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Effective School Reform

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INTRODUCTION TO SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

At the forefront of education research and policy agendas is an effort to ensure that all children, especially those in low performing, high-poverty schools, get a quality education. The question of which programs and strategies are most effective in reforming K-12 education is complex. School administrators and policymakers throughout the nation are seeking strategies that will help *all* students to achieve mastery of basic grade-level academic skills as measured by standardized tests. This brief summarizes current research on the characteristics of effective schools and effective teachers. Also, we highlight several comprehensive school reform models with evidence of effectiveness in improving student achievement.

POLICY CONTEXT: THE *LAKE VIEW* CASE

The final ruling in the 1992 *Lake View* case required that education policymakers in Arkansas improve the adequacy and equity of public education in order to provide a "general, suitable and efficient system of free public schools equally available to all." In an eight-week Special Session of the Arkansas General Assembly concluding February 2004, lawmakers codified a number of sweeping education reforms related to school accountability, consolidation of small districts, increased teacher salaries, and a revision of funding formulas. Additionally, the legislature implemented a number of tax increases to finance these reforms. With these reforms in place, policymakers, administrators, teachers, and parents now turn their attention to utilizing enhanced funding to meet increased standards of accountability by emphasizing school effectiveness.

EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

What are the characteristics of an effective teacher? In order to be effective with all children, a teacher needs to possess a wide range of knowledge. In addition to mastering his or her content area, a teacher needs to understand how students develop and learn, as well as

how to enhance the learning process. Providing teachers with strong, ongoing professional development is one of the key factors in encouraging and supporting learning environments that result in high student achievement.

Another key factor in teacher effectiveness with disadvantaged or low-achieving students is the overall school environment. Teachers are most effective in conveying high expectations in a context of school-wide collaboration toward improvement. Teachers who are successful in reaching all students need administrative support to succeed. A school environment that fosters teacher excellence tends to have the following characteristics:

- Minimal rules and constraints;
- Clear goals and established priorities;
- Valid measures of student performance; and
- Opportunities for teachers to learn together, practice what they have learned, and evaluate the results.

When teachers and administrators work together to communicate high expectations and increased student and parent involvement, generally, their efforts result in improved learning outcomes.

EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

Beyond strong collaboration among teachers and school administrators, what makes for an effective school? While numerous models and strategies exist for developing effective schools, this discussion will focus on attributes that help low-achievers in particular. Schools that are effective in helping low-achieving students to meet challenging academic standards tend to share these attributes:

- they utilize state standards to drive curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
- they schedule extended instructional time in math and reading;

- they spend proportionately more money on professional development than other schools;
- they utilize systematic assessments to monitor student progress;
- they encourage parents to become involved with student's school work; and
- they hold adults (not students) responsible for student outcomes through accountability standards.

Other characteristics of high-needs, high-performing schools include strong district support, a clearly organized and well-articulated curriculum, a stable faculty and staff, school-wide staff development opportunities, and frequent assessment of student progress frequently and prompt assistance to those students who are having difficulties. Also, effective schools tend to celebrate academic success on a school-wide basis to encourage and reward high achievement.

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

Another approach is to adopt a specific model of whole-school reform. Developed in the 1980s and 1990s, comprehensive school reform (CSR) models emerged to address the shift in Congressional funding from "pullout" (one-to-one or small group) interventions for low-performing students in favor of programs that make large-scale changes designed to address the needs of *all* students in low-performing schools. CSR models focus on the overall approach of *all* staff to toward teaching, learning, and discipline in their work both with students and with parents. Congress solidified its support of CSR in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Currently, federal policy encourages states and school districts to adopt CSR models by allocating new money in the form of formula grants to schools that use programs that address the eleven components considered essential to effective whole-school reform efforts. The component of effective CSR programs include:

- utilization of methods and strategies proven effective by scientifically-based research;
- integration of all components into an aligned, comprehensive teaching/learning design;
- emphasis on continuous, high-quality professional development for teachers and staff;
- development of measurable goals and benchmarks for student achievement;
- creation of mutually supportive environment for students, teachers, staff, and administrators;
- shared endorsement of the program by teachers, administrators and staff;
- meaningful involvement from parents, students, and the broader school community in planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program;
- utilization of high-quality technical support and assistance from external partners with experience and expertise in school-wide reform;
- implementation of annual program evaluations;
- assurance of enough resources for sustainability;
- demonstrated success in improving student achievement within the school implementing it.

Currently, there are more than 20 whole-school reform models available, but which ones are most effective? Two recent systematic reviews of literature (meta-analyses) synthesized the evidence of effectiveness of various reform models, highlighting those with rigorous evidence of success in improving student achievement. The four models that these reviews highlight are: Success for All, Comer's School Development Project, Direct Instruction, and High Schools that Work. As policymakers encourage districts and individual schools consider models for implementing comprehensive school reform, they will want to encourage consideration of *both* goodness of fit within the school's community context *and* empirical evidence of program effectiveness. For a few programs, at least, such evidence of effectiveness does currently exist.