Organizational Goals

Organizational goals help us focus and filter our learning on the system's highest priorities. In this way, professional development and organizational improvement are integrally related. The growth of professionals can contribute to the organization as a whole, but individual growth without the organizational context is insufficient and inefficient in helping the organization to achieve its strategic goals. In the absence of organizational direction (vision and goals), the impact of professional development becomes a matter of luck rather than the result of a deliberate allocation of resources.

When we view this relationship from the opposite perspective, we see an equally strong case for linking the two. Imagine a district or school strategy for improvement that ignores the need to develop the people who will be responsible for implementing the improvements. It is hard to divorce the two, to imagine one without the other—especially in an educational environment where the organization is almost synonymous with its people.

The Kimberly Area School District in Kimberly, Wisconsin, provides a dramatic example of how a district-wide vision, accompanied by a clear set of SMART goals, not only shaped professional development practices, but ultimately redefined the role of professional development as *the* key strategic process for improving student results. In Kimberly, every decision is based on the pursuit of goals; everything they do to achieve their goals is considered professional development.

In the mid 1990s, the board, central administration, and principals published a strategic plan for the district that they called "Mission Possible: Raise Student Achievement." The plan included a goal that by the 2002–2003 school year at least 90% of students would be proficient or advanced readers as assessed by the Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test (WRCT). The leaders believed strongly that if children could read and read well, the scores on other measures of achievement in other areas of learning would also dramatically improve.

At the time that the plan was created, the average proficiency rate for young readers in Kimberly was at 61%—below the state average—on the WRCT and between 40% and 50% on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exams (WKCE). The district's goal of 90% seemed unattainable and unrealistic to those deep inside the organization. In fact, there were accusations that it would "hurt kids"; many felt that becoming so narrowly focused on reading meant that the social, emotional, artistic, physical, and broader knowledge-based needs of students would be ignored. Furthermore, it was feared that such dramatic gains could only be accomplished if teachers did nothing but teach to the test.

Indeed, this goal would be impossible if the district had not supported a fundamental change in how teachers taught and how students learned. In particular, the plan for achieving this lofty goal needed to include a change in how professional development was delivered, how classrooms were resourced, what content was taught, and ultimately, what got removed from the already overfilled plates of the staff.

The graph in figure 5.1 illustrates Kimberly's 7-year journey. Based on the reading performance of third graders as measured by the WCRT, Mission Possible was indeed possible**!** Kimberly was the only district to improve its rank on all three subtests in every year at every grade level tested. As a result, based on a formula that included a variety of criteria, Kimberly ranked first among all Wisconsin districts as the most "improving" school district. It moved from the bottom half of the districts in 1998–1999 to the top 20% in the state in 2003–2004.

Recall that one of the fears of staff was that if the district were to take such a narrow approach in targeting resources and staff development on literacy, other areas of learning would be compromised. In direct opposition, the district's leadership believed that by focusing on reading, other areas would benefit. A look at a recent study conducted by the Wisconsin Taxpayer's Alliance (2004) shows how Kimberly fared across the board (figure 5.2, page 124).

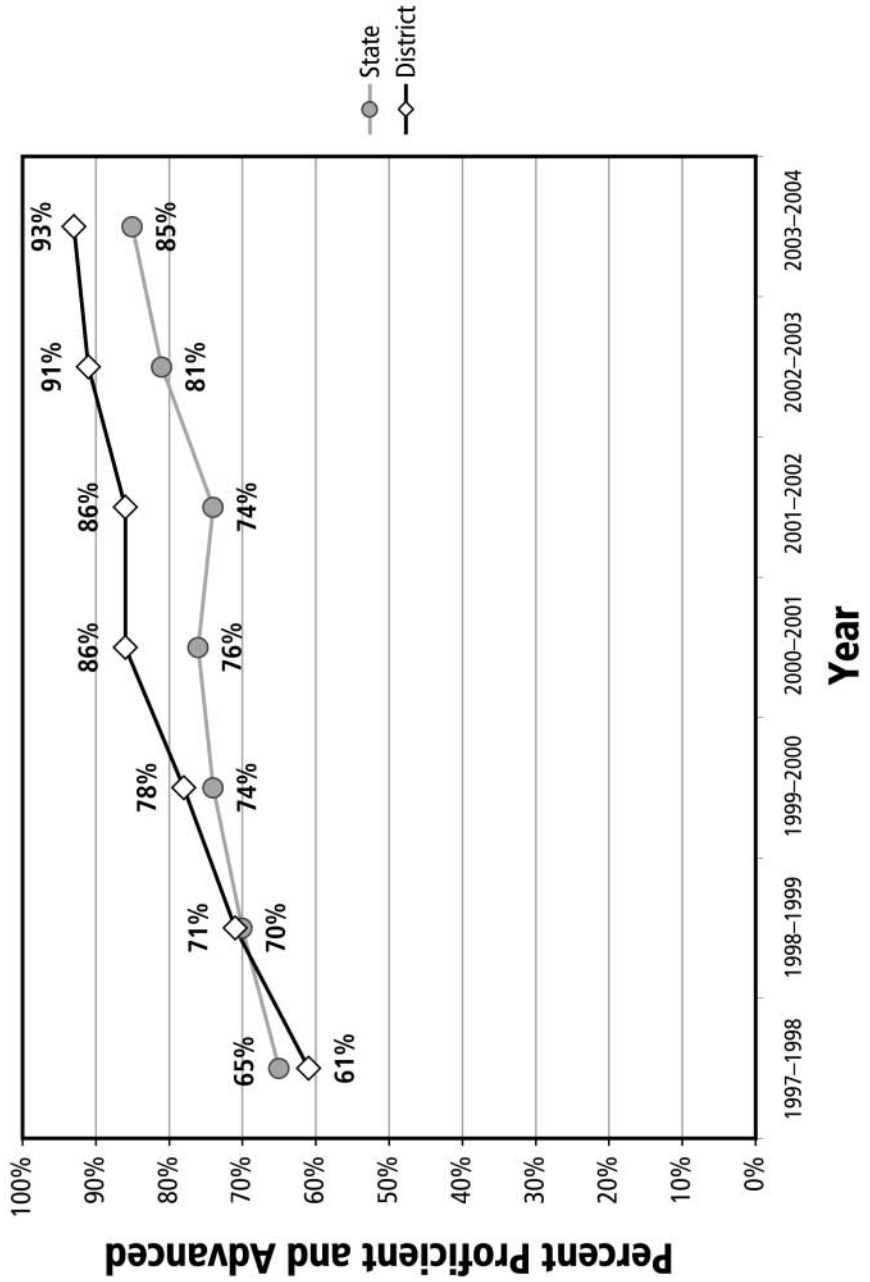

Figure 5.1: Kimberly, Wisconsin, Reading Comprehension Test—7-Year Comparison.
Percent proficient and advanced.

Subject	School Year					
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Reading	41	51	71	72	80	81
Math	52	74	77	81	93	97
Language Arts	27	57	65	83	85	85

Figure 5.2: Kimberly Fourth-Grade Percentiles

Though this chart depicts only the fourth-grade percentiles for the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE), the same trend is true for all subjects at the eighth- and tenth-grade levels as well (figure 5.3). Student performance as measured by the WKCE started at or below the state average and moved to well above the state average in every content area and at every grade. Kimberly was recognized by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance as "a high-achieving, low-spending" district, based on analysis of eighth- and tenth-grade student performance on the WKCE.

When asked, "How did you do this," the answer was swift and certain. According to Mary Bowen-Eggebraaten, the district's assistant superintendent for learning, "The entire system became a learning organization focused on classroom implementation of instructional best practices." Essentially, she meant that everything was at stake.

How They Did It

Kimberly began by focusing their efforts in the area of early literacy, targeting all elementary staff development and program resources to the implementation of best practices in reading assessment and instruction. In collaboration with Viterbo University, Kimberly's leadership team designed and delivered a graduate program focused on classroom implementation of best practices in teaching for learning. The courses were taught by principals, central office administrators, and eventually by teacher leaders.

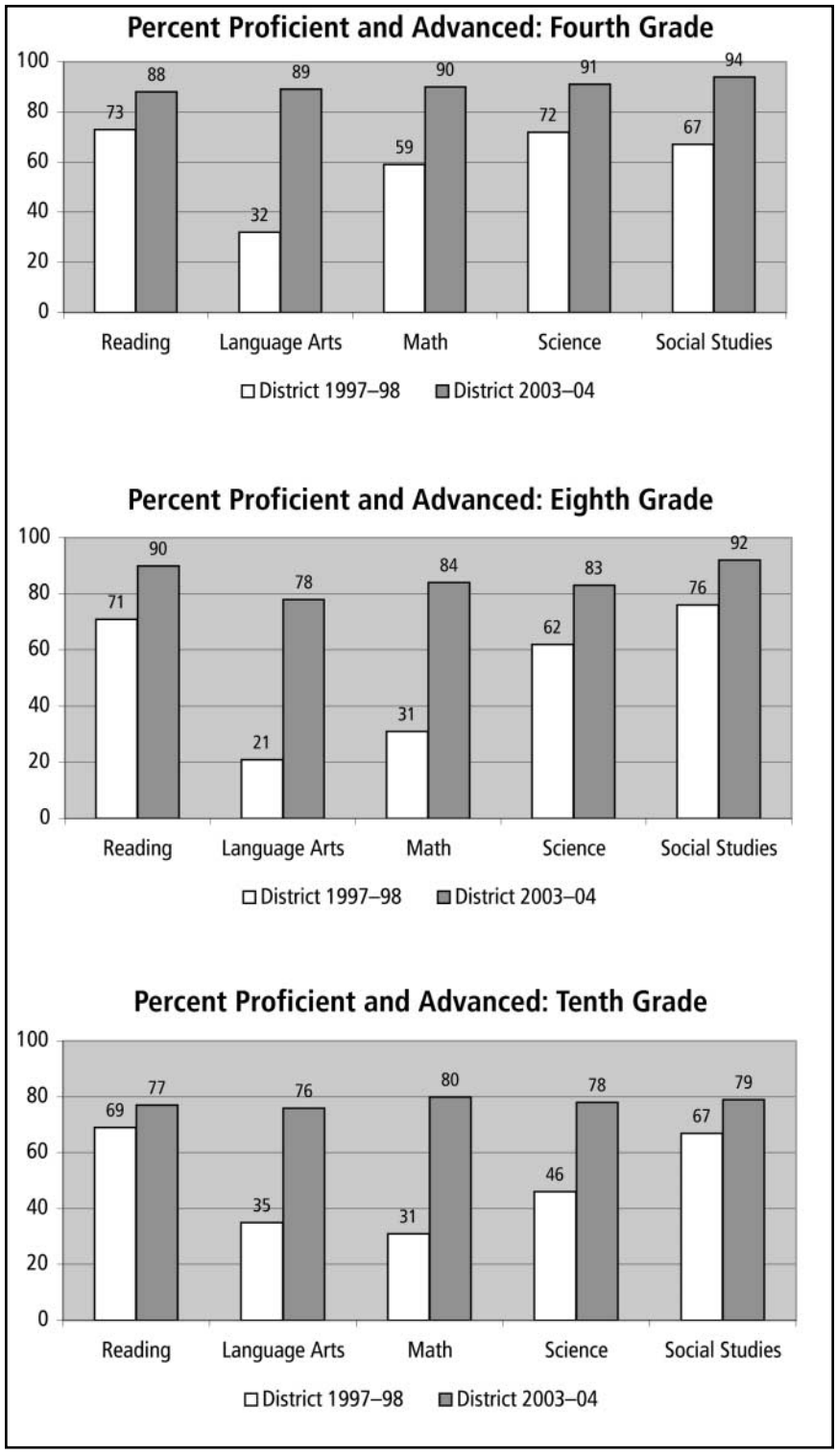

Figure 5.3: Kimberly, Wisconsin, WKCE 7-Year Comparisons for Fourth, Eighth, and Tenth Grades.

The development model at the elementary level includes ongoing collegial learning teams where teachers regularly work and learn together, sharing their strategies and examining their data. One of the formal graduate courses embedded in this model begins in August with a 2-day intensive training session on designing and implementing standards-based lessons. The outcome of this session is a lesson that is implemented within the first week of school. Following the implementation, a teacher has time to reflect on student learning from the lesson and share insights with the administrative supervisor, who has been trained as a standards-based learning coach. In phase two, a new standards-based lesson is developed and then implemented while a trained coach observes. The two reflect together and discuss teacher learning and improvements. This cycle is repeated throughout the year.

Another approach creates a learning laboratory where children participate in a summer session designed to give teachers a safe environment in which to receive valuable feedback on implementation strategies. In these sessions, the teacher-student ratio is two to one—two teachers for every one child. One teacher teaches while another teacher observes. Then, in a fashion similar to Japanese lesson study (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998; Watanabe, 2002), they come together to dialogue about what worked, what did not work, and what could be done differently to achieve maximum results. Then the teachers rotate roles so that both have the opportunity to teach, to observe, and to give and receive descriptive feedback.

At the middle school, every teacher participates as a member of a "tuning protocol" team, "a [professional development] process through which educators can hone their skills by examining student work in a supportive, problem-solving group" (Easton, 2002, p. 28). In Kimberly, the process was designed by and is led by teacher leaders. It is cross-disciplinary, happens during the day, and is based on researched best practices in assessment for learning.

The Importance of Leadership

In a system, it is not enough to change the behaviors of one part of the organization—in this case, the teachers. It is the very nature of systems that all of the individuals and their respective roles are symbiotic and as such must realign in support of the change effort. Thus, Kimberly also needed to change how leadership occurred so that there were systematic and informed support mechanisms in place for teachers to successfully implement what they were learning. "It's all about leadership," says Bowen-Eggebraaten. "Leadership is no longer a 'position' assigned to a certain group of individuals; it is the responsibility of everyone in the organization. All individuals are expected to take responsibility for improving student learning results. When a system is accountable for results, it translates into shared leadership." This is precisely what Lambert (1998) refers to as leadership capacity, "skillful, broad-based involvement in the work of leadership" (p. 3).