



# Big Ideas and Encouraging Gains



One school district has had the same superintendent for more than three decades. In another, the superintendent is just finishing his first year.

One district has doubled the number of graduates eligible for admission to the state's public universities. Another district partners with community organizations and city agencies to ensure students at all grade levels get the wraparound supports they need to thrive in the classroom.

Some districts are empowering principals with more autonomy. Many are more proactively tapping into the know-how of their most effective teachers.

Different priorities. Different stories. In *Districts Rising*, we tell the stories of 10 school districts, and their efforts to raise student achievement and prepare students for college and career. Big challenges remain, but these 10 districts can offer advice, strategies and encouragement to others.

## 10 Districts, 10 Themes

The most important lesson of *Districts Rising* is this: When school districts commit to raising academic standards, improving educator effectiveness and turning around low-performing schools, their students benefit. The districts in this series differ in size, geography and student population, but they've used similar strategies to address common challenges.

### 1. Prioritize high-quality curriculum in *all* classrooms.

[D.C. Public Schools](#) developed new curricula and instructional materials aligned to Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and in 2015 rolled out Cornerstones, a set of selected rigorous and engaging lessons in all grades and subjects. All D.C. students will experience Cornerstones, regardless of where they attend school. Meanwhile, rather than wait for textbook publishers to align the curriculum to CCSS, teacher leaders in [Santa Ana Unified School District](#) in California and [Springdale Public Schools](#) in Arkansas developed their own.

### 2. Provide teachers with high-quality, content-specific feedback and coaching that improves their instruction.

In Texas's [Aldine Independent School District](#), veteran teachers in core subjects demonstrate classroom strategies for their peers, and help them analyze student data. Next year, D.C. teachers will meet weekly with small groups of their peers and an instructional coach to discuss lesson plans, instructional strategies and student data. The new superintendent of [Boston Public Schools](#) has taken steps to transform adult learning by building the capacity of principals to facilitate school-based Instructional Leadership Teams.

## Where are districts on the rise?



In *Districts Rising*, we examined the strategies and programs ten school districts are using to improve teaching and learning. We also looked for evidence of student achievement gains on state or national standardized tests, college readiness measures, graduation rates, and college matriculation and persistence rates. The complete set of briefs is available at Education First's online [Resource Library](#).

### 3. Give principals autonomy over staffing decisions.

Principals can't be effective instructional leaders if all staffing decisions are determined by "last-in, first-out" rules. In [Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#), principals base staffing decisions on effectiveness and fit, rather than seniority. Meanwhile, principals at high-needs schools in [Washoe County School District](#) get the first pick of teacher applicants, and do not have to hire teachers who have been excessed from other schools.

### 4. Elevate meaningful teacher leadership opportunities.

With the right leadership opportunities, school districts can expand the influence of effective teachers without removing them from the classroom. [Indianapolis Public Schools](#)

negotiated teacher leadership opportunities into the teacher contract and partnered with Teach Plus to provide teachers with training in key policy and practice areas. To the east, [New Haven Public Schools](#) secured a \$53 million Teacher Incentive Fund grant from the federal government to fund its teacher leadership efforts. Teacher leaders mentor their peers, write new CCSS-aligned curriculum and tutor struggling students.

**5. Engage teachers unions in the design and implementation of new policies.**

In New Haven, district leaders and the teachers union co-created a new teacher evaluation and support system, and union leaders continue to work closely with the district to improve professional learning and leadership opportunities for teachers. And after the Cleveland school district adopted CCSS, the local teachers union received a grant from the American Federation of Teachers to create standards-aligned model lesson plans.

**6. Get actionable student data in the hands of educators.**

Every [Cincinnati](#) public school has a dedicated room where teachers, instructional coaches and principals meet to analyze student data. Teachers and principals in Washoe County use student enrollment data, test scores, SEL indicators and the district’s innovative early-warning risk index to plan home visits, discuss classroom interventions and determine whether students are on track to graduation.

**7. Use technology to engage students and help teachers deliver more effective instruction.**

Santa Ana partnered with [Gooru](#), a Silicon Valley-based organization, to develop a website that hosts instructional materials created by district teachers. Springdale uses technology to help teachers deliver personalized instruction, monitor student performance and share information. Students in both these districts use technology (including student cell phones) to access online resources, conduct research and collaborate on class projects.

**8. Create a portfolio of schools that gives students and families choices and spurs innovation.**

One size doesn’t fit all, and many school districts meet the needs of students and families by creating a portfolio of high-quality, autonomous schools. Schools in Indianapolis’ Innovation Network are managed by outside partners and have complete autonomy, and even traditional schools in the district have autonomy to hire staff and spend Title I funds. Cleveland is expanding the number of high-quality schools—including public charter schools—and encouraging innovations—such as extended learning time and technology-based instruction—that can be scaled-up throughout the district.

**9. Build broad coalitions of stakeholders—non-profits, businesses, higher education and even public charter schools—to implement and sustain reforms.**

Aldine and Indianapolis collaborate with public charter schools to expand students’ access to high-quality schools. In New Haven, district leaders work with local universities to ensure graduates are ready for college, and with the city and local non-profits to provide students with wraparound services such as health care and counseling.

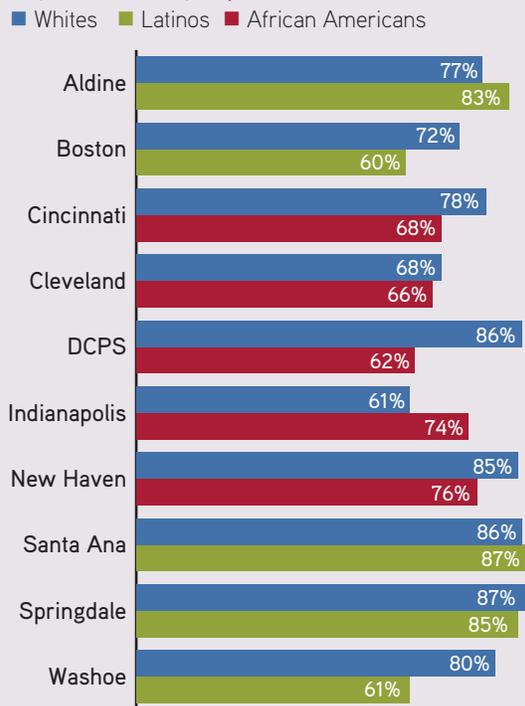
**10. Articulate a vision for change and student achievement that can endure leadership transitions.** The average tenure of superintendents in urban school districts is [just over three years](#), which makes it challenging for districts to sustain momentum. Washoe County, Boston and Cleveland have developed strategic plans with clear goals for raising student achievement to ensure leadership transitions do not impede their progress.

## Confronting the Challenges Ahead

Graduation rates in Boston, Cleveland, D.C., Indianapolis, New Haven, Springdale, Santa Ana and Washoe mirror the national trend. However, even with graduation rates at historic highs, many districts are struggling to narrow graduation gaps between white students and African American and Latino students. In Indianapolis and Cincinnati, graduation gaps have actually grown since 2010. In D.C., Boston, New Haven and Washoe County, graduation rate gaps have narrowed, but remain unacceptably high. There are bright spots: Springdale, Santa Ana, Aldine and Cleveland have successfully narrowed graduation rate gaps between white students and students of color.

### Even with graduation rates at historic highs, many districts struggle to narrow achievement gaps

Comparing 2014 graduation rates of white students and the largest racial subgroup



Sources: Aldine, Boston, Cincinnati, Cleveland, DCPS, Indianapolis, New Haven, Santa Ana, Springdale, Washoe

These districts are on the right trajectory, but to keep rising, they must pursue the strategies in this brief that are improving student achievement, while attending to persistent achievement gaps that limit opportunities for students of color and students living in poverty.



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Photo courtesy of District of Columbia Public Schools