



Miami-Dade County Public Schools

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RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The following Information Capsule reviews research that has been conducted to determine how certain schools produce high levels of student learning, even in the face of adverse conditions. This topic has been important for some time. Now, however, it has taken on added significance given the establishment of the School Improvement Zone in Miami-Dade County by Superintendent Rudolph F. Crew.

A significant number of studies have been conducted to identify strategies for developing and sustaining high-performing schools. Research on school reform has shown that it takes an average of three years for elementary schools and six years for secondary schools to implement the changes that will improve student achievement. The reasons for low performance vary from school to school, but low-performing schools are often located in impoverished communities where circumstances at home make it difficult for students to come to school prepared to learn. The stigma of being designated as a low-performing school places additional stress on these schools and can lead to reduced expectations for student achievement.

Researchers have sought to identify commonalities in schools where students are learning at high levels, regardless of family background. For example, 90/90/90 Schools (at least 90 percent combined minority, at least 90 percent free or reduced price lunch, and at least 90 percent successful on standardized assessments) have demonstrated that all children can learn when they are placed in demanding academic settings (Reeves, 2000).

In 1996, the Association for Effective Schools concluded that a successful school's mission is clearly articulated. In addition, staff share an understanding of and commitment to the school's instructional goals and assessment procedures and accept responsibility for student learning. A climate of high expectations for success fosters the belief that all students can attain mastery of essential content and skills. Teachers believe they have the capability to help all students achieve that mastery.

Schools that succeed in improving student performance, despite adverse conditions, ensure that every student is challenged and set the expectation that all students will achieve at high levels. These schools align their curricula with the accountability system, monitor instruction by measuring incremental success, and encourage collaboration among all school-site staff. The

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selection of specific strategies for improving student achievement should be based on each school's individual strengths and weaknesses. All school stakeholders must be ready to embrace change and must adopt a clearly defined, strategic approach for reforming the school.

The following is a summary of strategies that studies sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement have found to be effective in moving low-performing schools forward (Goodwin, 2000; Corallo and McDonald, 2001). Successful research-based strategies provided by the Association for Effective Schools (1996), Dr. Douglas Reeves (2000), and Dr. A. Wade Boykin and Dr. Sean Utsey (2001) are also included.

- **Provide all students with a challenging curriculum.** Schools must create learning conditions that are engaging, inviting, and challenging. A focus on learning outcomes within a rigorous instructional program ensures that every student is academically challenged. Low-performing schools often use weak or inappropriate curricula and students are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers. Low-performing schools should adopt proven curriculum programs. Studies suggest that a research-based literacy program is an essential element to improving student achievement. An on-going writing performance assessment program, where weaker writing areas are emphasized, should also be implemented. A single rubric for all writing assignments in all content areas helps teachers evaluate student needs across the curriculum. The inclusion of culturally relevant curricula contributes to the achievement of students from diverse populations. Achievement should be celebrated and publicized throughout the school and

community and high academic performance should be rewarded with high praise.

Counselors must be trained to make appropriate decisions regarding student placement. Without proper training, counselors may underestimate some students' abilities and place them in lower level courses. Studies have found that low-achieving students learn more when they are placed in rigorous, heterogeneously grouped courses.

- **Align assessment with the curriculum and analyze student achievement data to identify critical needs.** Students will be prepared for test-taking when the curriculum that is used in daily classroom instruction is aligned with the assessment program. Assessments should be given throughout the school year to regularly evaluate students' academic progress. A variety of assessment procedures can be used to identify students' levels of achievement, including standardized assessments, teacher developed assessments, and performance assessments. Exchanging student work for scoring allows teachers to maintain common assessment practices and alignment of the curriculum. Students should receive continuous feedback to reinforce their efforts and support their progress. Analysis of disaggregated student achievement data can help to determine if reforms are working and for which students. Educators can then make informed decisions about which instructional interventions are needed to meet the needs of individual students or groups of students.
- **Help teachers improve instruction.** Teachers are often successful when they are allowed to identify and adapt their own strategies for improving student achievement. In order to implement

successful instructional changes, however, teachers need time to collaborate with their colleagues and a strong professional development program, delivered through traditional workshops and courses, as well as through peer coaching and mentoring. An atmosphere of professional respect will promote a shared belief that students can and will succeed at higher levels.

- **Recruit and retain highly qualified teachers.** Low-performing schools often serve as “training grounds” for teachers, leading to high levels of staff turnover and making it almost impossible for improvement efforts to take effect. School districts must find ways to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers by changing the policies and incentives that make low-performing schools less attractive to them, such as rewarding teachers for improving student performance. Teachers at low-performing schools must be provided with more than just a reform plan. They need ongoing support and assistance to bring about the needed instructional improvements, including coaching by master teachers who have successfully worked with minority populations and sufficient time for collaboration with peers.
- **Distribute school leadership functions.** School leadership plays a central role in improving low-performing schools by setting the expectation that all students will achieve at high levels. The principal must act as the instructional leader and communicate the school’s mission to staff, parents, and students. Although the principal usually coordinates the identification, implementation, and monitoring of the school’s goals, he or she must distribute leadership functions so that teachers are given the opportunity to share their expertise on instructional strategies and curricular issues. School staff will support school reforms and feel more involved when everyone works

together. Distributed school leadership fosters a collaborative climate and it also establishes stability in the school so that reforms will be maintained, even through changes in administration.

District administrators should actively recruit and prepare aspiring school leaders. Ongoing professional development opportunities should be offered to strengthen the leadership skills of school-level staff. A combination of training and mentoring programs can enhance the development of aspiring leaders by helping them to acquire the skills and practices needed for effective leadership. External facilitators, who can provide training that is targeted to the specific principal and his or her leadership needs, can train school leadership in the use of research-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment strategies.

- **Provide additional support to students.** Teachers should allocate a significant amount of classroom time to instruction in essential content and skills. For a high percentage of this time, students should be engaged in whole class or large group, teacher-directed, planned learning activities. Even with improved instruction, some students may still fall behind. Schools must offer extra help to students who need it. Students’ progress should be assessed regularly to identify which students need additional learning time. After-school, Saturday, or summer school sessions can provide instructional programs that supplement the instruction students receive in the classroom. Programs should provide students with different and better instruction and not more of the same instruction that failed them during the regular school year.
- **Increase parent involvement.** Schools must ensure that parents are supportive of students’ academic successes. It is especially important for parents to

understand and support the school's mission and that they be given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school achieve that mission. Studies have found a strong link between parents' emphasis on education and student achievement. Schools must find ways to increase parents' involvement in their children's education. Traditional avenues for parent involvement, such as PTA membership and volunteer work, may be impractical for parents who work multiple jobs, speak little English, or are intimidated by their children's schools. Staff should look for alternative activities that address the needs of at-risk parents, such as bringing health care, counseling, and other social services to the school.

- **Create an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning.** Research indicates that students will be more successful learners when their school's climate is orderly, purposeful, and businesslike and when they are free from the threat of physical harm. Another

common element among school reform models is the "smaller is better" approach to both class size and school organization. Reduced class sizes and smaller sub-schools within large schools have been shown to strengthen the bond between teachers and students and ease students' transitions between grade levels.

In summary, public schools can and do make a difference, even in impoverished communities. When schools provide the appropriate levels of support, assistance, structure, and conditions for learning, all children can learn at high levels, regardless of family background. Low performing schools that succeed in improving student achievement implement a rigorous curriculum that is aligned with both accountability standards and assessment. Successful schools support students, teachers, and parents, create an environment where every student is academically challenged, and set the expectation that all students will achieve at high levels.

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