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The Michigan Benchmarking Institute

A Service to Help Schools "In Need of Improvement" Identify Promising Practices in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

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Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services

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"Benchmarking"

Successful organizations continually search for new ideas and methods to improve performance. They actively compare themselves to other organizations to learn from their best practices. Benchmarking is the process many of them use to improve performance – it's a team research and data-driven process by which learning and innovation trigger fundamental breakthroughs in thinking and practice. As schools seek to achieve high standards, they can use this process.

- Sue Tucker, Massachusetts State Senator and
Author of ***Benchmarking: A Guide for Educators***

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Michigan Benchmarking Institute

The State has contracted Standard & Poor's (S&P) to develop and manage the Michigan Benchmarking Institute.

The Institute is taking place on a regional basis as a pilot program in the spring of 2005.

S&P is coordinating the Institute with:

- Michigan Department of Education
- Mich. Elementary & Middle School Principals Association
- Mich. Association of School Administrators
- Mich. Association of Intermediate School Administrators

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Purpose of the
Michigan Benchmarking Institute

The goal of the Benchmarking Institute is to help elementary and middle schools that have not made Adequate Yearly Progress improve student achievement in reading, writing, and math.

This goal is pursued by helping schools identify and replicate "promising practices" in curriculum, instruction and assessment.

The identification and replication of promising practices is known as a **benchmarking study**.

It is a form of "action research" in which one school collaborates with another, in order to share insights about "what works."

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Continuous Improvement Through Benchmarking Studies

To conduct a benchmarking study, a school that aspires to higher performance does the following:

- It compares itself to "Benchmark Schools" that have similar socio-economic challenges but higher performance levels.
- It partners with one or more Benchmark Schools to discover how they achieved their higher performance.
- It adapts or replicates the Benchmark Schools' most promising practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment to help raise its own performance.

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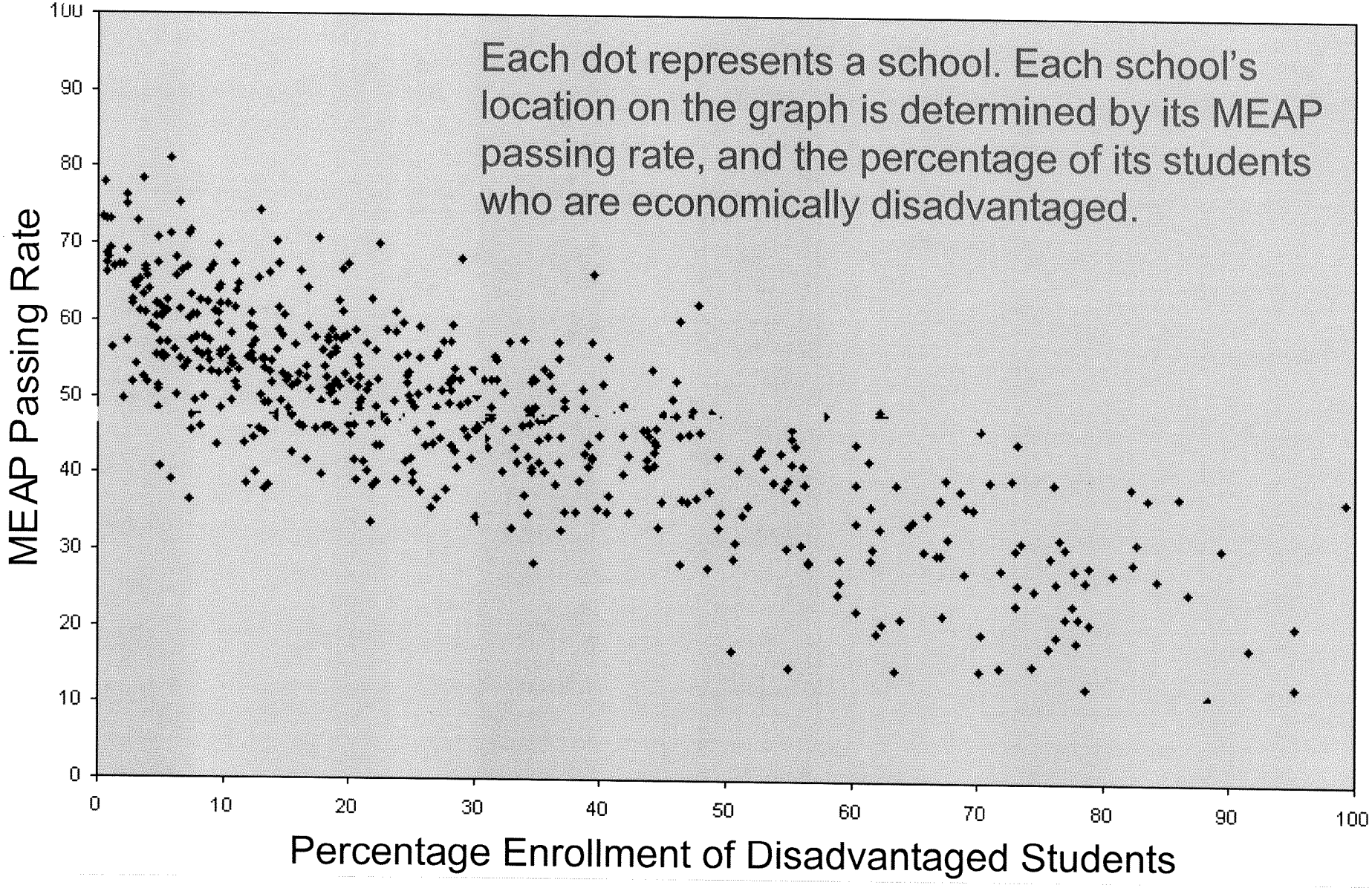
How S&P Identifies Michigan's Higher-Performing "Benchmark Schools"

"If two schools or districts have the same level of economically disadvantaged children but one outperforms the other, then we need to ask ourselves the tough questions. What are they doing differently? How can we raise scores in the lower-performing school or district?"

- Barbara Knuth, Past President
  Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals

Michigan Middle Schools:
The Relationship between Poverty and Test Performance



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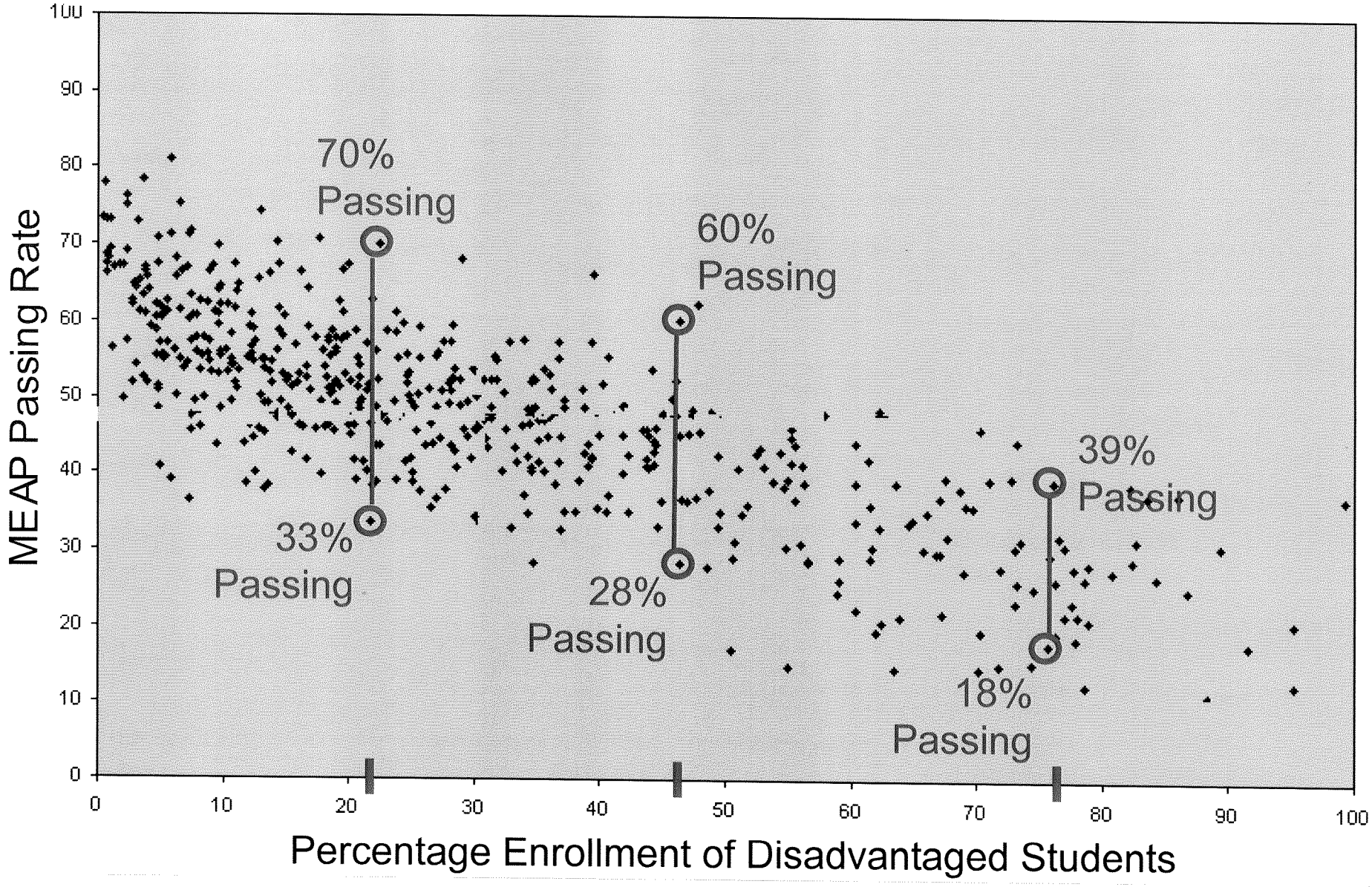

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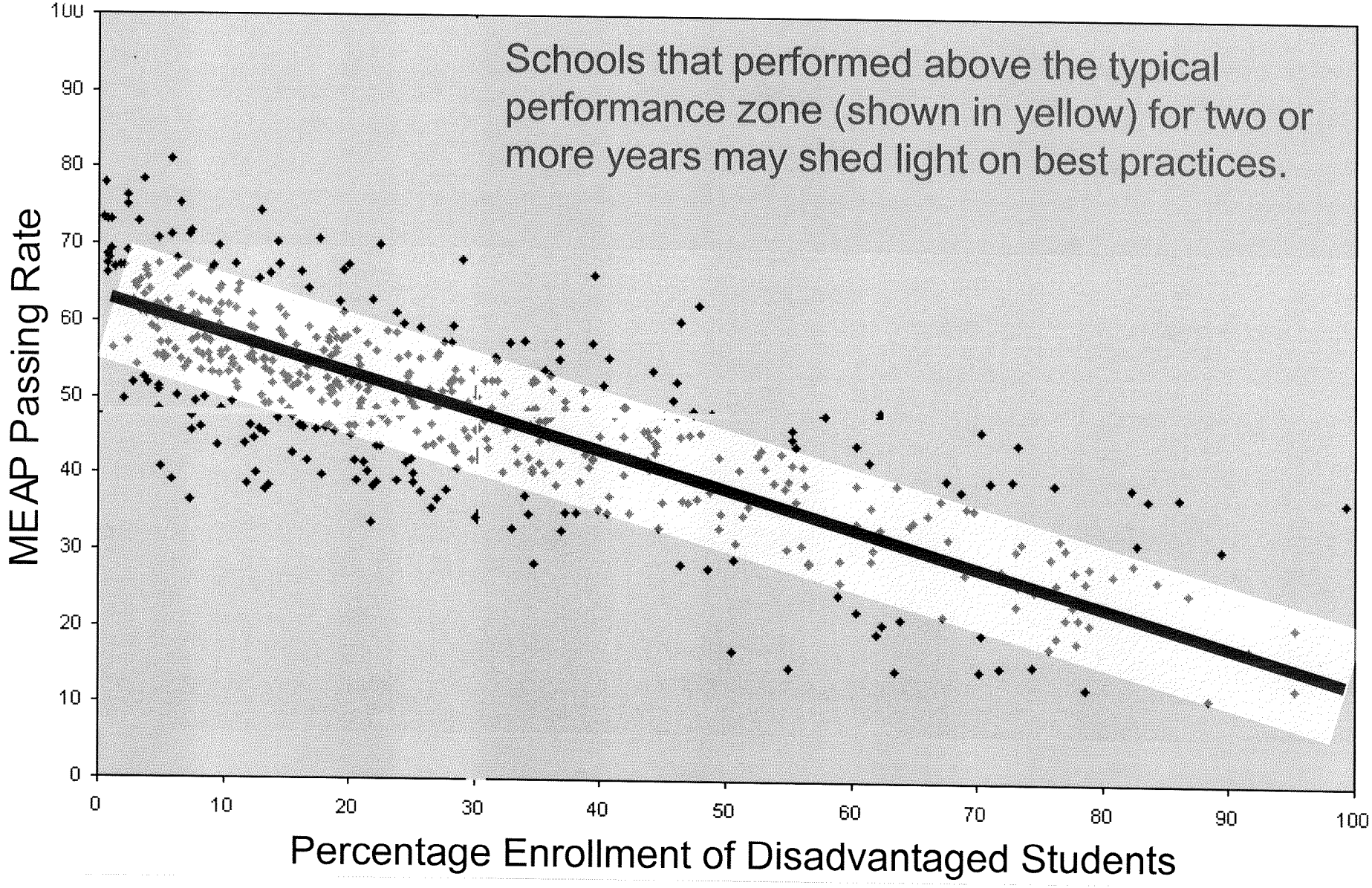

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Collaboration is the Key

"We'll make contact with principals in other communities to see what they're doing to assist their students in achieving at such a high level. This is one more way we are able to assess what we do to help improve student learning."

- Matt Cairy, Principal
  Williamston Middle School

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The Institute's Regional Training Program

Regional Benchmarking Institutes consist of an initial two-day training program and a one-day follow-up workshop.

Participants include principal-led school improvement teams of 4 to 5 people from a school "in need of improvement" that has not made Adequate Yearly Progress under NCLB.

The Institute provides the teams with data, training, knowledge, and resources to conduct their own benchmarking studies.

Workbooks are provided to help each team learn the benchmarking process, and guide their conversations with other schools that they partner with.

Seated at the table are representatives from Detroit's O.W. Holmes Elementary School, as they assess their school's strengths and potential areas for improvement. Teachers and principals from other schools look on as the process is demonstrated by the workshop facilitator.

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Participants' Evaluation Responses

"I felt that the Institute was outstanding! This is the first institute that I have attended and came away w/ pertinent ideas and solutions."

"One of the best workshops I have attended in my six years of teaching."

"The workbook was easy to follow & filled with information that I will be able to use at my school. Looking forward to using the website."

"The workshop provided the 'missing piece' to NCLB reform. We keep hearing that we need to 'improve.' This workshop gave us skills to empower that improvement."

"This workshop is rated one of the #1 workshops in my profession. Outstanding job!"

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Underlying Assumptions

- All schools do some things very well, and all schools have room to improve.
- Benchmarking is predicated on a collegial spirit of inquiry; it is not about "good schools" and "bad schools."
- Benchmarking studies are done in the context of the larger school improvement planning cycle.
- Benchmarking is not a "one-time" event but a continuous improvement process.
- Benchmarking doesn't have to be limited to "low-performing" schools; all schools can get better and better.

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Incentives for Participation

Two regional Benchmarking Institutes are being piloted this spring at the Wayne RESA and Saginaw ISD, for up to 30 schools. (The Michigan Department of Education has expressed an interest in conducting two additional Institutes this spring.)

Participants have included traditional schools as well as public school academies that have not made AYP.

The training is provided at no cost to each participating school (it is funded by the State).

The Department of Education has encouraged schools to consider using their Title I School Improvement Funds to cover the cost of substitute teachers and transportation to enable their faculty to participate in the Institute.

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Incentives for Participation

Each school improvement team leaves the Institute having identified 3 higher-performing "Benchmark Schools" that they would like to potentially partner with for a benchmarking study.

S&P and the Principals Association informs the higher-performing schools about this before being contacted by the school that hopes to partner with them.

Question: What incentives can be provided for the higher-performing Benchmark Schools to help the schools that are struggling to make Adequate Yearly Progress?

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Online Collection of Promising Practices at www.SchoolMatters.com

Each school improvement team is encouraged to document the findings from their benchmarking studies, and submit them to S&P.

Over time, we hope to build an online collection of promising practices that can be accessed by other schools across the state and nation, by visiting Standard & Poor's new national website at www.SchoolMatters.com.

This collection will complement the website's annual analysis of Michigan's schools and school districts.