McREL INSIGHTS

Schools that
"Beat the Odds"

McREL

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Table of Contents

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By 2014, all children must meet state standards in reading and mathematics under the No Child Left Behind Act. With over 25,000 schools failing to reach their target for annual yearly progress in 2002–2003, state and local education officials are feeling a sense of urgency about reducing achievement gaps and raising the level of knowledge and skills of all children. A long history of research has identified factors deemed critical for school effectiveness. Still, a lack of research on the relationships among these factors leaves educators with little to go on when considering how best to organize schools to ensure the success of all students.

This technical brief is based on McREL's study of academically successful high-needs schools. Through this study, researchers at McREL have identified ways in which high- and low-performing, high-needs schools are similar and ways in which they differ. This brief sheds light on the organization of high-needs schools, how this relates to student achievement, and the implications for policy and practice.

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Organizing Schools for Success

McREL's line of inquiry, like that of other researchers, was to identify "beat the odds" schools — high-needs schools that were having success with improved student achievement — and then compare them with comparable low-performing, high-needs schools. This study went a step further, however, in focusing on the organizational or systemic differences between high- and low-performing schools. The overarching question was whether high-performing, high-needs schools were organized differently than low-performing, high-needs schools.

"High-needs" schools were those in which 50 percent or more of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. "High-performing" schools scored well above state averages, and "low-performing" schools scored well below averages.

A total of 76 high-needs elementary schools from 10 states participated in the McREL study. The 49 high-performing and 27 low-performing schools were similar in school size, poverty, location, and teacher preparation and experience. Low-performing schools in the study, however, were more ethnically diverse (54% vs. 37% in high-performing schools).

This study identified, from education research, four key components of school success: instruction, school environment, professional community and leadership. In addition, sub-components of each of the four major components were identified. The ones deemed most critical to the effectiveness of high-needs schools were included in the study.

Classroom Instruction

The core work of schools takes place in the classroom where students are given the opportunity to develop and demonstrate proficiency on standards through teacher guidance, curriculum content, and a variety of learning activities. Our study incorporated three complementary sub-components of effective instruction in high-needs schools that had been identified in prior research: structure, individualization, and opportunity to learn.

THE OVERARCHING QUESTION WAS WHETHER HIGH-PERFORMING, HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS WERE ORGANIZED DIFFERENTLY THAN LOW-PERFORMING, HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS.

Effective schools provide a structure that makes the goals and expectations clear for students. In high-needs, high-performing schools, teachers are more likely to explicitly teach students how to independently manage their work and to actively guide and coach them through study or exploration. These teachers are also more proficient at classroom management (Crone & Teddlie, 1995; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Structured instruction, however, does not necessarily mean rigid, non-responsive instruction. Through a review of student performance data, classroom instruction and learning activities can be individualized, resulting in positive academic gains (Baker, Gersten & Lee, 2002; Hill & Rowe, 1998; Waxman, Wang, Anderson & Walberg, 1985). Ensuring that the enacted curriculum meets both the content and cognitive demands required by the standards defines the opportunity to learn. In high-performing, high-needs schools, students appear to have opportunity to engage in more challenging class work than in low-performing schools (Lauer, Palmer, Van Buhler, & Fries, 2002).

Key Sub-Components of Instruction in Effective Schools:
- *Structure*
- *Individualization*
- *Opportunity to learn*

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

In this study, school environment represents those school-level factors that affect instruction but cannot be ascribed to a particular position (e.g., to teachers, curriculum coordinators, or principals). These factors reflect policies created at the school, district, or community level that impact the entire school faculty, parents, and students. Four sub-components of an effective school environment were examined in this study: orderly climate, assessment and monitoring, parent involvement, and academic press for achievement.

Effective schools are shown to have an orderly climate that supports learning through clear and enforced expectations for student behavior that minimize disruptions. Assessment and monitoring in these schools occurs at all levels — school, classroom, and student. Regular review of

student performance keeps the focus on core goals and identifies areas of adjustment. Parent involvement in effective schools is viewed in terms of the degree to which there is a positive and productive relationship between the school staff and parents. This includes determining not only how involved parents are in the school but also how much of their voice is present in the school culture and operating principles. Finally, academic press for achievement is an indication of the expectation that all students will achieve at a high level. This one factor is cited consistently in the school-effectiveness literature as being critical to success, particularly with regard to helping low-achieving students perform to high standards.

> ### Key Sub-Components of School Environment in Effective Schools:
>
> - **Orderly climate**
> - **Assessment and monitoring**
> - **Parent involvement**
> - **Academic press for achievement**

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

Shared norms and values, a collective focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatization of practice, and reflective dialogue typically define professional community (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). The effects of professional community on instruction and school environment were examined in this study through assessment of three sub-components: professional development, collaboration, and support for teacher influence.

Research supports the importance of professional development within a community of learners as a means of changing teacher practice (Garet, et al, 1999) and effecting school-wide change (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Collaboration among teachers fosters the sharing of work and expertise, as well as a sense of affiliation and support (Louis et al., 1996; Secada & Adajian, 1997; Newmann & Wehlage). A recent study of high- and low-performing schools found more collaboration among teachers in schools with higher achievement (Bruner & Greenlee, 2000). Teachers

in professional communities are also more likely to work together in one another's classrooms (deprivatization of practice), interacting with one another, observing, mentoring, providing feedback, and sharing expertise (Louis et al., 1996; Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999). Finally, in a professional community teachers are empowered. A climate of respect in which leadership is shared results in support for teacher influence (Louis et al., 1996; Bryk et al., 1999).

> **Key Sub-Components of Professional Community in Effective Schools:**
> - **Professional development**
> - **Collaboration**
> - **Deprivatization of practice**
> - **Support for teacher influence**

LEADERSHIP

We also examined the influence of leadership on instruction, professional community, and school environment. Three sub-components of leadership were identified as relevant to effective schools: shared mission and goals, instructional guidance, and organizational change.

Effective school leaders promote shared mission and goals by framing and communicating a common vision and a set of clearly defined goals that determine the areas in which school staff expend their resources. The focus is on linking beliefs and actions in the school, such as academic expectations, opportunity to learn, and time for learning. Three ways that effective leaders can provide instructional guidance are by developing and allocating the resources necessary for effective instruction; ensuring that curriculum, assessment, and instruction are aligned; and monitoring the day-to-day work of teachers in classrooms. And, in high-needs schools where principals must

> **Key Sub-Components of Leadership in Effective Schools:**
> - **Shared mission and goals**
> - **Instructional guidance**
> - **Organizational change**

"beat the odds," leaders must be able to make organizational changes in areas such as school policies and culture.

A MODEL OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

Taken together, these four key components of instruction, school environment, professional community, and leadership and their sub-components form a model of an effective school (see Figure 1). McREL's study examined the relationships among each of the four components and the extent to which this model accurately represented the overall organization of high- and low-performing, high-needs schools.

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL, HIGH-NEEDS ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS.
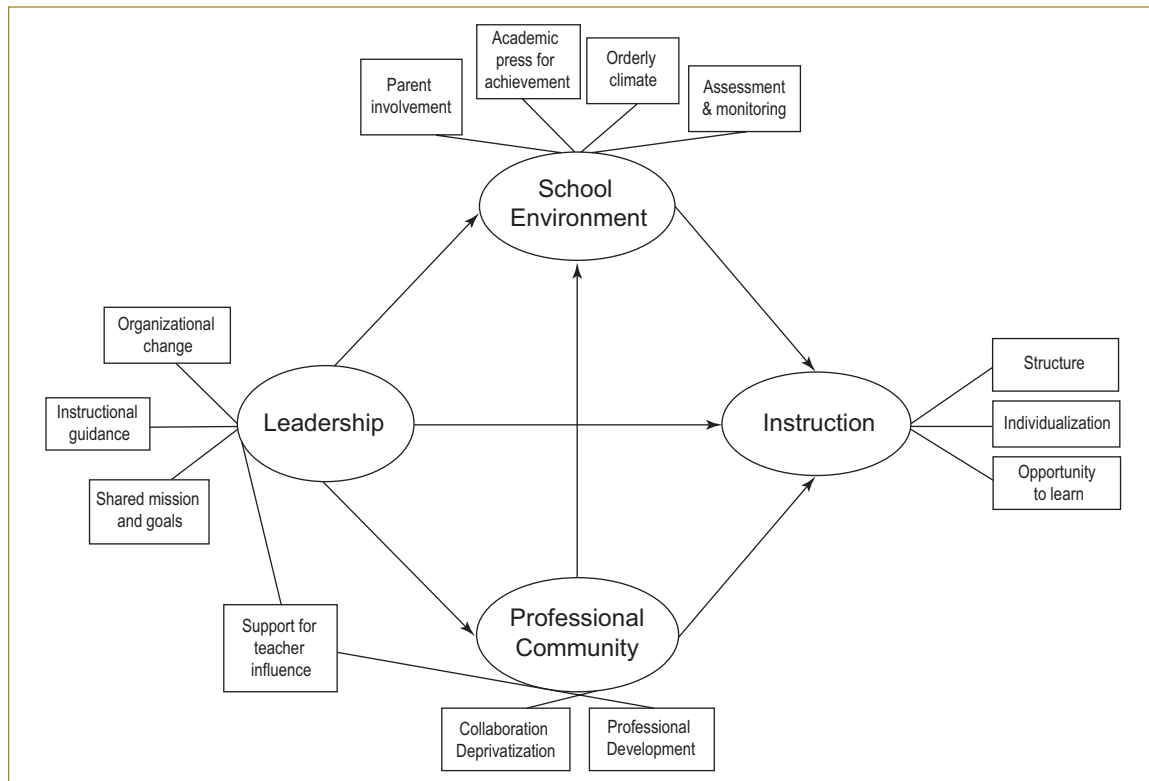
LESSONS LEARNED

Perhaps the most significant finding from the study was that the ways in which high- and low-performing schools are organized does not differ, as McREL and others had imagined. Instead, the relationships among instruction, school environment, professional community, and leadership are the same for both sets of high-needs elementary schools. In the end, better instructional practices are supported by a strong professional community and a positive school environment, both of which are heavily influenced by effective leadership.

It would seem, then, that it may not be necessary to attempt a reorganization of a low-performing, high-needs school in order to move it towards higher performance. Reorganizations are disruptive and draw resources away from the everyday work of schools. They can also divert attention from the core components that must be improved if better student results are to be obtained. This finding suggests a need to look further for other strategies to turn around low-performing schools.

Finding #1:
High- and low-performing high-needs schools are not organized differently.

Although the relationships among instruction, school environment, professional community, and leadership do not differ in high- and low-performing high-needs schools, the relative influence of each sub-component does. High-performing schools have a more supportive school environment, more effective instructional practices, and strong leadership. With regard to the school environment, high-performing schools had greater academic press for achievement and more orderly school climate. High-performing schools were also

Finding #2:
The difference between high- and low-performing, high-needs schools is found in the school environment, nature of instruction, and leadership.

more likely to have a shared mission and goals and more support for teacher influence. Overall, successful schools provided more structured instruction where the goals and expectations for student learning were clear to all involved.

What School Leaders Can Do

In this and other studies (see for example, Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), leadership has been shown to have a strong direct influence on the school environment and professional community and an indirect influence on classroom instruction. In other words, leadership directly affects school environment and professional community, which, in turn, directly affect instruction. This section highlights some of the areas in which administrators may want to examine policies and practices to see how they align with McREL's findings on high-performing, high-needs schools.

FOCUS ON IMPROVING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND CREATING A MORE ORDERLY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT.

ACADEMIC PRESS FOR ACHIEVEMENT. Researchers have found that the ability to instill in students a belief that they could learn is critical to the success of effective low-socioeconomic schools (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Administrators looking for ways to increase this academic press for achievement are encouraged to review school policies and practices to ensure that they reflect a clear focus on: mastering basic skills, high expectations for all students, use of records to monitor student progress, and a school-wide orientation towards high achievement (Marzano, 2000). In the classroom, school administrators may want to look for evidence of teachers setting clear academic goals with students, demonstrating consistently high expectations for all students in the class, and using homework to provide greater structure in student learning.

ORDERLY CLIMATE. A safe and orderly school environment has been identified as one of the most important variables in helping low-achieving students in this and other studies (Borman & Rachuba, 2001). Therefore, administrators may want to assess whether their schools have policies in place that clearly articulate rules and codes of behavior along with associated rewards and punishments. Evidence

that students and staff understand the policies and that the policies are consistently enforced are other things to look for. Finally, in reviewing a school's disciplinary procedures, administrators may consider the importance of including "thoughtful prevention" of disruptions to support effective teaching and learning (McCollum, 1995).

SHARED MISSION THROUGH SUPPORT FOR TEACHER INFLUENCE. When principals and administrators share leadership with staff and create shared ownership with teachers around norms, values, and expectations, the school mission and goals are more likely to be a prominent part of the day-to-day operation of a school (Louis et al, 1996). By welcoming teachers' input regarding the learning environment, administrators can promote a climate of respect and sustain teachers' professional community.

STRUCTURED INSTRUCTION. Although individualized instruction and opportunity to learn undoubtedly shape the effectiveness of classroom instruction, the McREL study found that it was the extent to which the goals and expectations for learning were clear to students that differentiated high- and low-performing schools. Administrators may want to look at the ways in which their school provides greater structure in instructional settings. Employing motivational strategies, such as specifying learning and behavioral goals and awarding prizes when goals are met, is a practice associated with higher achievement among lower socioeconomic students (Heistad, 1997). Another practice to be explored is the use of explicit instruction and feedback to students on how they are doing (Marzano, 2001).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The findings from this study provide educators with clear guidance on the key components they should attend to in order to improve student achievement in high-needs schools. In addition, by demonstrating strong correlations among the school factors, the study also provides evidence that schools do, indeed, operate as systems. Thus, school leaders should recognize these interconnections when planning and implementing school improvement efforts and take a systems approach to helping their schools "beat the odds."

EMPOWER TEACHERS TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A SHARED MISSION THROUGH CLEARLY ARTICULATED GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS.

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