

# Teacher Effectiveness in Schools of Promise Strategic Research Group

## Executive Summary

ODE contracted with Strategic Research Group to study what factors and resources contribute to the success of *Schools of Promise*, and in particular, teacher quality and the role that teachers play in these high-performing schools.

Eight of the 113 *Schools of Promise* recognized in the 2004-2005 school year are included in this case study. These eight schools were selected from a cross-selection that considered high student poverty, high and low percentages of minority students, and the number of years that the school had been recognized as a *School of Promise*.

Prior to each site visit, researchers surveyed all teachers in the school, and each school administrator completed a survey with pertinent statistics. During each site visit, researchers observed three mathematics and three reading and language arts classrooms. Later, they conducted personal interviews with key instructional staff, administrators, and the observed teachers. They conducted two focus groups with students recruited from the observed classrooms. After each site visit, they interviewed 20 parents and other key community members over the phone.

Overall, this study's findings provide further support for the "Five Lessons Learned" and expand our insight into the role that teachers play in these successful schools.

### **RIGOROUS INSTRUCTION ALIGNED TO THE STANDARDS**

All of the schools studied share a rigorous adherence to the state academic content standards. Alignment to Ohio's academic content standards was described as an incremental process, with teacher involvement critical. Although several years ago teachers may have resisted the idea of standards-based instruction, involving them in alignment, clearly communicating achievable goals for student improvement, and encouraging teachers to collaborate have been effective practices for these schools.

Teachers regularly collaborate and share best practices to align instruction vertically across grade levels, and horizontally within grade levels. Student performance data are typically broken down to the teacher level, which helps teachers identify student weaknesses, set attainable goals, and pinpoint academic standards that need additional attention in the classroom.

Because educators view reading and literacy as critical to student success in all other subject areas, reading and literacy form the core of the curriculum in the four elementary schools. For example, one elementary school uses an "Achievement Word of the Day" that teachers in all subject areas (even art, physical education, and music) integrate into the day's lessons. Another elementary school participates in a Literacy Collaborative, which extends reading instruction up to three hours a day, and students write daily in journals in both reading and mathematics classes.

In the four high schools, educators' goals for student achievement are more far-reaching than passing the Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT). These educators consider the OGT as one step in preparation for a successful college experience or for life after graduation. Two of the high

schools focus their attention on building student readiness for college, both in terms of content knowledge and study skills. By partnering with local colleges, these two schools provide their high school students with access to college experiences. In addition to college preparation, the other two high schools emphasize the value of career education. Educators in these two schools encourage students to take both career/technical and academic courses – both are viewed as critical to applying knowledge in the workplace.

### **STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP**

The principals in these eight *Schools of Promise* serve in supportive, collaborative roles and empower teachers to act as leaders in their schools. In particular, the high school teachers agree that there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their schools. Principals in these schools solicit teacher feedback in decision making and empower teachers to make informed decisions. At three of the high schools, student performance data are routinely examined at the teacher level as part of the continuous improvement process. School leaders support this process, which identifies areas where individual teachers can focus to help students improve.

With encouragement from their principals, teachers take on leadership roles by actively seeking out, piloting, and integrating new technology and materials into their instruction. For example, teachers in one of the elementary schools sought out the school's current phonics program and championed the Accelerated Reader program, both of which have been fully integrated into the school's curriculum. In another elementary, teachers serve as grade level chairs to handle administrative issues, and other teachers serve as curriculum leaders to maintain alignment to standards.

Teacher leaders actively participate in the professional development of their peers, and in the process, help to reduce the costs of training additional staff. For example, only a few teachers in one of the high schools participate in national conferences and training, but through structured and informal collaboration with peers, the information is disseminated teacher-to-teacher. Teachers in one elementary school regularly attend statewide training on Enhancing Education Through Technology and then convey the information to their peers through teacher-to-teacher training sessions at the school.

All schools either build in common planning time or require meetings specifically for the purpose of teacher collaboration. Teachers regularly share ideas, information and strategies to improve instruction through structured meetings and informal networks during lunch, in the hallways and after school. In one of the elementary schools, common planning time has been facilitated with substitute teachers, who provide 90-minute blocks once a week for teachers at each grade level to plan and collaborate.

### **INSTRUCTION DESIGNED FOR ALL STUDENTS' SUCCESS**

Teachers play a critical role in the way these schools design instruction to ensure every student's success. By being responsive to feedback, engaging in self-reflection, and collaborating with colleagues, the elementary teachers actively seek out ways to improve their instruction. With support from school leadership, teachers regularly use student assessment data to reflect on areas where students need support or intervention and provide students additional time and help to improve in that area. Teachers in these schools generally take a personal stake in student improvement and share a sense of responsibility for helping students learn.

A commonality among most of the high school teachers is a high degree of enthusiasm and excitement, not only for their subject areas but also for working with high school students. Based upon classroom observations, interviews and survey results, teachers' attitudes toward teaching were clearly positive, and administrators, students, parents, and even outside observers could not help but recognize it. Teachers in these high schools spend time before, during, and after school working individually with students to help them understand and apply new material. This teacher dedication is critical to the intervention of struggling students.

Teachers at these *Schools of Promise* vary their instructional techniques and incorporate technology to enhance their lessons. The high schools that use interactive technology like graphing calculators, SmartBoards, and PowerPoint create opportunities to engage students and to support concept development, active "hands-on" learning and higher-order thinking. Beyond technology, teachers at two of the high schools also emphasize the importance of discussions to engage their students.

Elementary school teachers frequently use technology to customize instruction and focus on the specific needs of each student. Two of the elementary schools use self-paced programs (e.g., Accelerated Reader or Accelerated Math), which allow students to set goals with the teacher and work at their own pace, complete assessments on a computer, and evaluate their own progress toward meeting their goals. Teachers in a third elementary school use a computer program to individualize assignments and generate detailed reports on each student's progress to differentiate instruction based on a student's particular needs. Students can even access the software from home or the local library.

Intervention for struggling students begins early in the elementary schools. In one of the schools studied, kindergarten students are assessed during the first six weeks, and those with the lowest scores are put into a literacy skills class for half a day, making for day-long instruction. A second elementary school uses a specialist trained in Reading Recovery to provide intervention to first-grade students who are having difficulty learning to read and write.

All of the elementary schools rely on Title I intervention for closing gaps and providing individualized instruction. Two of the elementary schools fully integrate their Title I teachers into the regular classrooms, therefore providing additional assistance to all students during small group instruction. At one of the elementary schools, intervention intensifies in preparation for proficiency tests between January and March. Each grade level meets together twice a week and substitutes are brought in so students can be divided into four small groups. Teachers rotate through the groups, providing focused small group instruction in language arts and mathematics, focusing on the standards that students are struggling with.

Intervention also is important at the high-school level, but more actively involves students in formulating solutions. The Building Assistance Team at one of the high schools – including the student, teachers, guidance counselors and parents – works to identify a struggling student's problems and customize the intervention strategies. Another high school monitors students' assessment scores across multiple tests and over time to determine its mathematics intervention. This high school uses Accelerated Reader to provide teachers with a way to monitor students' guided reading practice. Students choose their own books, then complete assessments on the computer specific to the book they read.

## **ENGAGE PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS**

The high level of poverty in these schools complicates educators' efforts to increase parental involvement. Regardless, teachers and educators in these eight schools make frequent efforts to engage parents and keep them informed of their children's progress. All of the schools provide information to parents through newsletters, fliers or parent associations. Two elementary and two high schools utilize web-based technology to communicate with parents on their children's performance. Parents can frequently monitor their children's daily progress and communicate with teachers during any time of the day. To further reach out and inform parents, one elementary school extends the number of days and the range of times for its parent-teacher conferences.

Teachers are a key point of communication with parents, and they actively seek out the most effective ways to reach parents in their school and community. A critical communication with parents is explaining academic content standards. Schools provide information through presentations, parent guides and standards-based report cards.

Three of the schools partner with community agencies to provide social and emotional support to parents and families. Two of the elementary schools operate programs that help parents work more effectively with their children. Through the local funding of a nonprofit agency, one high school provides onsite counselors for social services and support to students.

Because the goal of these high schools is to prepare their students for a successful college experience or for life after graduation, strong partnerships with local universities, community colleges and technical programs are especially critical to the success of three of these *Schools of Promise*. Two of the high schools partner with their local community colleges to provide students with college preparation, dual-credit opportunities and advanced technical skills.

Through the dedicated efforts of school administrators, the third high school has established strong partnerships with two local universities. Besides providing staff development in science and mathematics, one of the universities assists students with the transition between middle and high school. Incoming freshmen attend a five-week summer program located on the university's campus, where students become acclimated to the college-bound culture of the high school, and learn about the high school's policies and expectations. During this summer program, teachers assess students' mathematics, science and English skills, and then group them according to their freshman year performance level.

### **CREATES A SCHOOL CULTURE WHERE EACH INDIVIDUAL FEELS VALUED**

Along with their alignment to standards and emphasis on academic rigor, perhaps the most important characteristic of these schools is the warm, supportive, "family" environment cultivated among staff and students. Teachers are important role models and provide stability, support and structure. Discipline, structure, and order were also particularly important among these schools, perhaps in part because students often come from difficult home lives, making structure in the school day particularly important. Positive reinforcement is used to encourage good behavior. Student success is promoted publicly in the schools on a regular basis.

Teachers in these schools care deeply about connecting with their students, helping and supporting them; however, teachers also hold students to high standards. While these teachers acknowledge that many of their students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and often deal with complex and difficult problems at home – they still maintain high standards and hold high expectations for what students can achieve.

Teachers in the four high schools invest significant time working individually with students who need extra help. Teachers' connections with students are important both academically and emotionally. The ability to develop and maintain rapport with students is a critical aspect of their effectiveness. The four elementary schools emphasize discipline and mutual respect among staff and students, frequently utilizing praise and positive reinforcement. Principals and teachers know the students well and have personal connections with them that reflect an interest in students' well being beyond the classroom.

Researchers observed frequent praise and positive reinforcement at all schools. One elementary school principal leads a "caught doing good" campaign by rewarding students with public recognition when they are caught demonstrating good behavior during the principal's classroom walk-throughs or in the hallways.

A clear common denominator in the four high schools is an emphasis on discipline, structure and mutual respect, providing an important foundation for learning. One high school's discipline policy extends to a carefully monitored dress code policy. The school also implements gender-based classes (i.e., exclusively male or female classes) as a disciplinary measure. Staff and students believe the gender-based environment helps students focus on their lessons. Another high school also implements a dress code policy and bans earrings and beards for males, visible tattoos, holes in jeans, and the use of cell phones in the building. The policy, administrators believe, reflects the community's values and emphasizes structure and respect. All four high schools foster a sense of community, where everyone in the building—administrators, teachers, custodians and cafeteria workers—share a stake in student success. Administrators consider all staff part of the same team.

Social support for students and families is also an important consideration in these eight *Schools of Promise*. Often these resources are in the form of social workers and counselors. For example, one of the high schools operates the "Families Forward" program, funded through the United Way, which provides two counselors onsite for social services and support to students. An elementary school participates in the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program to support and engage parents of at-risk students.

## **ROLE OF TEACHERS**

A particular focus of the present research is the role of teachers in *Schools of Promise*. Clearly, teachers are fundamentally important in terms of designing instruction to ensure every student is successful, but teachers also play key roles in terms of alignment to standards, continuous improvement, connections with parents, and creating a culture where everyone feels valued.

In the present *Schools of Promise* research, teachers serve a central role. They are highly trained professionals with significant experience. Many of the teachers had been teaching for a long time and had close relationships with their colleagues and with their students. Nearly half or more of teachers at all schools have master's degrees, and more than three-fourths of are considered Highly Qualified under the federal definition.

Across the eight schools studied, researchers found teachers who were committed to their schools, their colleagues, and most importantly – their students. They believe what they are doing in their classrooms is important, they feel valued and supported by administrators, and they work collaboratively with colleagues in a "team" atmosphere.

Teachers contribute in important ways to the school climate and culture. Although leadership often sets a direction and example for teachers, the teachers respond to leadership in positive ways. Teachers are held accountable to their students, to school leadership, and to one another. Regular classroom visits from the principals are customary at many of the schools studied and serve as support as well as evaluation. Student performance data at the classroom level is often shared openly and strategies are discussed collaboratively. Teachers support their schools' efforts to improve or maintain high levels of achievement in their words and actions. They actively participate in meetings and trainings supported by the school or district, they frequently communicate with colleagues to improve their effectiveness and share resources, and their behaviors in and out of the classroom are consistent with the school values.

Perhaps the strongest theme across all eight schools is openness to change among administrators and teachers and a tendency to be self-reflective. Staff members at these schools constantly seek ways to grow, change and improve. This is common among principals in their support of the school's continuous improvement efforts, as well as teachers, who often use student performance data diagnostically and modify their instructional delivery as necessary to maximize their effectiveness. In turn, they model this behavior for students.