

Schools of Promise: Rural Schools with High Performance in Mathematics Ohio University

Executive Summary

ODE contracted with Ohio University to study effective instructional practices of rural Schools of Promise. This case study describes the school improvement activities taking place in six rural Schools of Promise identified because of their high performance in mathematics; and compares their activities to those taking place in two comparison schools with similar demographics but less notable performance in mathematics.

Ohio University selected six rural schools from among the 2003-2004 Schools of Promise based on the following criteria: high mathematics achievement; variety in grade levels (e.g., kindergarten through six, ninth through 12th); and availability and willingness to participate. Two comparison schools with similar demographics that were not Schools of Promise also were included in the study.

During each school's site visit, which ranged from five to eight days, researchers conducted interviews, classroom observations, and student focus groups. Interviews included administrators, teachers, parents and community members. In addition, various documents were reviewed, including lesson plans, teacher-made tests, school handbooks and continuous improvement plans.

The research found that all of the studied schools are taking Ohio's accountability mandates seriously. To increase student achievement, the schools devoted attention to aligning curriculum with state standards and explicitly preparing students to take the tests. Educators at the schools saw the value of strong leadership, respectful relationships, collegiality, an explicit focus on academics, and community engagement. Schools differed considerably, however, in the approaches they favored to improve performance.

LEADERSHIP

In each of the Schools of Promise, certain individuals provided strong leadership, particularly during implementation of an improvement plan. Leadership involved the development of a shared vision and the encouragement of teachers to take ownership of and accountability for particular improvement practices. In four of the schools, leaders used a top-down approach to stimulate reform, gradually introducing more democratic processes as time went on. Democratic leadership had a longer history and greater cultural resonance at the other two Schools of Promise. At these two schools, administrators explicitly encouraged all teachers to take leadership roles, which allowed for greater stability when there was a change in principals.

- Leadership in the comparison schools was less coherent and less focused on collectively engaging reform.

RELATIONSHIPS

Teachers in the Schools of Promise saw the character of the relationship they developed with their students and with one another as central to the improvement effort.

Discipline. Educators worked to establish compliant behavior among students, seeing increased attention to student discipline as a precursor to high academic performance. Efforts to improve student discipline were structured and consistently enforced throughout the school.

- Educators at the comparison schools did not see an explicit linkage between improved discipline and improved academic performance, nor did these schools develop or enforce a unified code of discipline across their buildings.

Professional collaboration. Teachers in the Schools of Promise attributed their schools' improvement, in part, to the quality of their professional relationships with one another. Even though the nature of the collaboration differed from school to school, teachers in all of the schools engaged in ongoing collaboration with colleagues on issues of curriculum alignment and changes in instructional practices.

- Teachers in the comparison schools focused more on improving the instructional practices in their individual classrooms, instead of working collaboratively to improve student performance schoolwide. Improvement efforts at the comparison schools were more piecemeal and tended to reflect the initiative of individual teachers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Schools of Promise made professional development a priority and viewed it as a way to foster school improvement. Procedures for planning and implementing professional development differed in significant ways across the Schools of Promise, as did the content of the professional development activities. At some schools, professional development was planned at the district level and focused on district priorities, whereas at others it was primarily a school-based initiative. In most cases, professional development encompassed activities that teachers selected themselves as well as those chosen for them by professional development committees or administrators.

- Professional development was viewed as a priority in the comparison schools. However, unlike the Schools of Promise, professional development in comparison schools was less integrated into the schoolwide efforts to improve.

ACADEMIC FOCUS

The state's accountability system has driven all of the schools in this study to focus on academics, primarily through curriculum alignment to the state standards and preparing students to take the tests. Educators in the Schools of Promise changed their teaching strategies in ways designed to improve student achievement. The type of changes adopted by each school varied from traditional drill-and-practice to problem-solving approaches.

- Less attention to mathematics instruction was found at the comparison elementary school.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In the Schools of Promise, as well as the comparison schools, strong school and community relations were viewed by all as an important resource for school improvement. Not all schools,

however, were at the same point in their relationships with parents – some were still reversing past alienation of parents and community. Some schools were developing new initiatives, such as “Family Reading Night” and parent volunteer programs, in order to cultivate increased involvement. Other schools were just beginning to consider ways to connect in positive ways with parents and community members.

CONCLUSIONS

The research showed that Schools of Promise and comparison schools did not differ systematically with respect to the practices that were considered useful for fostering improvement. What seemed to differentiate the two groups of schools were: the longevity of the improvement initiative; coherence of the reforms adopted; and, the severity of the challenges that the schools confronted. The six Schools of Promise each had a coherent, collaborative effort that did not happen by chance. The two comparison schools were dealing with the consequences of unpopular school consolidations, a circumstance that seemed to delay their efforts to implement coherent educational reforms.