How Schools Sustain Success

Showing improvement in student achievement is one thing. The challenge is sustaining it year after year.

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Under the microscope of increased accountability, a growing number of U.S. schools have been identified as underperforming on the basis of their low test scores. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation demands that low-performing schools improve their students' academic achievement annually. Yet sustained increases in student achievement are problematic for underperforming schools. A case in point: Only 83 of the 430 schools that participated in California's Immediate Intervention Underperforming Schools Program met their students' test score growth targets for two consecutive years (Just & Boese, 2002).

To better understand the differences and similarities between the 83 low-performing schools that sustained improved student test scores and the schools that were unable to sustain this improvement, I conducted a study of California's primary and secondary reform program schools. I compared the 83 schools that sustained growth on California's academic program index for two consecutive improvement program years with the 273 schools that showed growth for only one of the two years. (The remaining 74 schools in the program showed no growth in either year and were not included in the study.)

I compared the successful and unsuccessful schools according to three criteria: analyses of test scores and school characteristics; interview responses from four teachers and the principal at each of eight representative sample schools, four from each group; and questionnaire responses from the 356 principals whose schools experienced growth in at least one of the two years of the reform program.

Analysis of sample school characteristics revealed that the successful schools actually had higher levels of student mobility and a smaller percentage of fully credentialed teachers than the unsuccessful schools. Larger schools were also more successful than smaller schools at sustaining improved student test scores.

This is not to suggest that schools should advocate for increased student mobility, uncredentialed teachers, or larger enrollments to improve student achievement. Neither specific characteristics of schools nor qualities of students seemed to account for the striking differences between successful and unsuccessful schools in this study. Rather, improved
student achievement seems to be the product of how well a school operates and depends on the quality of leadership and the effectiveness of instructional programs and practices.

**Teacher Leadership**

Strong teacher leadership was apparent in each of the four successful sample schools. Teacher leadership appeared to develop when three conditions were present. First, the teachers had ample opportunities to make decisions about teaching and learning. Successful schools provided teachers with time to meet as grade-level or subject-matter teams. Moreover, teachers at successful schools reported that they regularly used this collaborative time to review student work and to discuss how to strengthen their classroom instruction.

Second, teachers engaged in various forms of informal action research. They used the results of their students' assessments to compare different instructional strategies and different classroom environments to see which strategies and environments encouraged student learning. Working together in this way enabled them to create a continual improvement cycle for their instruction.

Third, teachers developed their own internal leadership structures—such as team teaching, mentoring new teachers, and collaborating to share lesson designs—to support one another's resolve to improve student achievement.

Teacher leaders at the successful schools also made policy decisions. These decisions included the design of student intervention programs, the creation of student learning groups based on the individual student's skill weaknesses, the implementation of new standards-based grading systems, and a new focus on instructional strategies, such as reciprocal teaching. The teachers implemented these new programs themselves. To ensure consistency of implementation, they met informally to monitor teacher usage of the programs. When asked which changes contributed to sustained increases in student achievement, teachers at the successful schools cited these kinds of teacher-initiated changes in teaching and learning.

Teacher leadership was strengthened in the successful schools when teachers made decisions regarding professional development. To select appropriate professional development, teachers analyzed student data and determined where students needed academic support. For example, in one middle school, students tested poorly on reading comprehension. Teachers arranged for professional development for all staff members—including mathematics, science, and social studies teachers—in how to teach reading using informational text. After receiving the professional development and implementing specific instructional strategies in the classroom, teachers reassessed the students to see whether their test scores had improved.

In three of the four successful sample schools, teachers sought professional development that focused on improved pedagogy. Their selection of professional development for staff members focused on learning how to use Marzano's nine effective teaching strategies (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) and on increasing the rigor of their instruction by asking questions that required students to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate new concepts. The teachers believed that their focus on pedagogy strengthened their collaborative teams.
Teachers at successful schools spent between one and four hours weekly in collaborative lesson planning. This took place informally, during lunch or after school, as well as in formal weekly planning meetings. Informal conversations focused on successful lessons or problems in teaching specific concepts. In the formal weekly planning meetings, teachers shared student assessment data, analyzed student work, and monitored their own progress toward teaching the standards. Most of the successful schools hired substitutes to provide teachers with regular collaboration time. Teachers from unsuccessful schools reported that they collaborated “when the principal scheduled it in place of a staff meeting.” These meetings generally focused on planning for field trips, special events, and state testing.

Increased teacher leadership also created challenges. Teacher leaders cited personality conflicts with colleagues and perceived resentment from those teachers who were not in leadership positions. All teachers were subsequently offered professional development to improve their leadership skills. Staff development included video models of effective teacher-team meetings that foster collegial and professional relationships. Professional development included training in creating an effective agenda and conducting productive meetings. Teachers experienced in meeting management and creating consensus coached and mentored teachers who were new to leadership positions.

**Principal Leadership**

The successful schools in the study, as opposed to the unsuccessful ones, more often had the same principal for the last three years. Principals from successful schools believed that their previous experience in high-performing schools helped them hold higher expectations for students in their state improvement program schools. Principals stated that few colleagues, however, voluntarily sought principal positions at such schools. One experienced principal recently assigned to a state improvement program school said that when his colleagues learned of his new assignment, they asked, “Who did you tick off?”

Principals at the successful schools were more likely to create time for teachers to collaborate and to provide them with structured support. This included the principal’s frequent attendance at grade-level or department meetings and the expectation that teachers provide feedback on the meetings and let the principal know what he or she could do to help them. As a result, teachers at these schools said that they regularly reviewed student work, created rubrics and assessments, modeled lessons, and monitored how they used the professional development in the classroom.

When asked what they did to improve student achievement at their schools, principals from successful schools produced lists of programs, interventions, and professional development opportunities that contributed to this goal. These principals were comfortable using data and making changes when the data demonstrated that student achievement had not risen. “You can't feel sorry that something doesn't work; you just have to try something different,” explained one principal after determining that the school would have to abandon an unsuccessful after-school program.

The principals from the unsuccessful schools were far less comfortable with data. One principal
from an unsuccessful school described his attempts to use data to improve his school's effectiveness in raising student achievement as "shooting at moving targets." He claimed that the school could not achieve its state growth targets because "the failing group just keeps changing."

**District Office Leadership**

When asked to list three factors that were most likely to improve test scores, surveyed principals from both successful and unsuccessful schools included district leadership. All the unsuccessful sample schools demonstrated a lack of strong district leadership.

District leaders in successful schools provided more services than their counterparts in unsuccessful schools did. The successful schools benefited from focused districtwide professional development on pedagogy. Moreover, each summer the district office delivered follow-up professional development for new hires so that all teachers would have the opportunity to learn the same teaching strategies.

At the start of each school term, successful schools more often received assessment data disaggregated by teacher and by individual student than did unsuccessful schools. Teachers and principals also received training on how to use these data to improve instruction and academic achievement. In successful schools, teachers were more likely to find value in the district-provided benchmark assessments designed to track a student's learning. Teachers talked about how they used the assessment results to modify their instruction, such as creating student intervention and enrichment groups. The teachers sometimes agreed to alter their pacing calendars when they learned that the students were grasping new concepts either more quickly or more slowly than they had anticipated.

Principal from both successful and unsuccessful schools discussed their districts' practice of assigning experienced principals to schools with the greatest parent involvement and the greatest potential for parent conflicts. These schools tended to be in the highest socioeconomic areas of the district. New principals were placed in schools in which parent demands and conflicts were expected to be fewer. These schools tended to be in the lowest socioeconomic areas of the district. This practice contributed to a belief that ultimately became part of the culture—that assignment to low socioeconomic schools was either an entry-level position for new principals or a way of penalizing them for being unable to effectively handle parent conflicts. Transferring from lower to higher socioeconomic areas naturally represented a promotion.

A few districts changed this negative perception by placing principals alternately at high-achieving schools and at state improvement program schools. Experience at both types of schools helped principals develop high expectations for their students' academic achievement and increased the number of principals who had firsthand knowledge of both types of schools. The practice also fostered a new belief that both kinds of schools offer opportunities for professional growth.

Each of the eight principals interviewed for the study stated that the workload and pressure was greater for principals at low-performing schools. Principals from the successful schools said
that their districts scheduled monthly cohort meetings with all the district’s state improvement program schools. The principals so valued these meetings that they have continued to meet two years after leaving the state improvement program. Said one principal,

For the first time, I went to a meeting where I felt safe to share all the problems I was having. I say things in our cohort meeting that I would never say when all the district principals get together.

Some districts implemented a policy for state improvement program schools to receive additional district services. These services included additional professional development, additional visitations and support in curriculum and instruction from district personnel, district-provided grant writers, more comprehensive data analysis, and greater on-site visibility of the district superintendent. Unsuccessful schools did not receive these services.

**Programs and Practices**

Students who are learning English as a second language and students who are academically below grade level attending the successful schools had quite different experiences from those of comparable students who attended unsuccessful schools.

At the successful schools, teachers presented instruction that directly reinforced the students' understanding of how the English language works instead of teaching students conversational English. For example, rather than use curriculum that focused on teaching situational vocabulary—such as how to order a meal in a restaurant—teachers at successful schools used curriculum that focused on academic English and taught students how to use root words, suffixes, prefixes, and verb endings. Teachers believed that their focus on academic English gave all their students—both native and nonnative speakers of English—an advantage on the state test.

Teachers from the successful schools reported that students were grouped by their English language levels. The students received at least 40 minutes of instruction daily in how to read, write, and speak English. In contrast, teachers at the unsuccessful schools did not always group students by language levels and said they taught English language development “when they had time.” At successful schools, students not making adequate progress in English language acquisition received personal intervention and additional instruction in a pullout program.

In the successful schools, principals and district office personnel were instrumental in supporting all newly adopted district programs. At one successful elementary school, a new English language development program received far greater district support than the unsuccessful schools received. In this particular school, the district office paid for teacher training in the first year of program implementation and repeated the training yearly for all teachers new to the district. Administrators also made frequent classroom visits to verify consistent implementation and provide additional materials or training if needed.

Students who performed below grade level in language arts and mathematics at successful schools were far more likely to receive intervention in addition to their regular instruction than
were students attending unsuccessful schools. This additional instruction occurred during the school day with credentialed teachers. One teacher in a successful school stated, “We used to have para-educators running the intervention groups until we realized that we needed our strongest teachers with our most at-risk students.” When students showed proficiency in the targeted skills, they either exited the intervention programs or received additional instruction in other weak skill areas.

**Encouraging News**

The results of this study support the research studies of Mintrop (2003), Darling-Hammond (1997), and Barth (1990), which suggest that the solutions to improving education lie inside the schoolhouse. Schools and districts can replicate the successful strategies discussed here if they are willing to change in crucial ways.

One of the study's sample schools did just that. The overcrowded urban elementary school, with a student population of 1,119, is on a year-round multitrack and has a staggered schedule for 1st and 2nd grade. This schedule requires two teachers and 40 students to share a classroom for nearly two hours daily. Each 3rd through 6th grade class has 40 students enrolled. Eighty percent of students are English language learners, and 95 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. In the last four years, the school has had three principals and a 40 percent turnover in teaching staff. In 2003, the school moved to a temporary school site to allow for the construction of new classrooms. The school is scheduled to return to the original site sometime this year.

Despite the challenges, the school made its growth targets for four consecutive years.

When asked how they transformed their school from one that had the lowest test scores in the state to one noted for sustained improvement in student achievement, teachers credited changes in the district office's support of the school and changes in the school's instructional practices and programs. “We became very focused,” said one teacher. Another teacher cited evidence that these efforts are working. “Now the teachers want to be here,” she said. “Last year we only lost two teachers.” A telling comment made by a teacher revealed the staff's optimistic view of the school's future:

> When we return to the original school site in 2005, we won't be overcrowded and sharing classrooms. We're going to make even bigger jumps in student learning.

Schools and districts can bring about student achievement and sustain that achievement if they are willing to examine their practices and embrace change. All schools can replicate these strategies and make improved education available to everyone.

**References**


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