What is it that makes some English programs particularly successful and others less so? That is the question that guided a research study I recently completed at the Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA). My research team and I studied schools that, like so many today, are trying to improve student performance overall, including performance on high-stakes tests. We focused on schools in California, Florida, New York, and Texas, four states with very diverse student populations and different testing demands. First we asked educators from the state education departments; NCTE; other national, state, and local teacher organizations and groups; teacher educators; and administrators to recommend schools and teachers who had a reputation for excellence in English instruction. When we looked more closely at the schools that were recommended, we found an important difference: In some of the schools, students did much better on state English tests than students in other schools with comparable student populations; in other schools, students performed more like their peers in similar schools serving similar student populations. We wanted to understand why. What was contributing to the difference? And so, in our study we compared English programs in schools that were “Beating the Odds” (that is, whose students were performing unusually well on locally important tests when compared with students in schools serving similar populations) with English programs whose students were performing more typically (again, compared with schools serving similar populations).

There were two parts to the research. First, we wanted to learn about the professional lives of the teachers in both sets of schools, to see if there were differences in the experiences of teachers in the higher performing versus more typically performing schools. For this we studied the various professional communities of teachers, both locally and at greater distance. We were interested in learning about the intellectual and working environment provided by the district, school, and department; the cross-department relations; and the formal and informal out-of-school experiences that constituted the teachers’ professional environments. Second, we wanted to study the features of instruction that support student learning, including the curriculum as conceived and developed as well as the curriculum as enacted in English class, the instructional approaches and activities, and the various formal and informal modes of assessment. Here we were interested in understanding what gets taught and what gets learned, and the kinds of attention given to helping students gain both knowledge and skill in reading, writing, literature, and English language.

In each school, we followed the teachers’ professional lives and classroom experiences across two years, with two classes of students each. In all we studied 25 schools, 44 teachers, and 86 classes. In 14 schools students were scoring higher, and in 11 schools results were more typical. Poverty levels ranged from 5 percent to 86 percent of the students on free or reduced lunch. Many schools had highly diverse student bodies.
Although the schools looked different, varied in location, economic, and family background, and were organized differently, there are certain features surrounding the teachers' professional experiences and students' learning experiences that permeate the English classes and highlight marked distinctions that are useful for the field to consider. These features are the focus of this article. I have selected for discussion five key findings, those I think will be most immediately helpful for English professionals to consider, particularly in light of the growing prominence of high-stakes testing across the United States.

Before I describe these features, there are a couple of issues about the overall school context worth noting. First is the importance of the English program itself as the nucleus of excellence. There were excellent teachers in all the schools we studied. However, it was the program, the compounded and connected experiences students could have across time and across classes, that contributed to the successes in the higher performing schools. Even the best of teachers in the typical schools could provide only isolated moments of excellence and joy in an otherwise disconnected series of English classes. Second, the teachers and administrators in the higher achieving schools chose to be responsive to the high-stakes tests. They knew the limitations of the tests but also acknowledged their importance in this era—to the parents, school administration, and students. They used the tests, and the entire standards movement of which the tests are a part, as an opportunity for professional growth and curriculum development, as a way to ensure that they provided the best English instruction—the kind that will help their students do well in their schoolwork, in life, and on high-stakes tests as well. It was the skills and knowledge that underlie all high literacy in any setting that they wanted to ensure their students learned, and they used the tests as one legitimate context in which this knowledge and these skills needed to be applied.

Following are five of the features that distinguish the schools that are improving their students' performance.

**A Proactive Focus on Knowledge and Skills**

Teachers and administrators set high goals for all students and use the high-stakes tests as ways to ensure that the skills and knowledge underlying high literacy are taught. They use their professional knowledge of research and successful practice to dissect locally important standards and high-stakes tests, making connections between these and their knowledge of what it takes to do well in school and in life. Then they inspect and reconfigure their curriculum to ensure that those overarching skills and knowledge permeate what gets taught. Although they know that the test results are only one indicator of a students' literacy achievement, they're aware the results are particularly important at this point, and they monitor results. From year to year they reinspect their curriculum goals in light of student performance (in class as well as on high-stakes and other tests) and fine tune both goals and instruction to align with student needs. When students are doing well, they up the ante. In comparison, professionals in the more typically performing schools focus on the surface features of the high-stakes tests rather than on the underlying skills and knowledge.

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The pervasive integration of attention to fundamental language skills into the curriculum seemed to make a difference in students' abilities to read, write, and use language well in a variety of situations, including testing.

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For example, one state had used a persuasive writing prompt on its eighth grade test for a few years. A more typically performing school in that state tried to raise scores by developing sample persuasive prompts for the eighth grade students to practice across the year and devised many lessons focusing on the structure and content of the persuasive essay. Practice abounded. During the first year of this plan, scores went up somewhat, and more so the second year. However, the third year the state changed its prompt to descriptive writing, and the scores plummeted. In comparison, after an-
alyzing the demands of the same high-stakes test, a neighboring school with a similar student population decided it was of critical importance that their students learn to "read" the social demands of writing prompts, to learn to judge from the prompt the mode of writing that was called for. They also devised a plan to ensure the teaching of the various modes, helping the students understand how structure, style, and word choice are dependent on purpose and audience. This plan involved curriculum refocusing across grades. While this school's scores went up the first and second years, they continued to increase during the third year, even after the prompt had changed. It was attention to the underlying literacy skills and knowledge rather than the surface features of the test that made a difference. “Test prep” is substantially different in the higher performing as compared with the more typical schools. It primarily involves integrating the skills and knowledge the students need to learn into the ongoing curriculum. In contrast, in the more typical schools “test prep” tends to be treated as separate from the curriculum. In these schools, separate “brush up” and “practice” materials were purchased and separate test prep lessons developed. They were presented during class time devoted expressly to test preparation. For example, in the class I mentioned above, test prep involved a lot of writing to persuasive prompts that were worded similarly to the test. In some more typically scoring schools, almost the entire semester in which the test was given, and sometimes much of the entire year, was devoted to test practice. In comparison, in the higher performing schools, persuasive writing, for example, was integrated into the ongoing curriculum and permeated the students’ day-to-day experiences in English. Although some separate time was spent helping the students become familiar with the form of the test, this tended to be done soon before the test was given. The pervasive integration of attention to fundamental language skills into the curriculum seemed to make a difference in students’ abilities to read, write, and use language well in a variety of situations, including testing.

A Shared Vision and Plan

All parts of the educational system coordinate efforts. For example, staff at district, school, and classroom levels work together not only to ensure that goals and guidelines are set and followed, but also to see to it that the curriculum and instructional practices echo, build upon, and complement one another across the school year and across the grades. In the higher performing English programs teachers work together to plan, develop, and carry out a coherent plan. They know what each other is doing and how the knowledge and skills taught at one grade or during one time of year connect with others; therefore, the teachers are able to make overt links for students across time, links that help them become aware of connections in their learning experiences. One teacher in a higher performing school, for example, said, “I know that last year you wrote persuasive essays. Remember when you wrote letters to the principal about changes you’d like in the lunch menu? Let’s talk about why that was a persuasive letter.” After the discussion she said, “Now, let me tell you about another kind of persuasive writing.” In comparison, in the more typically performing schools, the teachers tended to work alone, unaware of potential connections that could create coherence for their students. Due to a lack of sharing within the school, even excellent teachers who offered rich and exciting English experiences for their students offered isolated classes, moments of time. Because there was no overt continuity across the years for their students to experience and build upon, the test scores in their schools did not change.

Further, in the higher performing schools the supervisors tended to work along with the teachers to coordinate the curriculum and all student learning experiences across the grades and across subjects. As a community, the professionals strove to knit the curriculum together in ways they could understand and orchestrate and in ways their students could become aware of and understand. For example, many schools are offering a great deal of extra help for students to improve their literacy. In the higher performing schools, the work of summer school, remedial classes, extra help before and after school, and Saturday academies are all part of the shared school or district vision and plan, connected to what the students experience in their daily English course work. Teachers and supervisors meet and discuss what they are doing and how the students are doing, and they make connections that can add coherence to the students' day. In the more typically performing schools, in comparison, the students' school experiences are separate, fragmented. The teachers are unaware of potential connections, have little opportunity to work together to develop them, and thus have no way to help their students
To build networks of knowledge across the experiences that were devised to help them.

**A Variety of Approaches to Instruction**

Skills and content are taught in a variety of ways, both embedded in big ideas and targeted for special practice. Thus, the “parts-whole” and “in or out of context” arguments so vitriolic in our field have no place. Students work in small groups, as a whole class, and alone. What matters is that the activities are selected to provide students with “minds on” experiences that are engaging and challenging and that lead to new learnings. In the higher performing schools there are three approaches to instruction that teachers call upon in flexible ways, based on student needs: separated, simulated, and integrated. When teachers use a “separated” approach, they highlight a particular knowledge or skill that they want their students to notice, and they help them to understand its superficial features. They do this for a grammar rule, the definition of a particular literary device, the key parts of a persuasive essay, styles that pervade a particular literary era, or a particular literary theory. They use it when they want their students to focus on what an item looks like, means, or connotes. Separated activities are used to mark a particular item for students to use at other times. Sometimes these activities involve having students develop entries in their learning logs for future reference or do exercises of various sorts. When teachers use a “simulated” approach, they help their students focus on how a bit of knowledge or skill works, what underlies its use. The skills or knowledge are put to use in a new activity, but the activity is circumscribed, and the primary purpose is still to learn and practice the new skill. Here teachers involve their students in identifying, analyzing, and critiquing the persuasive aspects of a literary work or practicing persuasive writing on their own.

Separated and simulated approaches differ from an “integrated” approach in which students engage in such authentic activities as doing a school research project or engaging in research and writing about a civic problem. Here, to complete the activity, students need to use their knowledge and skills toward some larger end. If students experience difficulty, they can recall their past experiences, or refer to their logs, or the teacher might offer a separated or simulated activity to an individual or a group of students in ways that help them continue their broader activity with greater ease. In the higher performing schools, teachers draw on all three of these approaches as they seem appropriate and helpful. In comparison, in the more typical schools, one approach tends to dominate and the others to be neglected.

**A Focus on Generative Learning**

Teachers never stop teaching just because students have met particular achievement goals. Instead, they treat “getting it” as the groundwork from which to help their students reach deeper and more thoughtful understandings. Students are expected, as a matter of course, to go beyond analysis and critique to research or imagine possible applications, effects, or interpretations of new learnings. Here, literary concepts, reading and writing, links to science, history, and culture interconnect in highly literate ways.

For example, after Alicia’s class had read, analyzed, discussed, and wrote about *The Scarlet Letter*, they did research into the colonial era, the Puritans and their living conditions, and the social structures of the times. After discussing what they had learned from their research, they read pieces that focus on related themes such as scapegoating, sin, temptation, and Puritanism. “A Respectable Woman” by Kate Chopin, “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, and “For Each Ecstatic Moment” and “Time’s Lesson” by Emily Dickinson were among the works they read. The students discussed the works in literary circles, making comparisons and contrasts across them, including theme, style, language, characterization, authorial and social biases, and the relevance of differing interpretations across time and culture. They moved from comprehending and interpreting *The Scarlet Letter* to using it as a way into other works and then using other works to gain enriched understanding not merely of *The Scarlet Letter*, but of relations among literature, literacy, and life. In contrast, in the more typically performing schools, when the particular learning goals within a lesson or unit are reached, the students are moved on to another (often disconnected) lesson.

**Teachers Engaged as Knowledgeable Professionals**

Teachers are encouraged to keep up with new ideas in their fields as well as research on pedagogy and therefore are sought after for planning and decision-
making as well as implementing change. For example, teachers are on committees to interpret state or national standards, examine the various tests, revise the curriculum, write guidelines, interact with other teachers about what works for their students, help research and make decisions about change, and help decide what else needs to be done. They are a critical part of the network for programmatic reform. Because the teachers are treated as knowledgeable professionals, money is spent to continue their professional growth as well as to help them become better informed about options regarding their problems at hand. They become active participants in the growth and development of the instructional program. Their goal is to learn for action. As example, one English supervisor invited me to speak about my “Beating the Odds” studies to a district-wide committee of teachers who were investigating ways they could improve high-stakes test scores while still maintaining the best changes they had made in thought-provoking English instruction over the past ten or so years. I came prepared with lots of information but quickly learned that they had already read my papers on the center’s Web site (http://cela.albany.edu) and wanted to use my time with them for particular purposes that they had in mind. The next two hours involved joint discussion of their problems and ways in which my research could provide options for them to consider. In comparison, the more typically performing programs tend to be hierarchical, treating teachers’ purview as the classroom, responsible for their students and responsible to the district. Teachers are rarely involved in reviewing or planning change, and when they are it tends to be superficial, with final decisions made by administrators as opposed to a team of professionals.

Looking across the five features I’ve just discussed, we can see that, while professionals in the more typically scoring programs want their students to do better and most often do take action to improve the curriculum and instruction within their own classrooms, they lack the organized, highly informed, and participatory features that pervade the more successful programs. Sometimes one or some of the features are in place, but not all. However, when all the “Beating the Odds” features pervade the instructional environment, they add the comprehensiveness that school programs need to make a difference in helping all students acquire the language and literacy skills they need for school and life as well as high-stakes tests.

For Further Reading

One field researcher was assigned to each school, shadowing the teacher, observing the classes, and interviewing the students as well as other professionals with whom that teacher interacted. Detailed portraits of a number of the “Beating the Odds” schools have been written by the field researchers and published by CELA. These provide rich narratives of the ways in which excellence in English was attained in very different schools and environments. In addition to the case studies done by the field researchers, I carried out cross-school analyses of the features of teachers’ professional lives and features of instruction that differentiated the higher from more typically performing schools. All of these reports are available for downloading on the CELA Web site, or print copies can be ordered directly from CELA. For a publications list and order form, call 518-442-5026 or write CELA, School of Education B-9, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222.

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**Judith A. Langer** teaches at the University of Albany, SUNY, where she directs the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA).

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