

Exceptional Children  
Schools Where Students with Disabilities Met or Exceeded  
75 Percent Passage Rate  
Center for Special Needs Populations  
The Ohio State University

Executive Summary

The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) launched Superintendent Susan Tave Zelman's *Schools of Promise* program in 2003 to recognize elementary, middle and high schools across Ohio that are demonstrating high achievement for all groups of students even though at least 40 percent of the students in the schools meet low-income criteria.

As part of that program, ODE's Office for Exceptional Children (OEC) was interested in discovering more about effective practices and the kind of support school staff found useful in improving the performance of at-risk students, including those with disabilities. Eighteen schools were selected for case study review based on the criteria that students with disabilities in those schools exceeded a 75 percent passage rate on statewide assessments in either reading or math or both. While very successful with their students with disabilities, five of these 18 schools were not identified as *Schools of Promise*, because less than 40 percent of their students came from low-income backgrounds.

Each of the 12 elementary schools, the two middle schools, and the four high schools was visited, and interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, parents and students. At some schools, superintendents, curriculum directors and special education supervisors from Educational Service Centers (ESCs) and community members were also interviewed. Classroom observations also were conducted.

The site visits revealed that these schools integrate the five themes that are found in past and present *Schools of Promise* in that they:

1. Deliver rigorous, standards-based instruction;
2. Provide leadership focused on improved instruction
3. Design instruction to ensure all students succeed;
4. Engage parents and community; and
5. Create a school culture where individuals are valued

**Deliver rigorous, standards-based instruction**

All of the schools have aligned their curriculum and instruction to Ohio's standards. References to the standards are found in classrooms throughout the buildings so everyone is always aware of them. At one elementary school, the teachers report that Desk Top References (laminated placements) containing grade-level indicators and essential vocabulary for each grade keep them focused on standards when planning daily lessons. At another elementary school, students are made aware of the benchmarks for performance through "I Can" posters that are displayed in each classroom. One of the middle schools rewrote the standards to be student and parent friendly. Curriculum mapping is complete in some schools and underway in others. Some of the schools use pacing charts to ensure that instruction is consistent throughout their districts. Common assessments have been developed and are administered regularly, some monthly and some quarterly, to all students. At one of the high schools, regular and special education team teachers prioritize power indicators and review the

assessment map to make certain students are getting the standards and are being assessed properly.

There are examples of schools working to align instruction to standards vertically within districts. One of the middle schools collaborated with the high school teaching staff to vertically align curriculum, and the teachers at one of the high schools worked with middle school teachers to align the science curriculum.

### **Provide leadership focused on improved instruction**

A central theme at all of the schools is the belief that all students can learn and that it is the responsibility of the educators to figure out how students learn and how to teach them. Staff members refer to “at-risk” students as “at-promise.” With that as their philosophy, there is a strong emphasis on staff collaboration to focus on how to meet the learning needs of each student. All of the principals meet with staff members regularly to plan instruction and review progress. Shared leadership is the model used by some of the principals while others personally monitor each student’s progress and assists teachers in identifying instruction strategies to address learning needs. At other schools, district curriculum directors are an important part of the team.

All of the principals stated that they dislike being out of their schools during school hours as they think it is vitally important to be seen out in the classrooms and hallways to interact with students and teachers and to be actively involved in all that is going on in the schools. However, the principals are conscientious about pursuing their own professional development and about providing opportunities for the professional development of their staff members.

### **Design instruction to ensure all students succeed**

There are many important similarities in the elementary schools visited. Each of them has an all-day kindergarten, although at one school the program is just provided for a small group of students who are most at-risk. At all of the schools, teachers regularly use data from various sources to identify learning needs and target interventions, to evaluate the curriculum and to inform instruction. All of the schools provide a variety of interventions to support the needs of their students. Students are grouped and regrouped for instruction based on specific learning needs.

Instruction for students with disabilities is differentiated to meet students’ needs wherever services are provided. At some of the schools, intervention specialists and Title I teachers team-teach along with regular education teachers in the regular education classrooms all the time. At others, students with disabilities receive their instruction in some courses in the regular classroom and some in the resource room. At those schools, the intervention specialists and instructional aides work closely with regular education teachers to coordinate the curriculum and instruction.

There is a heavy emphasis on reading at all of the schools. At one school, the curriculum includes a 90-minute uninterrupted reading block in every class in grades 1-5. At other schools, a variety of special reading programs are available to support students including Early Reading Intervention, Accelerated Reading, the OhioReads HOST program, the Ohio State University Literacy Collaborative and generous use of tutors, reading volunteers and peer tutors.

Each of the high schools focuses on supporting students with special needs. At one school, content area teachers and intervention specialists meet prior to the beginning of school to plan for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans. They organize each student’s information, identify the student’s strengths and weaknesses,

and plan for any accommodations per the IEP that may be needed in the subject area. At another high school, the principal believes the intervention program is “the heart and soul” of their success with all students. Intervention is also the focus at a third high school where an intervention period was added to the end of the day, allowing 30 additional minutes for students to receive extra help. The fourth high school provides an Academic Coaching program with an array of services for students’ academic needs. The Academic Coaching room is staffed and available all day.

### **Engage parents and community**

All of the schools emphasize working closely with parents and the community on behalf of their students and foster supportive and respectful relationships with parents and families. School staff members make great efforts to stay in regular contact with parents personally, electronically and through print. Many of the teachers in the elementary schools send home weekly packets of each student’s work with each student charting his or her own progress. Teachers also inform parents and students of expectations through handbooks and face-to-face and telephone conferences. All of the high schools and most of the elementary schools post homework assignments, along with a variety of other information, on the schools’ Web sites.

Some schools have full- or part-time parent coordinators who work to involve parents in school activities such as grade-level and subject-level nights. Others have parent resource librarians who provide parents with materials and training on how to use them with children. Several of the schools have family liaisons that are responsible for working with parents and linking them to school and community resources. At a number of the schools, parent organizations are the moving forces that host parent events, encourage parents to participate, and conduct fund raising activities that support field trips and other activities for the students.

The schools also have a variety of partnerships, including with colleges, businesses, police and fire departments. These groups provide tutoring, shadowing and mentoring activities for the students.

### **Create a school culture where individuals are valued**

While the principals at the schools visited have promoted and supported a data-driven way of life in their schools, they never lose sight of the importance of the need for positive human interaction throughout the school. Because of this philosophy, the principals and staff members in each school have worked to create a culture where individual students are valued. They take responsibility for ensuring that struggling students get the additional help they need. The principal and teachers have an open door policy, and a kindness theme sets the tone for each of the buildings.

The staff members at these schools have high expectations for all of their students regardless of the students’ prior academic or behavioral challenges. Students are told that the expectations for learning and behavior are the same for every student. That means that all students are expected to be active participants in the learning process in the classrooms and to refrain from engaging in distracting activities. Schoolwide behavior plans are in place in all of the schools.

At some schools, the plan is the result of training through the Positive Behavior Support Project; at others, behavior is monitored and tracked through a colored card coding system. The high expectations are kept at the forefront as teachers emphasize them on a regular basis and print copies are usually posted in every classroom. While the primary tool used for behavior management is “catching students being good” and rewarding

them for positive behavior, activities are in place to help students learn from the experience when their actions result in detentions.

Students are also honored for a variety of other reasons including academic improvement, academic achievement, improving work habits and community service. At one elementary school, a Hero Party is held weekly for students exhibiting excellent social behavior and work habits throughout the week. At a middle school, a quarterly awards assembly recognizes students for academic achievements, citizenship, athletics and achievement in many other areas such as art and student contests. At one high school, each teacher determines the students that he or she will recognize and the category for recognition at the school's Award Assembly. Students are honored for classroom participation and for improvement, as well as for grades, so more students have the opportunity to receive awards.

### **Postscript**

It is important to note that incorporating all of the research-based activities covered by these themes did not take place overnight in any of the schools. In each school, it has taken the concentrated, committed, collaborative, ongoing effort of everyone involved to work toward improving the performance of all of their students. Each school has its unique geographic location, demographic characteristics, history, personnel and programs so the path each is taking varies as it works to achieve an equitable and excellent education for all students. The common denominator is a consistent focus on students and doing whatever is necessary to help them learn and progress. None of the schools claims to have all of the answers for improving student achievement across all grade levels and among all groups of students, but staff members at all of the schools are willing to make the effort required to learn more of the answers. Every individual involved with the progress in each of these *Schools of Promise* is to be congratulated.