

Executive Summary

Purpose

Five high achieving schools were selected to participate in a study conducted by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). The purpose of the study was to ascertain how the schools were implementing policies, procedures, and practices that are likely contributing to the academic achievement of their schools. Common themes were noted across the schools as a result of the study and are summarized in this report.

Study Methodology

Schools were selected based on the academic achievement of their disaggregated groups, specifically English learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing poverty, and minority students. Eight Colorado Department of Education employees with expertise in various areas relevant to the study were selected and trained to conduct onsite interviews, focus groups, and observations. Prior to conducting the onsite visits, the study team studied the schools by reviewing documents available to CDE and the schools' and districts' websites. Prior to the onsite visits, personnel and families were invited to participate in anonymous surveys to provide their perception of the schools.

While onsite, interviews were conducted of school leaders and personnel with knowledge of the schools' practices that had likely contributed to the schools' success with the disaggregated groups. These interviewees included but were not limited to principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, English language development specialists (teachers and coaches), SPED specialists (teachers and coaches), teachers, and paraprofessionals. Focus groups were conducted with families, community members, and students.

Findings

During the study, some common practices were noted across the schools:

- Relationships between school leaders, teachers, families, and students are valued and prioritized. Time and effort are devoted to building and maintaining strong relationships by getting to know each other on a personal level, including the cultural backgrounds of the individuals within the schools.
- Time devoted to selected priorities is invested and protected. School leaders value and respect the time needed for effective instruction, learning new strategies, and mastering skills. They also protect time devoted to priorities such as collaboration among team members and analyzing, studying, and using data. By minimizing the number of initiatives each year, the schools are able to focus on the agreed upon and protected priorities.
- Performance monitoring is purposeful, frequent, and effectively used. Data is used to progress monitor student performance and growth. Students are identified for fluid/flexible small group instruction based on data on an ongoing basis. Teachers' performance is monitored through frequent informal observations and feedback, in addition to the more formal evaluation processes in place. The frequent informal feedback is intended to

Common Themes across the High Achieving Schools

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- Performance monitoring is purposeful, frequent, and effectively used.
- Decisions are student-centered.
- Expectations are set high, made explicit, frequently expressed, and consistently applied.
- Learning is purposefully and meaningfully structured.
- Staff intentionally uses common language for consistent messaging.
- Schools capitalize on available resources.

provide opportunities for continuous improvements that lead to more effective performance earlier in the process than that which is afforded through the formal evaluation.

- Decisions are student-centered. Schools use data to make decisions that will best meet the needs of their students. School leaders and staff know each of the students, including their academic histories and cultural backgrounds, allowing them to make better decisions that are aligned with the students' best interests. Staff is involved in decision-making as often as possible, and principals prioritize what is best for students when making tough decisions.
- Expectations are set high, made explicit, frequently expressed, and consistently applied. High and consistent expectations are set for everyone affiliated with the school, not just students, and are communicated until everyone knows and can articulate them. Expectations and procedures are posted throughout the schools, and school personnel share the expectations with parents and ask for their input and support in enforcing the expectations. Personnel hold high expectations for themselves and share the responsibility for meeting expectations regarding student outcomes.
- Learning is purposefully and meaningfully structured. Instruction is aligned both across and within grades. Learning environments are clean, well-organized, and attractive. Students are placed into small, fluid groups based on their skill level and content knowledge. Frequent progress monitoring and regrouping of students based on the most recent data results ensure that students are gaining access to needed content and skills as efficiently and expeditiously as possible.
- Staff intentionally uses common language for consistent messaging. The intentional use of common language is an integral part of their alignment of instructional practices, norms, and classroom management practices across the whole school. The value of collaboration and teamwork is reinforced by the consistent use of collective vocabulary (e.g., "our students", "our goals", and "our mission"). Staff shares and expresses a sense of collective ownership and responsibility for students. Not only did students express a sense of belonging and protection provided by the whole school, they could also clearly articulate what is expected of them behaviorally and academically from all adults within the school. By the time that students reached higher grade levels, they are able to hold each other accountable behaviorally, allowing the teachers the freedom to focus on academic and instructional needs, rather than classroom management needs.
- Schools capitalize on available resources. They minimize work when possible through relying on each other's expertise. Resident experts are utilized for training and supporting others within the building rather than relying on external trainings. Professional development is used wisely by ensuring that it is needed and will be utilized, and the person receiving the professional development is expected to share with others what he or she learned.
- Schools strive for continuous improvement. Despite their high achievement, complacency was not noted within these schools. School leaders and staff strive for continued improvement. They prioritize initiatives and use data to inform their progress and identify other areas in need of improvement.

Conclusions

This study investigated how five high achieving schools implemented policies, procedures, and practices. Numerous themes were found among the schools. These themes included valuing relationships, investing and protecting time, effective performance monitoring, making decisions based on students' best interests, setting high and consistent expectations, purposeful and structured learning, sending consistent messages, capitalizing on resources, and continuously improving. Many of the practices implemented by these schools required minimal financial resources. Many of the practices and strategies noted in these schools were very traditional and often exemplified and described in education literature and research. Nonetheless, the consistency with which the practices and strategies were observed was commendable. The whole school beliefs, supports, and approaches to their work epitomized team work and collaboration. The onsite visits to these schools by the CDE study team provided evidence for the types of practices and strategies that could be supported by CDE administered funds.



Next Steps

As a next step to this study, CDE will develop opportunities for lower performing schools to implement some of the common factors and strategies observed in the high achieving schools. An evaluation will be conducted to determine if low performing schools can improve student outcomes using the practices and strategies used by the high achieving schools.

Where can I learn more?

For information about the study, contact Nazanin Mohajeri-Nelson

- Mohajeri-nelson_n@cde.state.co.us
- (303) 866-6205

For information about the High Fliers Network, contact Lynn Bamberry

- Bamberry_l@cde.state.co.us
- (303) 866-6813

Report Authors

- Nazanin Mohajeri-Nelson
- Alexandra Rechlin