A Diamond in the Rough: Schools of Best Practice

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Two diverse, urban elementary schools in central Florida that had been low performing for over five years implemented a variety of effective practices at their schools and significantly increased student achievement. This paper reports the strategies that each school employed and describes the results of focus group sessions that were conducted with the school principal and teachers. The two schools are now considered “schools of best practice” by their school district because of the dramatic improvements made. Recurring themes reported by the two schools are compared with the national literature on the characteristics of effective schools.

A Diamond in the Rough: Schools of Best Practice

In central Florida as in other areas of the country, teachers, administrators and school district officials continue the work to improve teaching and learning in struggling, high-need schools. In one school district in central Florida, a task force identified several schools that had been considered low performing, but had transformed themselves into schools of best practice. These schools were identified by examining demographic factors including free/reduced lunch statistics, race, and mobility rates to predict performance on the state-wide assessment test. The result was that the regression model did predict school performance, and several schools identified as schools of best practice significantly outperformed predicted results based on the model. These schools had identified ways to increase student achievement in spite of the many challenges in their
urban settings, and in addition, it was found that the improvement on the state-wide assessment test was dramatic.

Characteristics of Effective Schools

Bollen (1996) states that if schools are to improve, they must be more responsible for creating an environment that encourages effective teaching and learning. Glickman (1993) describes successful schools as places where teachers guide one another and work collaboratively. At a conference in 2005, Gloeckler identified several characteristics of successful high schools: small learning communities; high expectations; data-driven decision making; curriculum alignment; an emphasis on reflection and relationship building; focused professional development based on need; and leadership. Gloeckler (2005) challenged the audience to solve rather than refer the problem.

Some of the recommendations of Gloeckler (2005) and others (Pollard-Durodola 2003) are reflected in the national literature on effective schools and the factors shown to have a positive impact on student learning. Researchers have found that effective schools have high expectations for student achievement; strong leadership; an emphasis on basic skills; frequent monitoring of student progress; time on task; and a structured, orderly environment (Edmonds, 1979; Purkey and Smith, 1983). These same characteristics have been found in effective schools with poor students in urban settings (Cole-Henderson; 2000).

Pollard-Durodola (2003) studied an inner city school to determine what factors were present to successfully assist poor, at-risk African American students. She identified the following characteristics: strong principal and teacher leadership; an emphasis on basic skills; high expectations for teaching and learning; frequent evaluation
of teachers and students; a curriculum that addresses student needs; staff development that addresses teachers’ needs; a plan to prevent academic problems; and a common vision.

Method

As previously mentioned, several schools in central Florida were studied to determine how they had transformed themselves from low performing to high performing schools. They were identified using a regression analysis study based on demographic factors including free/reduced lunch statistics, race, and mobility rates to predict performance on the state-wide assessment test. The regression model proved highly reliable in predicting school performance, and these schools significantly out-performed predicted results based on the model. Focus group interviews were conducted, first with the principal and then with faculty and staff members to identify the specific factors at each school that had contributed to the dramatic improvement in student achievement that had transformed a low performing school to a school of best practice. The results of the interview with the principal at School # 1 were compared with that of the teachers and staff members at School # 1 to find out if they identified similar factors. The same procedure was conducted at School # 2.

Faculty members from the College of Education at the University of Central Florida conducted the focus group interviews at the schools, and the results of two of those interviews are reported. The two elementary schools were inner city schools with poor, urban populations and had been low performing, as measured by performance on the state-wide assessment test, for four years. The university faculty members used the following questions to conduct the interviews.
1. Please share what you have done at your school to improve student achievement.

2. What are the top factors that you feel contributed to your success?

3. If there was a school with similar demographics that was looking for ways to improve achievement, what five “pieces of advice” would you give this school?

4. In order to further increase student achievement at your school, what additional resources would you say are needed?

5. Attracting teachers to relocate in low economic schools is a major concern for school districts. Additional pay has been used as a means of attracting teachers. Is this a good idea? Why/why not?

6. If you were in a position to bring about radical changes in public education, what would you do?

Results

A university faculty member and a university student conducted the interviews. In this way, the faculty member could conduct the interview and give undivided attention to the interviewee(s) while the student tape recorded and wrote or used a laptop computer to record the responses. Following the interviews, the faculty and student team met to discuss the recorded responses. Results are presented for two schools.

School # 1

When the principal began his tenure in the 1995-96 school year, School #1 was declared by the state of Florida as a “critically low, failing school.” At the time of the interview this inner city school of 840 students was an A school. 93% of the students
were on free/reduced lunch. It had an 80% mobility rate. The population was made up of 86% African American, 10% Hispanic, and 4% white students.

1. Please share what you have done at your school to improve student achievement.

   **Leadership**

   - The teachers were reluctant to credit the principal because they feared he would be moved to another school. Everyone at the school, including the principal, credited his leadership of the school for its success.

   **Curriculum Materials and Alignment**

   - In addition to the Sunshine State Standards and School District Grade Level Expectations, the teachers at School #1 created a list of standards for each grade level. They started at sixth grade and asked the middle school teachers what a student needed to know and being able to do to be successful in sixth grade. Then they worked backward, grade-by-grade listing the key things. They created a reasonable, reachable list. Every teacher has standards that they are expected to meet.

   - They send the lists home to parents at the beginning of the year so the parents know what the expectations are, and they know where their children need to be focusing their efforts.

   - The parents are warned that students will be retained if they do not master the skills.

   **Tutoring**

   - There is after-school tutoring four days a week and Saturday school. In early August the principal visits every classroom. He explains that there will be a test
on basic math skills for students entering each grade at the end of August; 100 problems and 5 minutes. Students must score a 90% or they will be required to stay after school until they master these skills. “Teachers can teach higher level concepts because they’re not spending a month and a half reviewing how to add and subtract, or how to multiply.”

• While after school tutoring and Saturday school are voluntary, the principal explained that parents really don’t have a choice. It is explained to them that children will be retained if they do not master the curriculum for each grade level.

Business/Community Partnership

• A local bank has partnered with School #1. They offer a school savings program. They also volunteer at the school.

Mentoring

• The principal admitted that, “Teaching is a hard job anyway. Teaching here is one of the hardest jobs in the world.” Mentoring is one way this reality is addressed at School #1. There is a literacy coach at grades K, 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. There is an instructional coach that just does mentoring. The National Board Certified teachers mentor other teachers. No teacher is left without support.

Use of Time

• As the instructional leader, the principal empowers teachers to do what they do best – teach. Teachers don’t have lunch or bus duty. Teachers aren’t expected to hunt for supplies or distract themselves with clerical jobs. Teachers are freed to teach.
Fostering Parental Involvement

- Parental support, though limited, is encouraged. Parents receive a report card from the teachers in which they are graded on how they are doing with their child. Things like signing the planner, helping with homework, attending PTA meetings and having lunch with their child are considered in this evaluation.

2. What are the top factors that you feel contributed to your success?

**Principal**

- High expectations for our standards
- Teachers suited to the school population
- Tutoring
- Mental health program at the school that provides services to the children.

**Teachers**

- Dedication
- High expectations
- Leadership

3. If there was a school with similar demographics that was looking for ways to improve achievement, what five “pieces of advice” would you give this school?

**Principal**

- Develop standards
- Enforce them
- Be consistent
- Recruit high quality teachers
- Realize it’s not an over-night thing
Teachers

- Consistent program
- Hire carefully
- Teacher attitude of “My kids can do this.”
- Hire more teachers to improve the teacher-student ratio

4. In order to further increase student achievement at your school, what additional resources would you say are needed?

Principal

- Money
  - To hire exceptional education teachers and special area teachers.
  - To buy computers
  - To pay for tutoring
  - To purchase books for the library
  - To purchase textbooks

Teachers

- More flexibility
- Substitutes
- Behavior specialist

5. Attracting teachers to relocate in low economic schools is a major concern for school districts. Additional pay has been used as a means of attracting teachers. Is this a good idea? Why/why not?

Principal

- Yes. But it all starts with a principal who will support teachers.
Teachers

- No. The additional More flexibility
- Substitutes
- Behavior specialist pay should be for teachers who stay. “We work a whole lot harder; you have to love these kids.
- Allow teachers who work in high-risk schools to retire five years earlier.

6. If you were in a position to bring about radical changes in public education, what would you do?

Principal

- Take what is happening at our school and replicate it on a district-wide basis.

Teachers

- Pay teachers more.
- Require less paper work
- Staff two adults in every classroom in a high risk school.
- Lower class size

Recurring Themes of School #1

Based upon the data collected, five recurring themes were noted:

1. Traits and characteristics of school’s leadership
2. High expectations
3. Consistently enforced standards
4. Dedicated teachers
5. Leadership very connected to issues and faculty
The principal’s summary remarks at the end of the interview said it all. “We love our children. And the children know that we love them. When you know someone loves you and cares about you, you’re going to work harder for them. We have very high expectations. We’ve created high standards that they know.” School #1 was an “A” school not by accident. It achieved its status by hard work, a caring attitude, high expectations and standards, and a willingness to give 110%.

School #2

School #2 is an elementary school with 512 students: 96.67% are African American; 1.75% are Hispanic; 0.19% are White; and 1.39% are Other. The percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch is 81.8%. The principal has been there for sixteen years and the average years of experience of the teachers is five years. At the time of the interview this school was an “A” school with a committed faculty, staff and administration.

1. Please share what you have done at your school to improve student achievement.

Leadership (the Principal growing as a leader) and District Support

- The principal stated that the school principal must continue to grow. She hired a consultant to help her develop her own skills using the Seven Correlates of Effective Schools. The consultant became her coach and mentor to help in the growth process, and she made a deliberate decision to model learning and growth for her staff. She brought in other consultants to work with faculty in reading, writing, and math.
• In January of 1998, the principal requested additional staff for the school: an Assistant Principal and a Curriculum Resource Teacher. At the time, the justification for acquiring an assistant principal position was to have 750 students, while School #2 had an average of 500 students. The district wrote a grant for an Instructional Coach position, a Reading Coach position and an Assistant Principal.

• The principal was optimistic that School #1 could be an “A” school in the new millennium even though it had been a “D” school three times, an “F” school, and a “B” school. She established a leadership team at the school. This team focused on state standards and benchmarks and held weekly meetings. The agenda of these meetings was tailored to address the Seven Correlates of Effective Schools. The school also implemented continuous improvement models to look at benchmarks and state standards.

• Faculty and staff members held weekly meetings to analyze student data and student assessments and make data-driven decisions.

• The principal hired data analysts to look at the school and the data. The curriculum resource teacher and assistant principal attended the data analysis meetings. The process of data analysis concluded that if teachers in the third and fourth grades could work to improve the grades of three students in each class, the overall grade of the school could be improved. Data analysis was conducted at the beginning of the year to determine which students are at risk and who teachers need to focus on.
The principal strategically looked at teacher strengths and placed teachers at grade levels according to their strengths and where they would be of greatest benefit to students. In this way, teachers’ strengths were maximized and students reaped the rewards.

Not all programs are suitable for use at all schools. The principal recommended that each school principal must understand the culture of his or her school and select the programs that the teachers will gravitate towards. The staff at School #2 studied material provided by different consultants and selected what worked for the students.

When School #2 received an “F” grade, the faculty and staff members went through the stages of grief. They realized the urgent need for reviewing their current practices and held many meetings to discuss how to change practices and improve. Teachers modeled an “I Can” attitude for students so that they would also see that it was possible to change.

Curriculum Materials and Alignment

The principal consulted with a colleague at a school which had improved from an “F” grade to a “B” grade, and was referred to another consultant. The consultant worked with School #2 on reading. The work was driven by state targets and benchmarks. The consultant also worked with teachers on staff development.

The principal arranged for another consultant in math and arranged for professional development opportunities for herself, teachers, and administrative staff. She also brought in motivational speakers to speak to
the children. One consultant used rap songs to facilitate writing and math by creating math raps, rhymes, etc.

- Teachers utilized multiple resources in order to meet the diverse learning needs of different students. They felt and still feel strongly that there is no one program that will meet the needs of students, but that multiple programs, strategies, techniques, and approaches must be used.

- The K-5 curriculum is aligned vertically.

**Tutoring**

- An after-school tutoring program was implemented to assist students who were performing poorly. Every 9 weeks, a ceremony was held to recognize achievement in this after-school tutoring program.

**Business/Community Partnership**

- A business/community partner adopted School #2 to help level the playing field by providing incentives to both teachers and students. The school held workshops for parents and the business/community partner encouraged parent attendance by paying for babysitting costs and providing food for school functions. At the beginning of each school year, the business/community partner hosted a welcome back breakfast for the staff. The business/community sponsored two nights of reading at two local libraries, helping to create awareness within the parent community to utilize local resources and help educate parents on what they could do to help their children. The business/community partner also helped to
improve the look of the school by planting palm trees and providing other landscaping at the school.

- A neighborhood center provided computers for the school. It also facilitated a grant that provided an after-school tutoring program in math.

**Mentoring**

- The school had many outside mentors who came into the school and provided mentoring to students and teachers. The business/community partner sponsored sixty mentors to come in after the school received an “F” grade.
- The Boys and Girls club provided a mentor to spend one day a week in the classroom with designated students. Volunteers from the YMCA program came in twice a week to work with students.
- The school developed a foster grandparents program in which children become attached to a ‘grandparent’ who provides guidance and mentoring for that child.
- Beginning teachers were provided with mentors who held weekly meetings with them to assist them in daily planning and other areas.
- The school sent the technology staff to professional development workshops in order to ensure that students had access to the best programs available.

**Use of Time**

- The staff examined their day and scrutinized their use of time. Steps were taken to maximize instructional time. Student transition time was limited
and teachers moved from class to class while students stayed where they were. Valuable minutes of instructional time were gained with this change.

- The leadership team restructured the school day and allowed students to come to school earlier so that they have some extra time in the morning. Recess was eliminated from the school day.

2. **What are the top factors that you feel contributed to your success?**

   **Principal**
   - Leadership - the principal growing as a leader
   - Support from the school district in obtaining additional staff members for the school
   - Getting the children to believe in themselves; getting the staff to believe that change was possible
   - Developing a comprehensive vision for the school

   **Teachers**
   - Leadership – the principal growing as a leader
   - Faculty and staff working together closely as a team
   - Teachers placed where their strengths are so they can be of most help to students
   - Implementing assessment on a weekly basis to monitor student progress

3. **If there was a school with similar demographics that was looking for ways to improve achievement, what five “pieces of advice” would you give this school?**
• Look at the consultants that you are using to see if they are facilitating success for your school.

• Have the principal look at his/her leadership skills, and hire a coach or consultant to assist with his/her growth. The principal should also learn to delegate tasks to key people.

• Have the principal designate time to meet with teachers.

• Look at your teachers to see where their strengths are. Make decisions based on the identified strengths by utilizing teachers in the areas where their strengths will be capitalized upon. It is important to get the teachers to buy into the notion that all the work that is done and any changes that are implemented are for the good of the children.

• Guard/protect instructional time and examine teaching practices to utilize maximum time for learning. Schedule activities after school so that they do not interfere with instructional time. Extra-curricular activities should serve to enhance learning.

• The time leading up to the statewide assessment test (FCAT) should be spent focusing on FCAT. For this reason, activities, such as field trips, should be planned for the beginning of the school year.

• Use student data and benchmarks to drive instruction. Make provisions to have a designated time that the principal meets with individual teachers. Make certain that the focus is on the curriculum so that teachers are teaching what students need to know.
• Use multiple resources for instruction. Instruction should be driven by data analysis.

• Keep open communication with and among staff. Communication is vital to ensure that all are working towards common goals.

• Do not leave 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade classrooms with revolving substitute teachers.

• Dedication from the staff is crucial. Many times, teachers may be required to go beyond what is required of them.

• Develop/encourage mutual respect and coordination among staff members.

• Provide technology for staff and students. Technology should be updated and utilized to facilitate data-driven instruction and time management.

• Do not be swayed by the wind of opinion. There is no one answer that fits every situation. It is important to look at the different programs available and select what will be useful for your purposes.

4. In order to further increase student achievement at your school, what additional resources would you say are needed?

• Books (new).

• More mentors so as to provide individual assistance and hands-on help in the classroom.

• Technology and computers/laptops for teachers.

• An additional counselor.

• New school building- the facility is old and in need of upgrading.
• The ability to keep teachers for at least five years so that they can be mentored, nurtured, and guided as they grow in the classroom.

• Continued support and partnership with business/community partners, the school district, and the community.

• More support staff and paraprofessionals especially for exceptional student education classrooms.

• Partnerships with local universities. Interns from the University of Central Florida have been very helpful.

5. Attracting teachers to relocate in low economic schools is a major concern for school districts. Additional pay has been used as a means of attracting teachers. Is this a good idea? Why/why not?

Principal

• Yes. The principal reported that she has witnessed teachers turn down a position because they were offered more money in another school district.

   Are there incentives that should be considered?

• Free extended-day programs for teachers in the school district. Make provisions for teachers to place their children in extended-day programs in schools in the district.

• Loan forgiveness program for teachers; payback programs for student loans.

• College tuition and books for teachers who have taught for a certain length of time
Teachers

- No. If teachers who come to teach in low economic schools do not do so out of a sincere desire, they will not stay. Teaching is more than just a job; it is more than just teaching the curriculum. “You have to have heart.”
- Pay tolls for teachers who have to drive long distances to get to school.
- Keep class size small in order to retain teachers.
- Reward teachers who have “proven records of having stayed at low economic schools” rather than just trying to attract teachers with extra pay. It is important to show appreciation to those teachers who have proven their dedication instead of taking chances with teachers who are not guaranteed to stay.
- Provide overtime pay for teachers to allow them time to do all the work that they need to do after school.

6. If you were in a position to bring about radical changes in public education, what would you do?

- Set up college funds for students. If children knew they could go to college without worrying about money, they would be more motivated to work hard.
- Have two teachers to a classroom.
- Require unitary status (diversity) among students, not just teachers.
- Bring the arts back (e.g. music, art, and physical education) into the curriculum. Current budget cuts force children to make a choice. Provide
several options for the children so that they can develop their strengths. By doing this, children can receive validation on non-academic achievements.

- Revise the testing requirements of the current system. This would go a long way to reduce the stress levels that children experience and provide them with an alternative vehicle for excellence.

- Extend the length of the school day. The current school day is too short to accomplish all the requirements of the curriculum. Cultures where children excel have longer school days.

- Build in recess for children. A school day without recess reduces the level of attention that students can pay. Having recess time would help children release some energy and thereby increase attention.

- Teach children a second language. This provides stimulation for children and also gives them more options later in life.

- Provide a gymnasium for students.

- Conduct fewer district assessments with students and instead, allow teachers more time to focus on teaching. Further, the testing from the county does not align with the curriculum.

- Provide accountability without FCAT and the school “grade” system.

- Look at programs for inner city schools.

- Bump up salaries.

- Tell our story to help gain respect for the profession.

**Recurring Themes of School #2**

Based upon the data collected, six recurring themes were noted:
1. The need for a strong leader and a team approach
2. A comprehensive vision for the school with ownership by all
3. Data-driven decision making and frequent monitoring of progress
4. Efficient use of instructional time
5. Support from a business/community partner and the school district
6. Alignment of the curriculum

Everyone in this school believed it was possible to change. That “I Can” attitude helped bring about the substantive changes that were needed to improve this school. When you enter the front office of the school, you can sense that something good is happening there and every time you arrive and leave, you get a hug from someone.

Conclusions

The results of the focus group interviews for these two schools were consistent with the results from five others that also participated in the process. The recurring themes included effective and efficient use of time; strong leadership; curriculum alignment; mentoring of students; business/community partnerships; parental support; high expectations; teamwork; school-wide commitment to improvement; and data-driven decision making. Furthermore, the findings in this study of two schools that were once considered to be low performing, show similarities to the characteristics of effective schools reported by Gloeckler (2005), which include high expectations; data-driven decision making; curriculum alignment; and leadership. Pollard-Durodola (2003) also identified strong principal and teacher leadership; high expectations; and a common vision; while Cole-Henderson (2000) and Purkey and Smith (1983) noted strong leadership; and time on task as being characteristics of effective schools.
Knowing the factors that positively impact student achievement in urban schools provides valuable information and opportunities for school districts with similar demographics and challenges to move from low performing schools to schools of best practice. It remains for schools to make a commitment to examine schools like themselves that have made substantial improvements and replicate what these successful schools have achieved. In addition, those involved in teacher preparation from College of Education could examine ways to become involved in partnerships with low performing schools as they strive to become schools of best practice.
References


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