

Urban Elementary Schools

A Summary of:

“Hope for Urban Education: A Study of Nine High-Performing, High-Poverty, Urban Elementary Schools” (1999) U.S. Department of Education – Office of the Undersecretary. Joseph F. Johnson, Jr. and Rose Asera, eds.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary School
- Middle School
- Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- ✓ Extended Learning

Overview

The research focused on nine urban elementary schools that served students who evaluators referred to as “children of color in poor communities.” All 9 of the schools have used Title I, school-wide programs. In addition, all the schools were located in urban areas and did not have selective admissions policies. Only two of the schools used nationally known, comprehensive school reform models; one used the Accelerated School Program and another used Success for All. The evaluators chose to write case studies about these schools because they had achieved results on state assessments of reading and mathematics that exceeded the average for all schools in their respective states.

POPULATION

Student demographics varied. At 6 of the 9 schools, most students were African American, at one school most students were Latino and at another, most were Asian. The majority of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch; in 7 of the schools, at least 80% of the students met low-income criteria. Enrollments ranged from 283 students at Baldwin Elementary, in Boston, to 1,171 at Goodale Elementary in Detroit. Three of the schools had more than 500 students. Although all of the schools served elementary grades, they had different grade level configurations, starting as early as pre-kindergarten and ending as late as eighth grade.

Key Findings

- ◆ A school that successfully closed a wide gap between minority students’ test scores and other students’ test scores was Lora B. Peck Elementary School in Houston. In 1995, no Latino students passed the writing section of Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) while fewer than one in five African American students passed it. In contrast, in 1998, at least 90% of each population group — African American, Latino, white and economically disadvantaged students — passed each section of the test.
- ◆ Another school successful in closing the gap was Baskin Elementary School in San Antonio. In 1994, 81.3% of white students achieved the passing standard in reading on the TAAS while

“The true catalyst was the strong desire of educators to ensure the academic success of the children they served.”

— Joseph F. Johnson, et al., evaluators

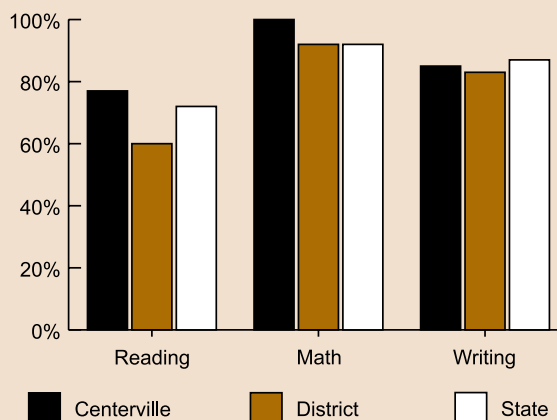
the percentage of African American students achieving the same standard was 56.3 percentage points lower. By contrast, four years later, at least 90% of all students, 90% of African American students, 90% of Latino students and 90% of low-income students passed the reading, writing and mathematics sections of the test.

- ◆ In 1995, at Burgess Elementary School in Atlanta (where 99% of the student body is

African American), 29% of students in grades 1-5 were scoring above the national norm in reading and 34% above the national norm in mathematics on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). By 1998, 64% of students in grades 1-5 scored above the national norm in reading while 72% scored above the national norm in math.

- ◆ At Baldwin Elementary in Boston, from 1996 to 1998, students' Stanford-9 mathematics and reading scores improved substantially, with achievement shifting from Levels 1 & 2 (little or no mastery of basic knowledge and skills to partial mastery) to Levels 3 & 4 (solid academic performance and superior performance beyond grade level).
- ◆ At the third-grade level, a greater percentage of Centerville Elementary students met or exceeded statewide performance goals for reading and mathematics as measured by the Illinois Goal Assessment Program that took students throughout Illinois. One hundred percent of third graders tested, met or exceeded state goals in mathematics (see graph).
- ◆ In Detroit, students at Goodale Elementary once performed below the state average and in 1998 scored above it on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). In 1993-94, 22.4% of students scored satisfactorily on MEAP, compared with 43.6% statewide; in 1997-98, 65% did, compared with 58.6% statewide. Similarly, students at the Gladys Noon Spellman Elementary School in Cheverly, MD improved considerably on the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program in

Percentage of Centerville Elementary Students Meeting or Exceeding State's IGAP Goals for Grade Three



reading between 1994-1998. In 1994, 17% of third-graders scored at or above the satisfactory level. By 1998, 69% did, compared with 41.6% statewide.

- ◆ One hundred percent of students in third grade at Hawley Elementary School in Milwaukee passed the Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test in 1998, compared with 25% passing throughout Milwaukee public schools.
- ◆ Students at James Ward Elementary School in Chicago have shown long-term progress in achievement on the ITBS. In 1991, the percentage of Ward students scoring at or above the 50th percentile on the ITBS reading assessment was 18.9% while it was 42.6% on math. In spring of 1998, 51.2% of Ward students scored at or above the 50th percentile in reading while more than 63% scored at or above the 50th percentile in math.

Program Components

These were all public schools that used federal Title I dollars to create Title I school-wide programs. They pooled all of their resources to improve achievement throughout the entire school instead of targeting federal resources to only those children who met eligibility criteria based on financial need. Though achievement-boosting initiatives varied from school-to-school, there were some common components:

- ◆ A visible and attainable, initial goal helped schools move toward broader, more ambitious goals.
- ◆ A sense of responsibility was fostered among students for appropriate behavior, cutting down on time spent with discipline and enhancing instructional time.
- ◆ The use of data helped schools to identify, acknowledge and celebrate strengths while focusing attention and resources on areas of need.
- ◆ Instruction was aligned to the standards and assessments required by the state and/or the school district.
- ◆ Professional development for teachers was added in tandem with school-wide or curriculum changes. School leaders made sure that teachers felt like they had adequate materials, equipment and training.
- ◆ Confidence and respect of parents was pursued by educators, primarily by improving the achievement of students.

“Even though there are far too many well-documented stories of intellectually vapid schools that perpetuate cycles of poverty and further limit the life choices of children, there are some urban schools that are giving new life to their communities and transforming the futures of the children they serve.”

— Joseph F. Johnson, et al., evaluators

Contributing Factors

Instructional Coaching

Principals tended to spend a large percentage of their time in the classrooms observing teachers, reinforcing good teaching techniques and helping to improve instruction. Some schools created a new “instructional guide” position, separate from other administrative positions. Instructional guides provided instructional coaching and support for teachers.

Clear Accountability

The schools created “clear, measurable and rigorous school accountability provisions,” observed the evaluators. A focus on adequate yearly progress, they added, was insufficient.

Capacity-Building Strategies

States and districts set high expectations for the schools but also provided adequate support for

them to meet these expectations. One of the most important supports was time for school personnel to align instruction to standards and assessments.

High Quality Training

Principals and school decision-making committees had high quality training that helped them use data to focus resources on critical areas of instructional need.

Extended Learning Time

The schools had resources that enabled them to increase the quantity of time available for instruction. The evaluators cited after-school programs, “Saturday Schools” and extended-year programs as important vehicles for ensuring that students met challenging standards.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

Teams of researchers made two-day visits to all 9 schools during which they interviewed campus and district administrators, teachers, parents and other school personnel. They also observed classrooms, hallways, playgrounds and various meetings. Finally, they reviewed various school documents and achievement data.

EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

The U.S. Department of Education funded the evaluation. The schools were all public schools that used federal Title I dollars to create Title I school-wide programs.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

The high-performing, urban schools selected were: Harriet A. Baldwin School, Boston, MA; Baskin Elementary School, San Antonio, TX;

Burgess Elementary School, Atlanta, GA; Centerville Elementary School, East St. Louis, IL; Goodale Elementary School, Detroit, MI; Hawley Environmental Elementary School, Milwaukee, WI; Lora B. Peck Elementary School, Houston, TX; Gladys Noon Spellman Elementary School, Cheverly, MD and James Ward Elementary School, Chicago, IL.

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