



2008 Award Recipient

Iredell-Statesville Schools

Iredell-Statesville Schools (I-SS) is a K–12 public school system located in southwestern North Carolina within a diverse community and economy. To meet the needs of its 20,900 students, I-SS offers a variety of educational programs delivered in heterogeneously grouped classrooms, two at-risk/behavior schools, and virtual curriculum and early college settings. The system also offers before- and after-school programs, short-term alternative site placement programs, and dual enrollment courses in partnership with a local community college. I-SS, which segments its 3,416 employees as certified, classified, and administrative staff, considers them to be “knowledge assets in achieving organizational learning and improvement.”

Transforming a Culture

With a new vision to “improve student learning by igniting a passion for learning,” I-SS senior leaders are moving the district from a “focus on teaching” to a “focus on learning.” The Superintendent of Schools and the Senior Leadership Team use the I-SS Performance Excellence Model as the management approach to share and accomplish the district’s vision. Their strategic plan is linked to the North Carolina State Board of Education Strategic Priorities: *high student performance; healthy, safe, orderly, and caring schools; quality teachers, administrators, and staff; strong family-community-business support; and effective-efficient operations.* These five

Highlights

- Cohort graduation rates (the percentage of ninth-grade students who graduate from high school four years later) increased steadily from 64 percent in 2002–2003 to 80.7 percent in 2007–2008.
- At 96.03 percent, the system’s attendance rate is higher than that of another local district, its 20 peer districts, area charter schools, and the state overall (ranking third out of 115 school districts in 2006–2007).
- I-SS started the last two years with 100 percent of staff positions filled, a teacher turnover rate below the state average, and waiting lists for most job openings.
- Although its per-pupil operations expenditures are among the lowest in North Carolina, I-SS is currently ranked academically in the state’s top 10 school systems. Additionally, I-SS SAT scores rose steadily from 991 (2002–2003) to 1056 (2007–2008) with the state rank rising from 57th (out of 115 school districts) in 2003 to seventh in 2008.

priority goal areas are aligned with division-, department-, and school-improvement plans to provide clear direction for the system.

Meeting the Goals

To fulfill its mission of realizing *high student performance* and long-term student success, I-SS uses its Model to Raise Achievement and Close Gaps (RACG). In the classroom, five key learning questions form the basis for action by focusing discussion and analysis on what students should know and be able to do: (1) “What do students need to know?” (2) “How will they learn it?” (3) “How will we know they have learned it?” (4) “What will we do if they have not learned it?” and (5) “What will we do if they already know it?”

When student performance does not meet targets, the gap is addressed through the systematic use of a Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle to identify and implement improvements. Best practices are shared throughout the district, departments, and schools. To support RACG, both administrative and site-based teams receive extensive analysis of student achievement data in midyear and end-of-year organizational reviews.

The system’s results illustrate the impact of its focused efforts to improve student achievement. For example:

- I-SS has achieved 94 percent of its Adequate Yearly Progress goals and outperforms peer districts and the state in this No Child Left Behind measure.



- Cohort graduation rates (the percentage of ninth-grade students who graduate from high school four years later) increased steadily from 64 percent in 2002-2003 to 80.7 percent in 2007-2008.

- In the past five years, the system's composite SAT scores have improved by over 60 points to 1056, with its current performance level ranking seventh in the state.

- The End-of-Grade (EOG) Reading Composite improved from 75 percent of students proficient in 2000-2001 to 90.6 percent proficiency in 2006-2007. Also, I-SS closed the EOG reading proficiency gap between African-American children and all students from 23 percent to 12.3 percent.

As one approach to building *healthy, safe, orderly, and caring schools*, an I-SS committee in 2003-2004 identified alternative schools, alternative learning processes, and student attendance as high priorities for improvement that could impact dropout rates. As a result of a district PDSA on alternative learning programs, the structure of alternative learning processes changed significantly. Several innovative programs were added including an out-of-school suspension-reporting center, an in-school credit recovery program, an attendance recovery program, virtual courses, virtual credit recovery courses, summer credit recovery programs, and Day Treatment and Community Classrooms provided by a strategic partnership. A Differentiated Diploma Program was targeted at preventing juniors and seniors from dropping out of school. As a result:

- I-SS has the lowest dropout rate (3.5 percent) for students in grades 9-12 in its history.

- At 96.03 percent, the system's attendance rate is higher than that of another local district, its 20 peer districts, area charter schools, and the state overall (ranking third out of 115 school districts in 2006-2007).

- Class size in core subject areas decreased from 21.8 students in 2001-2002 to 18.6 in 2007-2008.

As a result of Baldrige process feedback, I-SS aligned school-specific Safe School Plans to the crisis management phases identified by the National Incident Management System. The now more-comprehensive Safe School Plans address a broader range of events and hazards, including severe weather, fire, crime/violence, transportation, medical/public health, and hazardous materials.

Effective training and mentoring approaches ensure that the system has *quality teachers, administrators, and staff* to increase student achievement and close gaps. Professional Learning Communities provide classroom teachers with face-to-face and virtual opportunities to improve student learning and share best practices across grade levels and departments. Instructional Facilitators support these communities by providing ongoing professional development through coaching, modeling, and mentoring. Throughout I-SS, teaching assistants are trained alongside teachers and staff. Beyond the classroom, a Leadership Academy trains administrators in the Performance Excellence Model.

A recruitment program recently increased both the number of applicants and the minority workforce at I-SS.

Incentives to recruit and retain teachers for math, science, and exceptional-children instruction and at-risk schools include signing bonuses, moving allowances, at-risk supplements, and improvement bonuses. I-SS started the last two years with 100 percent of staff positions filled, a teacher turnover rate below the state average, and waiting lists for most job openings. According to No Child Left Behind standards, nearly 95 percent of the system's teachers are highly qualified, having increased from 84 percent over the last five years.

I-SS depends on *strong family, community, and business support* from active partners—including suppliers, community organizations, parents, and volunteers—to achieve its goals. They participate on school and district improvement teams, advisory committees, and specific task forces, working side-by-side with staff on school initiatives. I-SS volunteers contributed nearly 147,000 hours serving in roles such as mentors, tutors, lunch buddies, and clerical/classroom support for staff.

I-SS partners with a community college and another school district to offer students dual-enrollment opportunities in an early college setting. I-SS is working with the Statesville City Council and the Blumenthal Center for Performing Arts to establish a performance and fine arts magnet school and with the Boys and Girls Club to provide after-school enrichment activities for at-risk students. A partnership with the YMCA affords second graders the opportunity to attend regular swim lessons. A strategy to involve key partners in obtaining grants to impact strategic goals has resulted in more than \$8 million in grants being awarded in the last three years.

Achieving and maintaining *effective and efficient operations* throughout the system has been another key element in I-SS's success. Although its per-pupil operations expenditures are among the lowest in North Carolina, I-SS is currently ranked academically in the state's top 10 school systems. Additionally, I-SS student achievement rose from a ranking of 55th out of 115 North Carolina school districts in 2003 to ninth in 2008.

With competing priorities, I-SS's cost containment and wise allocation of the annual budget of \$160 million are essential to ensure that student and stakeholder needs are met. Overall cost minimization is considered in the design and monitoring of key work processes. For example, since the late 1990s, all elementary schools have been built on the same "green" school (environmentally sound) floor plan, facilitating healthy and responsible environments for learning. A systematic cost avoidance system provides capital to schools that are able to reduce energy consumption—saving more than \$4 million in its four years of existence.

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