre-test was administered in November 2004 and results were in the hands of teachers within the month. During 2004-05, the district provided professional development on assessments specifically for 3rd and 5th grade EL teachers. Time was devoted to alignment of instruction with current state assessments, particularly the correlations between the state-administered test for EL students, the Illinois Measure of Academic Growth in English (IMAGE) assessment, and the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) given to English-proficient students. Many EL teachers reported that the training raised their awareness of the academic rigor and English proficiency required to be considered at grade level.

## Professional Development on Instructional Strategies

The district has provided a significant amount of professional development around instructional strategies for implementation of the roadmap. During the first year of the roadmap's use, literacy consultants delivered on-site professional development in vocabulary development, including the concept of "academic vocabulary" or those words that are critical to understanding the content taught in schools. Teachers, including those working with ELs, participated in workshops on effective instructional strategies linked to instructional materials, including "power lessons" which allowed teachers to focus deeply on areas of student need such as inference. Content was based on student skill needs as identified through IMAGE assessments, and linked to *Moving Into English* instructional materials. Much of the sessions focused on the importance of building background knowledge and enriching vocabulary. Based on Isabel Beck's research with Margaret McKeown, leaders shared strategies such as Text Talk, aimed at structuring read-aloud time to maximize students' development of Tier Two or enriching vocabulary, i.e., those words found frequently across many domains offering the potential for greater impact on students' reading comprehension.

In addition to utilizing in-house expertise, the district contracted with experts from the field such as Dr. Robert Marzano, a leading education researcher on helping all students attain academic success. Teachers across the district read his book, *Building Background Knowledge for Academic Achievement*, and he visited the district in early 2005 to discuss strategies such as graphic organizers and the importance of developing a core academic vocabulary list. During the summer of 2005, teachers voluntarily convened to create a district-wide key academic vocabulary list for each grade.

During the 2005-06 school year, all 3rd, 4th and 5th grade teachers participated in district-provided professional development regarding the roadmap. It marked the first time

that teachers working with English-proficient students and teachers working with English Learners were brought together throughout the district for the same training. To facilitate implementation in the classroom, the district employed a cadre of instructional coaches to conduct walkthroughs and touchback sessions, assuming some of the former responsibilities of project team members and literacy consultants.



## District-Wide Implementation of the Curriculum Roadmap

The development and particularly the use of its Curriculum Roadmap happened more quickly than district administrators had expected. To refine the roadmap and ensure its relevance, the district convened three day-long workshops during the summer of 2004 with a wide representation of K-12 teachers. Response exceeded district leaders' expectations, with far greater turn-out than anticipated. Approximately 20 schools began the 2004-05 school year officially using the roadmap. During this year, 20-30 teachers kept informal journals regarding implementation and met periodically to refine the document. Excitement, word of mouth and corresponding professional development spread the news about the roadmap, and by the start of the 2005-06 school year, all schools in the district had some familiarity with the document.

The Curriculum Roadmap was finalized during the summer of 2005 at a day-long district-sponsored retreat for teachers and district administrators. The end product represents the best of what already existed in U-46, combined with promising practices from research and exemplar districts. During this same time period, the district has invested heavily in improving the accessibility and content of its website. The frequency with which the roadmap webpage is visited grows steadily as the site functions not only as an informational tool but an educational and professional development tool as well.



## V. Aligning district central office structures and supports



Strong district leadership and changes in central office structures and practices have played a crucial role in promoting change at the classroom level. Key players in the system – the superintendent, board and union – helped create, define and communicate a shared vision: academic success for every child. Structures and practices in the central office have changed dramatically, all in an effort to provide more effective, focused support. The emerging district office culture is marked by high expectations, no excuses and a recognition that children, not adults, are the primary client.

### Personnel, Roles and Responsibilities

In an effort to align central office staff roles and responsibilities, U-46's organizational structure has changed dramatically. From the past configuration of four area superintendents, there is now one Chief Academic Officer

**“When I was an area superintendent, we worked in isolation. The system was too departmentalized. I see a big shift in terms of culture. Now, we’re aligning around best practices for all students.”**

– Chief Academic Officer

and Chief Financial Officer reporting to the superintendent. Under the CAO, K-12 services are now integrated under an Executive Director for Elementary Education and an Executive Director for Secondary Education, and an Executive Director for Educational Programs. The cabinet now includes an Assistant to the Superintendent on Special Projects whose charge is to cross boundaries and help oversee the

whole of the district's work encompassed in the District Improvement Plan.

As the work of the Curriculum Roadmap has evolved over the course of the last few years, so has the composition and charge of the U-46 Curriculum Project Team. Whereas much of the team's efforts in the start-up phase were outward-facing, soliciting feedback from and cultivating ownership in the roadmap with union leadership, school-site administrators and teachers, now the team devotes the majority of its energy internally, analyzing central office strengths and gaps and helping to build systems' capacity to execute. Though the original literacy consultants remain involved, it is to a lesser extent and most of the professional development they provided is now provided by internal district staff. The data consultant, so central to the development of the assessment portion of the Curriculum Roadmap, has now been hired by the district as its Assessment Systems Architect. The Project Team EL expert originally funded full-time through the Stupski Foundation is now a full-time salaried district-level employee.

The district has also made several changes to the EL instructional program. In March 2004, the school board voted to re-route enrollment patterns away from the structure of bussing and non-neighborhood-based delivery. Following audit recommendations delivered in March 2005, the district has established consistent exit criteria from the EL program and changed the accountability structure for EL teachers. In prior years, EL teachers reported to the central office Bilingual Department; now they report directly to their building principal. The district has also provided professional development to principals so that they can be effective in this new role.

## Planning and Accountability

U-46 relies on its District Improvement Plan to both guide and improve its work. Although updates are made to the plan on an annual basis, the six pillars have not changed. The board revisits the DIP each year to select priority focus areas for the district and uses the plan to prioritize funding decisions and focus board meeting agendas, ensuring more

**“My hope is we’ve moved from random acts to a stronger alignment and eventually, as we go into interdependence, it will become almost seamless. Everyone will make decisions thinking, ‘although it’s OK for me, is it OK for everybody else? Does what I do create a barrier?’**

*– Superintendent*

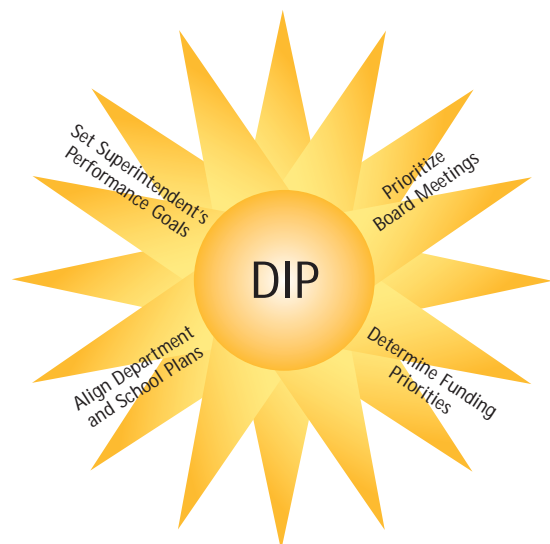
time devoted to issues directly related to student achievement. The DIP also provides the basis for the superintendent’s performance goals. District departments and schools each align their individual plans with the District Improvement Plan.

The Stupski Foundation has been supporting the capacity of the central office in a variety of ways, including learning visits for central office administrators to districts such as Broad Prize winner Norfolk Public Schools, coaching from Stupski Foundation staff members, and opportunities for cabinet-level officials such as the CAO to participate in role-alike groups with other leaders in urban districts

across the nation. In addition, the Stupski Foundation conducts an annual Organizational Assessment (OA), evaluating the district on seven core components: leadership, stakeholder engagement, efficient and effective processes, curriculum and instruction, stellar people, strategic planning and results, and accountability. Findings help district leaders identify strengths within their system, as well as specific opportunities for growth.

**“We’re the 2nd largest district in Illinois, so we were saying ‘well, nobody’s like us.’ Now...we view ourselves more as part of urban network nationwide. There are cities across the country that have similar issues...If they can make progress, why can’t U-46?”**

*– District Office Administrator*



*The District Improvement Plan*

## Resource Allocation

Due to improved fiscal practices, the district has reduced its

“The instructional program was the instructional program and the non-instructional program was a different animal, not connected. But, to the extent that you were inefficient with operations, it impacted instruction ... Aligning those pieces has really forced some things to happen.”

– Chief Financial Officer

deficit by 82% over the past three years. They are now on track to have a balanced budget by the end of the 2006-2007 school year. The changes have resulted in improved fiscal ratings for the district from external organizations. The Illinois State Board of Education issues a School District Financial Profile for each district in the state to help monitor fiscal health. In 2002-03, U-46 was rated at Financial Watch, the lowest financial rating possible short of being a controlled district. That rating has now improved to the second highest, Financial Review. The district's Moody's bond rating for

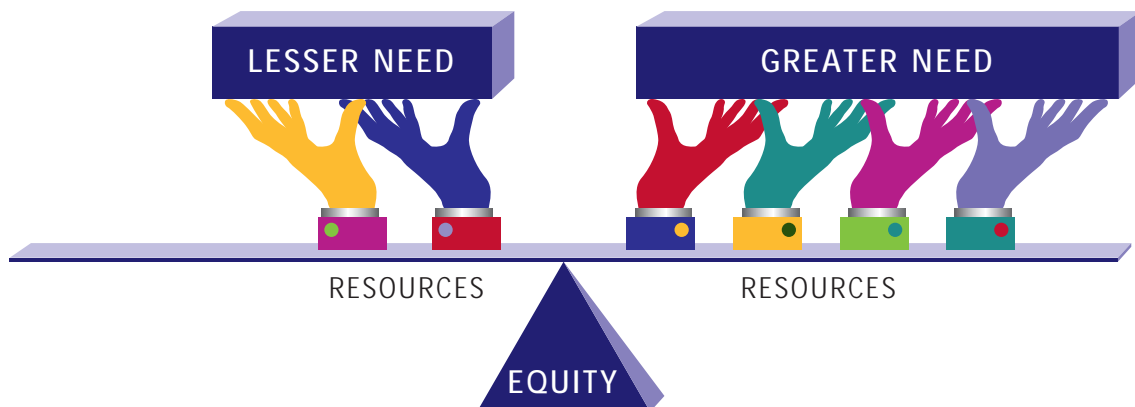
several years included a “negative outlook”; Moody's removed that in the 2005-06 school year due to the progress the district has made with financial initiatives.

The District Improvement Plan, together with the new organizational structure, is helping the district align resources with need. The CFO and CAO now work in close consort in an ongoing effort to ensure that funding decisions are made with consideration for the good of the whole. One way in which the district has provided greater alignment of resources to need is by reducing class size in schools of greatest need. Class size is determined on a tiered

“Equity doesn't mean you give everybody the same. It means you give them what they need.”

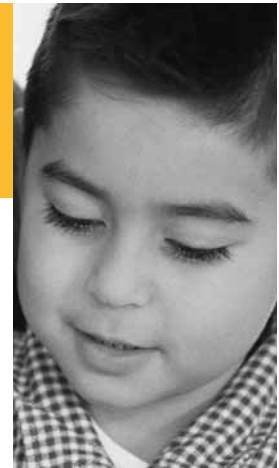
– Superintendent

structure based upon a school's academic performance and its enrollments in programs such as Free and Reduced Price Lunch and Special Education. The district also began differentiating funding for instructional interventions for students, providing more funding for more needs. The district also provides free breakfasts in high-need schools, as well as extra facilities maintenance efforts and more professional development and resources to teachers in these challenging schools. In addition, funding for the development of the Curriculum Roadmap and supports related to it has been more intentionally inclusive of both Special Education and EL teachers and administrators.



# VI. Challenges and Next Steps

## What are the next steps for U-46?



### 1. Continual Outreach and Engagement:

Change has happened fast in U-46 and the district is experiencing some growing pains. In a district with a strong history of site-based management and autonomy in departments, schools and classrooms, the curriculum roadmap document represents a radical change. Although there is momentum from the student achievement gains, some teachers and school-site administrators express frustration and a sense of feeling overwhelmed with new responsibilities. Pursuant to the boundary changes made in 2004, two families filed a lawsuit which is still underway. Any change initiative needs strong, continuous communications to promote collaboration with community and teachers.

### 2. Quality and Rigor for all:

The Curriculum Roadmap has established clear pathways for U-46 students and teachers; the next step is to ensure that that every child in the system has a fast onramp onto this road. Students enrolled in Special Education programs, gifted students, children in pre-kindergarten – a truly world-class system has structures in place to help every child in every population reach his or her full potential. The roadmap provides a solid baseline and an infrastructure for the whole system; now the district is working on adding to it so all populations are fully integrated.

### 3. Data-Based Decision Making:

The district has been making great strides toward using student achievement data to make decisions at all levels, from resource allocation at the cabinet-level to instruction in the classroom. It takes time and continued investment in professional development, however, to develop the expertise and capacity necessary to make data-based decision making part of the district's culture. The district needs to continually evaluate and improve its benchmark assessments so that they are tightly coupled with curriculum and instruction. Additional time and attention to this area are also needed to build capacity at all levels to use TetraData to support systemic interventions and differentiation based on need.

### 4. Creating learning communities:

The cultural shift toward sharing practice and making practice public has begun, but it needs continued, intentional supports to grow. Central office administrators need ongoing opportunities to learn from each other and from role-alike individuals in similar districts across the country. Principals need opportunities to network with each other, learning from each other's challenges and successes as the system moves toward alignment. Most importantly, teachers need coaching, mentoring, collaboration time, lab classrooms and more teacher leadership positions to truly change and improve practice. New practices such as walkthroughs or learning visits can be threatening and burdensome unless teachers have a voice in and ownership of the process, and see the non-evaluative benefit of sharing with and learning from peers.

### 5. Alignment at the secondary level:

As is the case in most districts, U-46's secondary schools and the departments within them are run in a more autonomous, site-based fashion than elementary schools. They are also lagging behind elementary schools in student achievement. Moving forward, engagement of secondary school teachers and principals is vital in the work of alignment, with a deep understanding of their needs and careful tailoring of central office efforts to meet them in a systematic manner. Subjects such as Social Studies and Science, as well as AP and Honors courses, all need to be integrated into the Curriculum Roadmap.

## VII. Lessons Learned



What can district leaders, reform support organizations, funders and policymakers learn from this initiative? Based on findings, we offer the following five considerations. Each includes action items and practical examples derived from the U-46 experience. While the specifics of the district's instructional and systems alignment are significant, it is the development of an underlying culture that has allowed U-46 to leverage crisis to initiate reform and achieve early wins. The most powerful lessons learned relate to the role of a values-driven culture of vision, equity, ownership, involvement and continuous improvement in the development of an aligned instructional system that will translate district reform to classroom achievement.

### *1. Teacher Ownership of an Instructionally Aligned System*

- A. Involve Teachers.** Engage teachers directly in developing a guiding framework for instructional alignment. Structure multiple, ongoing opportunities for teacher input. Convene retreats for extended teacher engagement. Schedule sessions in which central office staff engage with teachers in their schools to get feedback. Central office staff need to prioritize and proactively create the mechanisms for teacher engagement or it won't happen.
- B. Designate a Point-Person.** Decide who in the central office is responsible for engaging the teacher voice in developing the aligned instructional framework. Communication is vital. Teachers need to know exactly where and how their feedback can reach the central office, and the responsible administrator needs to understand how vital it is to integrate teacher comments in a timely and thoughtful manner.
- C. Prototype.** Test a draft framework with a small group of schools and learn from their feedback to make improvements. To select the schools for the prototype, apply change management criteria such as readiness and requirement of resources. A phased implementation cultivates teacher appetite for change, reduces resistance

and provides additional opportunities to improve before going system-wide.

### **D. Provide Tools and Support for Teacher**

**Implementation.** Ensure that teachers have all the resources they need, as well as professional development to ensure success. Provide instructional materials that are aligned with standards and provide ample opportunities to differentiate instruction according to student need. Give teachers assessments that yield early, diagnostic information on their students so they can tailor instruction. Provide teachers with professional development in both the aligned instructional framework and new materials or tools. If the district supports implementation of instructional alignment, the change will feel more like an effort to meet teacher and student needs rather than "one more thing" teachers are asked to do. Support at the start can also lead to early student achievement gains which, in turn, build momentum behind the change effort.

### *2. Broad-Based, Visionary Leadership Focused on Equity*

- A. Develop a Shared Vision.** Engage each of the three, key guiding parties – superintendent, teachers association and school board – early in the change process. Take time and plan opportunities for leaders in all three camps to build relationships and think big. The most important part in building a skyscraper is getting the plan and foundation straight; investing in relationships and a shared vision among superintendent, board and union rapidly accelerates the actual implementation of reforms.
- B. Focus on Equity.** Get clear that the district's goal is to support every child in graduating with expanded life opportunities. This requires the provision of more effort and resources where students have more needs. Use demographic and student achievement data to make sure that all leaders have an accurate and up-to-date understanding of student need. Good information helps to cultivate a sense of urgency around the goal of

helping all children reach grade-level or above while closing all achievement gaps.

- C. Put it in Writing.** Write a clear, brief guiding document outlining the district's vision. Keep it simple; a one-page document is immediately accessible. When the vision is clearly communicated, it builds community, serving as a "Mother Ship" guide that helps all involved parties – teachers, parents, site-based administrators, district administrators, etc. – see where they fit into the whole.
- D. Communicate the Vision.** Make sure all stakeholders, both inside and outside the district, have a variety of opportunities and forums to access and understand the vision. Use multiple methods: put the guiding document up on the website; make a brief video communicating strengths, priorities and next steps for the district; create a new equity-focused district motto. Communication helps the system shift away from determining priorities based on influential individuals or groups, historic patterns or narrow interpretations of categorical funding, to determining priorities based on a unified commitment to equity.
- E. Use the Vision.** The district's vision needs to focus action, providing alignment with student need. Use it to focus board meetings, making sure items on the agenda clearly stem from and support the vision. Use it to set the superintendent's goals or guide decisions on resource allocations. Connect school improvement plans to the district vision, helping all elements of the system stay focused on what matters most.

### ***3. An Integrated, Collaborative and Responsive Central Office***

- A. Focus on How the Parts Make the Whole.** A high-functioning system doesn't just work at making individual departments or schools high-performing; it focuses on how all pieces in the system work together most effectively. Typically, no one within the central office feels responsibility for this except the superintendent. To prioritize intentional systems thinking, assign individuals or teams to be responsible for system integration, how all the parts fit into the whole. A special projects person on the cabinet whose sole charge is integration helps a system take advantage of opportunities and not miss gaps.
- B. Integrate Structures.** Identify where departments or individuals need to work together, tear down the barriers

and create bridges. Ensure that all central office people who are planning and making decisions about curriculum, professional development and resource allocation are making those decisions together, with consistency and frequency. Make sure departments such as Special Education and English Language Learners are at the table. If all elementary schools need to be in conversation, don't separate them into four different divisions – bring them all under one. Structures with cross-boundary or cross-role groupings make alignment and interdependence the default.

- C. Bring Outside Voices In.** Structure positions and teams that ensure school and community voices are heard within the central office. Conceive of central office walls as permeable. Consider a project team in which strong teacher and community leaders are brought into the central office in a formal capacity to work on a specific issue. School-based or community members with official district roles act as liaisons, creating bridges between the central office and its clients. If stakeholders know their concerns are being addressed through central office structures, district initiatives will have more authenticity and credibility and encounter less resistance.
- D. Design for Flexibility.** Because needs are always changing, central office roles and teams need to be intentionally flexible. To jump-start an initiative, consider forming a temporary team as a catalyst. Leaders need to be willing to downsize or reconfigure central office roles and structures to focus on student need. Intentional flexibility combats the torpor and rigidity found in some district offices and enables momentum and action.

### ***4. Equity not Equality: Resources Allocated According to Student Need***

- A. Get Clear on Numbers.** The first step in intentional resource allocation is gaining an accurate understanding of the current district context. This starts with clear accounting – what money is currently spent where? It also means looking at detailed information on academic achievement outcomes and demographic data, such as participation in Free or Reduced Priced Lunch, to identify those schools in greatest need of support.
- B. Prioritize and Budget Based on Need.** Determine student priorities and build a budget based on them. Develop a process to prioritize resource allocation; schools can be ranked from high to low need or divided into tiers to

ensure funding allocations are tailored to need. Use the district's vision to guide the budgeting process to ensure that all parties understand both the big picture and the intentionality behind a shift toward equity.

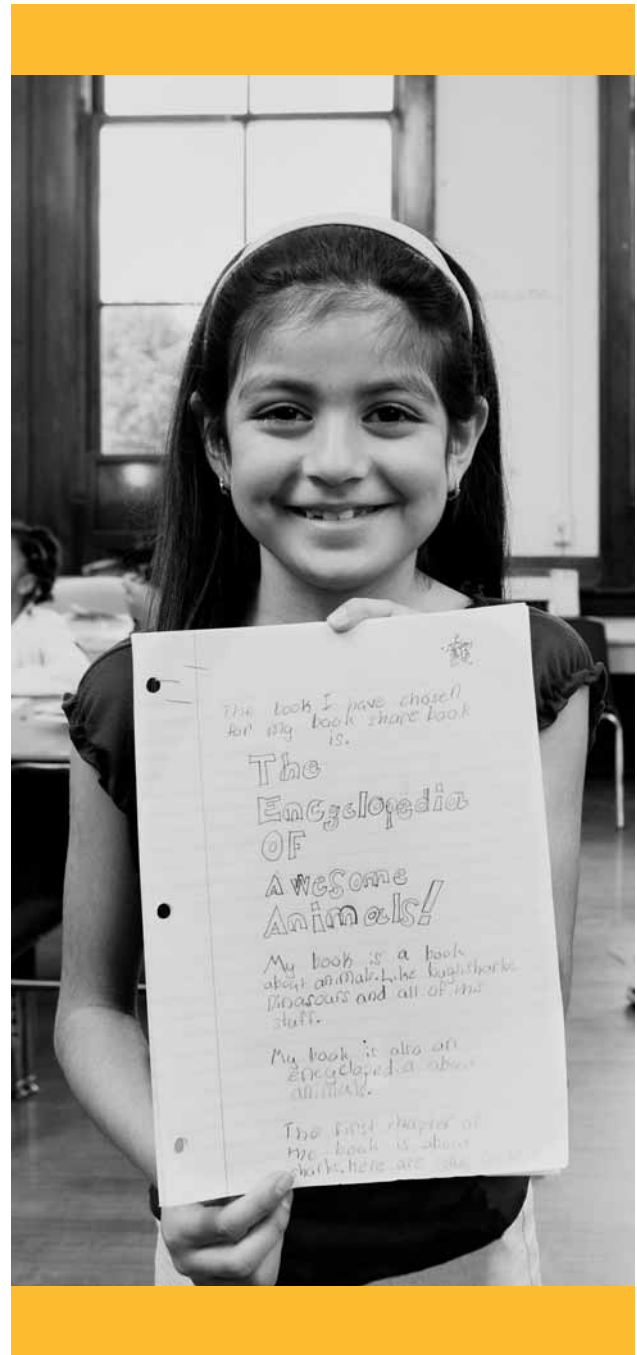
**C. Be Creative with Resources.** There are many ways, big and small, to put money where it's needed; find as many ways as you can. In high-need schools, provide free breakfasts or make an extra effort to ensure that facilities are clean and welcoming. Reduce class size in schools or classes with high-need students. Give teachers working with challenging populations more support through professional development or curricular materials. Resourcing according to need doesn't necessitate an immediate overturning of the apple cart; lots of small changes can begin a larger-scale shift toward equity.

## 5. Critical Friends and Continual Improvement

**A. Use Critical Friends.** Bring in outside experts to analyze strengths and opportunities for growth and provide recommendations on next steps based on their knowledge of successful practices in the field. Conduct departmental audits and go beyond the scope of tracking expenditures or cost effectiveness to benchmark against best practices in the field. Build in audits every few years so that they are an ongoing process, feeding continual improvement. Engage consultants and coaches to work with individuals or teams. External viewpoints engaged at all levels of the system can serve as catalysts, providing objective feedback on how to improve.

**B. Develop a Feedback/Improvement Process.** Create processes to reflect, respond and act on critical friends' advice and recommendations. After an audit, build in time for staff to analyze recommendations, decide how to implement changes and develop their own action plan. Critical friends are only helpful if changes ensue; the central office needs to set up the processes to guide and monitor continual improvement.

**C. Promote Transparency.** Communicate information on systems gaps, recommended next steps and progress toward goals to all stakeholders. After audits, structure time for department heads to come before the board and the public to discuss findings and next steps. Post audit findings and recommendations on the district's website. It might be counter-cultural, but it builds trust and generates momentum behind difficult changes.



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# Appendix A

The framework below has been designed by the Stupski Foundation as a guide to the critical components of a Comprehensive Aligned Instructional System.

