

Schools of Promise: Schools with High Performance in Reading Institutional Research Consultants

Executive Summary

The Ohio Department of Education contracted with Institutional Research Consultants (IRC) to study the effective instructional practices of eight Schools of Promise identified because of their high performance in reading/language arts.

Of the 102 Schools of Promise recognized in the 2003-2004 school year for their reading performance, 29 were excluded from the sample due to their current or previous participation in case study research. Eight schools were randomly selected from the remaining 73 Schools of Promise.

Two-day site visits were conducted at each of the eight schools. Principals, teachers, staff and parents were interviewed and surveyed during these visits. Between eight and 14 classrooms were observed at each school. Finally, surveys and focus group interviews were conducted with students.

The study's findings support the "Five Lessons Learned" identified in earlier Schools of Promise research. These lessons emphasize the importance of instituting strong leadership, establishing a school culture that values individual students, designing instruction to ensure student success, providing rigorous instruction aligned with the standards, and engaging parents and the community to support student success. As you will see, these emerging characteristics often relate to more than one of the five lessons, highlighting their interconnectedness.

STAFF CHARACTERISTICS

Each school shows strong leadership and a determined commitment to improving student performance. All of the schools had strong principals who were able to motivate staff and work with them collaboratively. Even where the principals were relatively new to the school, they were able to successfully build upon the progress made by their predecessors. Principals and teachers in the eight case study schools worked well with each other. They were experienced, professional and respectful of one another. Together, these staff members made concerted efforts to improve student performance – improvements did not simply happen by chance.

The staff in these eight schools care deeply about their students and were committed to putting them first. Staff provided students with appropriate support, including meeting students' social and physical needs, setting high standards, and expecting them to realize a high level of achievement.

Staff members at the elementary schools were especially aware of hardships experienced by many of the children. They had a great deal of compassion and wanted to help them. At the same time, staff maintained high expectations for their students. All four schools emphasized homework and had strong disciplinary measures in place.

Staff members at the high schools regularly demonstrated their belief in students and desire to help them succeed. They had high expectations but were cognizant of obstacles faced by many students. Consequently, teachers were often careful to encourage students without appearing to

be overly pushy. Students appreciated teachers who consistently showed them compassion and ways they could improve without putting them down. Students at these schools often expressed that the school staff was one of the best things about the school.

At all four high schools, teachers were available to help students with academic issues, before or after school and during the lunch period. In addition, there were several teachers who the students trusted deeply and felt comfortable asking for help with personal issues.

PRACTICES IMPACTING STAFF

The practices that staff most often viewed as making the most difference are the use of common planning time and creative hiring practices or use of staff. Five schools demonstrated these characteristics. Both traits were somewhat more prevalent in elementary schools.

Common planning time means that teachers have regularly scheduled time to talk to each other and plan collaborative activities, especially with intervention teachers. Two of the elementary schools and one of the high schools established common planning time on a daily basis. During this shared planning, teachers spent time aligning their curriculum and lessons to the state standards, systematically analyzing student performance to better inform their intervention, learning what other departments were doing, and brainstorming effective practices to improve their instruction.

Besides daily planning, three of the schools introduced more comprehensive planning processes in which staff set specific goals for their students. While one school worked through this process on their waiver days and annual retreat, the other two schools met on a monthly basis. Even though the changes that resulted from these collaborative meetings were broader in nature, it is of interest that two of the elementary schools also experienced notable improvements in their math scores in recent years.

Creative hiring often resulted in additional support staff, which gave the schools flexibility in meeting the needs of students. For example, some schools hired long-term substitutes as tutors or brought in additional aides to increase intervention efforts. For example, one high school had a separate tutoring class that was taught by long-term substitutes. Depending on individual needs, the student was taken out of the regular class for a short period of time or for the duration of the class. If a longer term intervention was required, the regular teacher coordinated assignments with the tutor.

Creative use of staff also enabled teachers to better meet the needs of individual students through small group instruction. For example, in one elementary school, the principal scheduled staff so that as many as four or five adults could be in one room at the same time, reducing the teacher-student ratio and facilitating intervention activities in the classroom. Three of the four high schools had noticeably small classes, averaging between 15 and 18 students, which encouraged teachers and students to get to know one another.

PRACTICES IMPACTING STUDENTS

The eight schools provided services or put into place practices that they believe had a huge impact for ensuring every student's success. Some variation of providing one-on-one or small group tutoring to at-risk students as early as possible was present at all eight schools. In seven of the schools, frequent testing and data analysis processes helped to identify students for intervention. Small class sizes and small reading groups for the elementary students benefited low as well as

high-performing students. For example, in three of the four elementary schools, children in grades kindergarten through two rotated through a variety of activities in work centers.

Five of the eight schools also strengthened the connection between intervention and regular classroom teachers to ensure students' needs were met, especially with respect to integrating special education students into the school. Full inclusion occurred in two schools and was a major transition, but staff believed that the practice has had a positive impact on student performance and behavior. One of the elementary schools encourages team-teaching, and with specialists and student teachers, it is not unusual for their classes to have up to five adults in a class supervising three to five student groups.

Six of the eight schools also offer a variety of small incentives to reward students. Teachers in three of the elementary schools provide small treats to encourage good student behavior and to reward performance. Three of the high schools give incentives to students to encourage them to achieve in their classes and do well on state tests. Incentives include pizza parties, coupons to local fast food restaurants, a free day off and field trips.

INSTRUCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Six of the eight schools in this case study project have a strong reading program or English department. Factors contributing to this feature are staff experience and quality and consistency of materials. Three of the four elementary schools were in the process of introducing new reading programs, driven by new textbook adoptions in their respective districts. Staff at all of the elementary schools expressed that supplementary resources can have as much, if not more, importance than the school's overall reading program. High school language arts instruction ranged from highly traditional – where students were primarily reading textbooks, completing worksheets, or listening to lectures – to ones where students were conducting research on computers, designing PowerPoint presentations and working cooperatively in group projects.

Three of the four high schools also had strong math departments, and all the high schools had implemented notable changes in the math curriculum in recent years. Changes included expanding the number of available math classes, introducing math coaches and additional technologies, and incorporating ACT Prep materials into their classes. One high school now requires students to pass course mastery and semester tests before they can progress to a higher level math course.

One elementary school in the study had made an explicit change in math instruction by expanding the amount of time for the math block to 90 minutes. This school also encouraged staff to challenge students with math activities that went beyond grade level and tested math knowledge of fifth and sixth graders on a weekly basis. This is also the only elementary school viewed by the research team as having strong math instruction. Even though the schools in this study were chosen based on students' performance in reading, the minimal attention given to math by most of the elementary schools is a concern to the researchers.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Teachers at all eight schools were highly aware of the state standards and have done their best to align their curriculum with the benchmarks. At all eight schools, teachers benefited from district-provided professional development that has helped them apply the standards; two schools were in districts that had developed pacing charts. Staff at all but one of the eight schools has participated in extensive professional development related to standards as well as to their discipline areas.

Teachers in all of the elementary schools engaged in ongoing professional development sessions during staff meetings, where they would share “best practices” with each other. Two of the elementary schools extend the sharing through observation of other teachers in the district.

Three of the high schools have benefited substantially from grants, either through direct grants to the school or from their affiliation with the district or region. Three elementary schools were awarded OhioReads grants, which resulted in increased reading resources, professional development and one-on-one tutoring. Three of the schools (two high schools and one elementary) are involved in a research-based professional development program.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

All four elementary schools and two of the high schools have extensive communication with parents and high levels of parent involvement. The forms of communication include telephone calls, newsletters, notes to parents, e-mail, and in-person contact. At least once a week, two of the elementary schools send home materials that must be signed by the parents.

One elementary school has particularly high parent involvement. It explicitly made a commitment to develop this aspect about 10 years ago. A key element is that each student, parent, and teacher signs a compact that outlines expectations for academics, attendance and homework.

Seven of the eight schools have many parents who once attended the school. Although this was likely related to the fact that six of the schools were in rural areas or small towns, this was also true of two schools in more urban locations. In addition, staff members at six schools are either graduates of the school or currently live in the community.

All four high schools and two of the four elementary schools have a close partnership with local colleges. These partnerships include student teachers, hiring college students for tutoring, and allowing students to take college-level courses while enrolled in high school.