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Office of Special Services

William Windler
Assistant Commissioner

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Research You Can Use

*This publication, **"Research You Can Use",** is the first of a series of communications that will focus on successful strategies to close the achievement gap. The intent of these articles is to provide synopses of information that highlight best practices and strategies for turning around under-performing schools.*

Anita M. Foxworth Ph.D

Newspapers, state and local, are replete with dismal news about our failing schools. Such descriptions lead both the public and policy makers to conclude that there are few places where schools are succeeding with minority and poverty children.

Kati Haycock, Director of the Education Trust said:

> "Somewhere along the line somebody decided that poor kids couldn't learn, or, at least, not at a very high level. And everyone fell in line. But the truth is actually quite different. Some poor children have always learned to high levels, and some whole schools get *all* of their children to levels reached by only a *few* students in other schools."

Nevertheless, there is good news to celebrate. When so many districts are struggling with the achievement gap between minority and white students, a recent publication by the Education Trust, 4, 500 schools nation wide have been able to do just that. It is no accident that these schools have been successful but what did they do to achieve that success?

There are many studies of what it takes to bring students to levels of high performance in high poverty schools. This article summarizes a few of these.

In its earlier publication, *"Dispelling the Myth High Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations,"* the Education Trust featured 366 schools in 21 states that were listed as top performing high poverty schools. Their findings indicated that these schools tended to:

- **Use standards extensively to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teachers.**
- **Increase instructional time in reading and math in order to help students meet standards.**
- **Devote a larger proportion of funds to support professional development focused on changing instructional practice.**
- **Implement comprehensive systems to monitor individual student progress and provide extra support to students as soon as it's needed.**
- **Focus their efforts to involve parents on helping students meet standards.**
- **Have state or district accountability systems in place that have real consequences for adults in the schools.**

Another key source of information regarding effective strategies for increasing academic achievement came from a study that was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education. The study focused on the progress of students in 71 high poverty schools as they moved from third to fifth grade. Researchers investigated the impact of specific classroom practices on student achievement.

The design of the study used a longitudinal analysis to collect data about progress in reading and math. Data were collected in spring 1997, spring 1998, and spring 1999. In their investigation, researchers used the results of standardized achievement tests, teacher surveys, interviews with district administrators and principals, focus groups of school staff and parents, classroom observations, a collection of state and district policy documents, and information from student records.

According to the October 2001 issue of the Title I Monitor, the results of the study indicated that simple strategies like contacting the parents of lagging third graders, and becoming involved in good professional development increased student growth in reading by 1/3 of a grade. Specifically, the findings were as follows:

- **Students made greater gains in reading when teachers highly rated their professional development in reading and said that it matched their school's reform plan, focused on standards and assessments, and added to their confidence in using new approaches.** The growth in student test scores between grades three and five was about 20% greater when teachers rated their professional development high than when they gave it a low rating.
- **Students made faster gains in reading when their 3rd grade teachers had been especially active in reaching out to low achievers' parents.** Growth in test scores between third and fifth grade was 50% higher for those students whose teachers and schools reported high levels of parental outreach early than students whose teachers and schools reported low levels of parent outreach activities for the third grade.
- **Conversely, students whose 5th grade teachers reported spending a great deal of time engaged in very basic instruction, e.g., using worksheets, reading aloud, and using other types of relatively routine skill practice—made fewer gains on reading tests than those whose teachers reported spending only an average amount of time working at that level**. Growth in test scores was 10 percent lower when teachers spent a lot of time on basic instruction than when they spent little time engaged in these activities

Similar findings were evident in increased mathematics results:

- **As in reading, students made greater gains in mathematics when teachers highly rated their professional development in mathematics and said that it matched their school's reform plan, focused on standards and assessments, and added to their confidence in using new approaches.** Growth in test scores between grades three and five was 50 percent higher for those students whose teachers and schools rated their professional development high than when they gave it a low rating.
- **Low achieving students made greater gains in mathematics when their 3rd grade teachers had been especially active in reaching out to their parents.** Test scores in mathematics grew between the third and fifth grade at a 40% higher rate for students in schools whose teachers reported high levels of parental outreach than students in schools whose teachers reported low levels of parental outreach activities.
- **Implementation of reforms involving more student-initiated activities and more complicated assignments in mathematics had a positive effect on student achievement.** Growth in test scores between the third and fifth grades was about 17 percent greater for students whose fifth grade teachers reported relatively very high usage of exploration in instruction versus students whose fifth grade teachers reported relatively very low usage.

Although many of the schools listed in ***"Dispelling the Myth Revisited"*** are secondary schools, in general, there is little information available about educational improvement in high poverty secondary schools. However, a study published last year by Policy Studies Associates, detailed findings from 18 secondary schools (nine middle schools and nine high schools) that serve a high population of educationally disadvantaged schools and have consistently high or improving student achievement. Key findings from the examination of these schools include:

- **The schools in the study used three major strategies to improve and maintain the quality of teaching in their classrooms: professional development, implementing accountability systems, and using data to guide improvement.**

  Professional development at many of the schools provided sustained opportunities for teachers to collaborate with their peers and explore different solutions to problems they experienced in their classrooms.

  Strong state and local accountability systems, when present, exerted tremendous influence on teaching and learning in these schools, and many schools also devised supplemental internal accountability systems.

  Systematic collection and analysis of timely data helped the schools in the study to assess programs and reforms, and eliminate activities that did not yield improved achievement.

- **The schools found ways to overcome significant barriers including:**
  - Ability grouping
  - Lack of focus on improving teachers' knowledge of subject matter
  - Insufficient time for teachers to plan and develop challenging lessons
  - Conflicting priorities between school-based reforms and state and local standards-based reforms

- **The schools used a variety of non-instructional services that support student achievement including:**
  - Creating smaller learning communities (e.g. teams or houses) to combat the impersonality of many large schools;
  - Increasing student attendance by engaging students in the life of the school (e.g. service learning, peer mediation, etc.);
  - Providing academic, social, career counseling, and health services to students who had personal or emotional problems that interfered with learning;
  - Making strong efforts to communicate with parents and working hard to keep parents involved in the school (e.g. flexible meeting times, positive news about the school and individual students, parent resource rooms, etc.).

The task of turning around under-performing schools is daunting but extremely important work. We have to believe that it is possible to help every student be successful. As George McKenna, former superintendent of Compton School District once said, "If excellence is possible anywhere, it's possible everywhere!" That is our mission and our charge, to make sure that every school experiences the kind of success that schools all across the nation are experiencing. We at CDE want to help you do just that!

Upcoming Events

February 1	Colorado Critical Friends Group Winter Colloquium, Denver
February 7-9	Colorado Chapter of the International Reading Association (CCIRA), Denver
February 12	Choice Grant Application Review, Denver
February 13	International Learning Disabilities Conference, Denver
April 2	Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Durango
April 3	Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Alamosa
April 9	Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Greeley
April 10	Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop - Metro
April 12	Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Glenwood Springs
April 16	Consolidated Federal Programs Workshop – Pueblo
April 28-May 2	International Reading Association (IRA) Conference, San Francisco

FUTURE ISSUES:

February – Math
March – Reauthorization
April – Ensuring highly qualified staff in every school
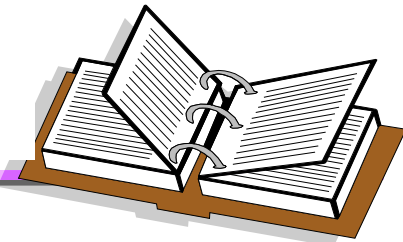
Resources

Dispelling the myth: high poverty schools exceeding expectations (1999). Available: www.edtrust.org

Dispelling the myth revisited (2001) Available: www.edtrust.org

Stepping Up the Challenge: Case studies of educational improvement and Title I secondary schools (1999) Available: ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/ed_for_disadvantaged.html#title1-2

The longitudinal evaluation of school change and performance in Title I schools: Final report (2000). Available:
ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/ed_for_disadvantaged.html#title1-11

Title I monitor (October, 2001). "Study finds simple strategies can narrow achievement gaps." (pp.) 6-11