Case Study Research on *Schools of Promise*

The state Superintendent of Public Instruction's *Schools of Promise* program, administered by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), recognizes schools across Ohio that are demonstrating high achievement in reading and mathematics for all groups of students, despite the fact that 40 percent or more of these students come from low-income backgrounds. Students in these schools meet or exceed the state standard of 75 percent passage in reading or mathematics, or both.

To help close achievement gaps in Ohio, ODE sponsored case studies by five research organizations that examine the effective instructional practices and cultural qualities of *Schools of Promise*. The findings from this research serve as a resource for educators and administrators interested in improving student achievement for all populations of students in their school. Studies centered on five categories: a mix of rural, small town and urban schools with an emphasis on reading/language arts achievement; schools that had 75 percent of their students with disabilities demonstrating proficiency in reading, math or both; rural schools with an emphasis on mathematics achievement; schools with a focus on teacher quality and effectiveness in schools; and, effective practices in urban schools.

ODE is grateful to the 39 *Schools of Promise* who participated in this research. The Department recognizes these schools for the incredible achievement of their students, and appreciates their willingness to open their doors to researchers and share their successes with other schools.

Schools of Promise Successful in Reading/Language Arts

The Ohio Department of Education contracted with Institutional Research Consultants (IRC) to study the effective instructional practices of eight *Schools of Promise* identified because of their high performance in reading/language arts.

Of the 102 *Schools of Promise* recognized in the 2003-2004 school year for their reading performance, 29 were excluded from the sample due to their current or previous participation in case study research. Eight schools were randomly selected from the remaining 73 *Schools of Promise*.

Two-day site visits were conducted at each of the eight schools. Principals, teachers, staff and parents were interviewed and surveyed during these visits. Between eight and 14 classrooms were observed at each school. Finally, surveys and focus group interviews were conducted with students.

The study's findings support the "Five Lessons Learned" identified in earlier *Schools of Promise* research. These lessons emphasize the importance of instituting strong leadership, establishing

a school culture that values individual students, designing instruction to ensure student success, providing rigorous instruction aligned with the standards, and engaging parents and the community to support student success. As you will see, these emerging characteristics often relate to more than one of the five lessons, highlighting their interconnectedness.

STAFF CHARACTERISTICS

Each school shows strong leadership and a determined commitment to improving student performance. All of the schools had strong principals who were able to motivate staff and work with them collaboratively. Even where the principals were relatively new to the school, they were able to successfully build upon the progress made by their predecessors. Principals and teachers in the eight case study schools worked well with each other. They were experienced, professional and respectful of one another. Together, these staff members made concerted efforts to improve student performance – improvements did not simply happen by chance.

The staff in these eight schools care deeply about their students and were committed to putting them first. Staff provided students with appropriate support, including meeting students' social and physical needs, setting high standards, and expecting them to realize a high level of achievement.

Staff members at the elementary schools were especially aware of hardships experienced by many of the children. They had a great deal of compassion and wanted to help them. At the same time, staff maintained high expectations for their students. All four schools emphasized homework and had strong disciplinary measures in place.

Staff members at the high schools regularly demonstrated their belief in students and desire to help them succeed. They had high expectations but were cognizant of obstacles faced by many students. Consequently, teachers were often careful to encourage students without appearing to be overly pushy. Students appreciated teachers who consistently showed them compassion and ways they could improve without putting them down. Students at these schools often expressed that the school staff was one of the best things about the school.

At all four high schools, teachers were available to help students with academic issues, before or after school and during the lunch period. In addition, there were several teachers who the students trusted deeply and felt comfortable asking for help with personal issues.

PRACTICES IMPACTING STAFF

The practices that staff most often viewed as making the most difference are the use of common planning time and creative hiring practices or use of staff. Five schools demonstrated these characteristics. Both traits were somewhat more prevalent in elementary schools.

Common planning time means that teachers have regularly scheduled time to talk to each other and plan collaborative activities, especially with intervention teachers. Two of the elementary schools and one of the high schools established common planning time on a daily basis. During this shared planning, teachers spent time aligning their curriculum and lessons to the state standards, systematically analyzing student performance to better inform their intervention, learning what other departments were doing, and brainstorming effective practices to improve their instruction.

Besides daily planning, three of the schools introduced more comprehensive planning processes in which staff set specific goals for their students. While one school worked through this process on their waiver days and annual retreat, the other two schools met on a monthly basis. Even though the changes that resulted from these collaborative meetings were broader in nature, it is of interest that two of the elementary schools also experienced notable improvements in their math scores in recent years.

Creative hiring often resulted in additional support staff, which gave the schools flexibility in meeting the needs of students. For example, some schools hired long-term substitutes as tutors or brought in additional aides to increase intervention efforts. For example, one high school had a separate tutoring class that was taught by long-term substitutes. Depending on individual needs, the student was taken out of the regular class for a short period of time or for the duration of the class. If a longer term intervention was required, the regular teacher coordinated assignments with the tutor.

Creative use of staff also enabled teachers to better meet the needs of individual students through small group instruction. For example, in one elementary school, the principal scheduled staff so that as many as four or five adults could be in one room at the same time, reducing the teacher-student ratio and facilitating intervention activities in the classroom. Three of the four high schools had noticeably small classes, averaging between 15 and 18 students, which encouraged teachers and students to get to know one another.

PRACTICES IMPACTING STUDENTS

The eight schools provided services or put into place practices that they believe had a huge impact for ensuring every student's success. Some variation of providing one-on-one or small group tutoring to at-risk students as early as possible was present at all eight schools. In seven of the schools, frequent testing and data analysis processes helped to identify students for intervention. Small class sizes and small reading groups for the elementary students benefited low as well as high-performing students. For example, in three of the four elementary schools, children in grades kindergarten through two rotated through a variety of activities in work centers.

Five of the eight schools also strengthened the connection between intervention and regular classroom teachers to ensure students' needs were met, especially with respect to integrating special education students into the school. Full inclusion occurred in two schools and was a major transition, but staff believed that the practice has had a positive impact on student performance and behavior. One of the elementary schools encourages team-teaching, and with specialists and student teachers, it is not unusual for their classes to have up to five adults in a class supervising three to five student groups.

Six of the eight schools also offer a variety of small incentives to reward students. Teachers in three of the elementary schools provide small treats to encourage good student behavior and to reward performance. Three of the high schools give incentives to students to encourage them to achieve in their classes and do well on state tests. Incentives include pizza parties, coupons to local fast food restaurants, a free day off and field trips.

INSTRUCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Six of the eight schools in this case study project have a strong reading program or English department. Factors contributing to this feature are staff experience and quality and consistency

of materials. Three of the four elementary schools were in the process of introducing new reading programs, driven by new textbook adoptions in their respective districts. Staff at all of the elementary schools expressed that supplementary resources can have as much, if not more, importance than the school's overall reading program. High school language arts instruction ranged from highly traditional – where students were primarily reading textbooks, completing worksheets, or listening to lectures – to ones where students were conducting research on computers, designing PowerPoint presentations and working cooperatively in group projects.

Three of the four high schools also had strong math departments, and all the high schools had implemented notable changes in the math curriculum in recent years. Changes included expanding the number of available math classes, introducing math coaches and additional technologies, and incorporating ACT Prep materials into their classes. One high school now requires students to pass course mastery and semester tests before they can progress to a higher level math course.

One elementary school in the study had made an explicit change in math instruction by expanding the amount of time for the math block to 90 minutes. This school also encouraged staff to challenge students with math activities that went beyond grade level and tested math knowledge of fifth and sixth graders on a weekly basis. This is also the only elementary school viewed by the research team as having strong math instruction. Even though the schools in this study were chosen based on students' performance in reading, the minimal attention given to math by most of the elementary schools is a concern to the researchers.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT CHARACTERISTICS

Teachers at all eight schools were highly aware of the state standards and have done their best to align their curriculum with the benchmarks. At all eight schools, teachers benefited from district-provided professional development that has helped them apply the standards; two schools were in districts that had developed pacing charts. Staff at all but one of the eight schools has participated in extensive professional development related to standards as well as to their discipline areas.

Teachers in all of the elementary schools engaged in ongoing professional development sessions during staff meetings, where they would share "best practices" with each other. Two of the elementary schools extend the sharing through observation of other teachers in the district.

Three of the high schools have benefited substantially from grants, either through direct grants to the school or from their affiliation with the district or region. Three elementary schools were awarded OhioReads grants, which resulted in increased reading resources, professional development and one-on-one tutoring. Three of the schools (two high schools and one elementary) are involved in a research-based professional development program.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

All four elementary schools and two of the high schools have extensive communication with parents and high levels of parent involvement. The forms of communication include telephone calls, newsletters, notes to parents, e-mail, and in-person contact. At least once a week, two of the elementary schools send home materials that must be signed by the parents.

One elementary school has particularly high parent involvement. It explicitly made a commitment to develop this aspect about 10 years ago. A key element is that each student, parent, and teacher signs a compact that outlines expectations for academics, attendance and homework.

Seven of the eight schools have many parents who once attended the school. Although this was likely related to the fact that six of the schools were in rural areas or small towns, this was also true of two schools in more urban locations. In addition, staff members at six schools are either graduates of the school or currently live in the community.

All four high schools and two of the four elementary schools have a close partnership with local colleges. These partnerships include student teachers, hiring college students for tutoring, and allowing students to take college-level courses while enrolled in high school.

Schools of Promise for Students with Disabilities

The Ohio Department of Education gave special recognition to 14 of the 2003-2004 *Schools of Promise* that had at least 75 percent of their students with disabilities demonstrate proficiency in reading, mathematics or both. In addition, ODE's Office of Exceptional Children (OEC) contracted with Ohio State University's Center for Special Needs Populations to study effective practices and the kind of support school staff found useful in improving performance of at-risk students, including those with disabilities. Eighteen schools were selected for case study review, based on the criteria that students with disabilities in those schools exceeded a 75 percent passage rate on statewide assessments in either reading or math or both. While very successful with their students with disabilities, five of these 18 schools were not identified as *Schools of Promise*, because less than 40 percent of their students came from low-income backgrounds.

Each of the 12 elementary schools, two middle schools, and four high schools was visited, and interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, parents, and students. At some schools, superintendents, curriculum directors and special education supervisors from Educational Service Centers (ESCs), and community members also were interviewed. Classroom observations were conducted.

The site visits revealed that these schools integrate the five themes that are found in past and present *Schools of Promise* in that they:

- deliver rigorous, standards-based instruction;
- design instruction to ensure all students succeed;
- provide leadership focused on improved instruction;
- engage parents and community; and,
- create a school culture where individuals are valued.

DELIVER RIGOROUS, STANDARDS-BASED INSTRUCTION

All of the schools have aligned their curriculum and instruction to Ohio's standards. References to the standards are found in classrooms throughout the buildings so everyone is always aware of them. At one elementary school, teachers report that Desk Top References (laminated placemats) containing the grade-level indicators and essential vocabulary for each grade, keep them focused on standards when planning daily lessons. At another elementary school, students are made aware of the benchmarks for performance through "I Can" posters that are

displayed in each classroom. One of the middle schools rewrote the standards to be student- and parent-friendly. Curriculum mapping is complete in some schools and underway in others. Some of the schools use pacing charts to ensure that instruction is consistent throughout their districts. Common assessments have been developed and are administered regularly, some monthly and some quarterly, to all students. At one of the high schools, the regular and special education team teachers prioritize power indicators and review the assessment map to make certain students are getting the standards and are being assessed properly.

There are examples of schools working to align instruction to standards vertically within districts. One middle school collaborated with the high school teaching staff to vertically align curriculum, and the teachers at one of the high schools worked with middle school teachers to align the science curriculum.

DESIGN INSTRUCTION TO ENSURE ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED

There are many important similarities in the elementary schools visited. Each of them has an all-day kindergarten, although at one school the program is provided only for a small group of students who are most at-risk. At all of the schools, teachers regularly use data from various sources to identify learning needs and target interventions, to evaluate the curriculum and to inform instruction. All of the schools provide a variety of interventions to support their students. Students are grouped and regrouped for instruction based on specific learning needs.

Instruction for students with disabilities is differentiated to meet students' needs wherever services are provided. At some of the schools, intervention specialists and Title I teachers team-teach along with the regular education teachers in the regular education classrooms all the time. At others, students with disabilities receive their instruction in some courses in the regular education classroom and some in the resource room. At those schools, the intervention specialists and instructional aides work closely with regular education teachers to coordinate the curriculum and instruction.

There is a heavy emphasis on reading at all of the schools. At one, the curriculum includes a 90-minute uninterrupted reading block in every class in grades one through five. At other schools, a variety of special reading programs is available to support students including Early Reading Intervention, Accelerated Reading, the Ohio Reads HOST program and the Ohio State University Literacy Collaborative, as well as generous use of tutors, reading volunteers and peer tutors.

Each of the high schools focuses on supporting students with special needs. At one school, content area teachers and intervention specialists meet prior to the beginning of school to plan for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans, by organizing each student's information, identifying the student's strengths and weaknesses, and planning for any accommodations per the IEP that may be needed in the subject area. At another high school, the principal believes the intervention program is "the heart and soul" of their success with all students. Intervention is also the focus at a third high school where a special period was added to the end of the day, allowing 30 extra minutes for students to receive help. The fourth high school provides an Academic Coaching program with an array of services for students' academic needs. The Academic Coaching room is staffed and available all day.

PROVIDE LEADERSHIP FOCUSED ON IMPROVED INSTRUCTION

A central theme at all of the schools is the belief that *all* students can learn, and that it is the responsibility of educators to figure out how students learn and how to teach them. Staff members refer to “at-risk” students as “at-promise.” With that as their philosophy, there is a strong emphasis on staff collaboration to focus on how to meet the learning needs of each student. All of the principals meet with staff members regularly to plan instruction and review progress. Shared leadership is the model used by some of the principals while others personally monitor each student’s progress and assist teachers in identifying instruction strategies to address learning needs. At other schools, district curriculum directors are an important part of the team.

All of the principals stated that they dislike being out of their schools during school hours as they think it is vitally important to be seen in classrooms and hallways. They want to interact with students and teachers and be actively involved in all school activities. The principals are conscientious, however, about pursuing their own professional development and providing professional development opportunities for staff members.

ENGAGE PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

All of the schools emphasize working closely with parents and the community on behalf of students and foster supportive and respectful relationships with parents and families. School staff members make great efforts to stay in regular contact with parents personally, electronically and through printed materials. Many of the teachers in the elementary schools send home weekly packets of each student’s work with each student charting his or her own progress. Teachers also inform parents and students of expectations through handbooks and face-to-face and telephone conferences. All of the high schools and most of the elementary schools post homework assignments, along with a variety of other information, on the schools’ Web sites.

Some schools have full- or part-time parent coordinators who work to involve parents in school activities such as grade-level and subject-level nights. Others have parent resource librarians who provide parents with materials and training on how to use them with children. Several of the schools have family liaisons that are responsible for working with parents and linking them to school and community resources. At a number of schools, parent organizations are the moving forces that host parent events, encourage parental participation, and conduct fund raising activities that support field trips and other student activities.

The schools have a variety of partnerships with colleges, businesses, police and fire departments, and other organizations that provide tutoring, shadowing and mentoring activities for students.

CREATE A SCHOOL CULTURE WHERE INDIVIDUALS ARE VALUED

While the *Schools of Promise* principals have promoted and supported a data-driven way of life in their schools, they never lose sight of the importance of positive human interaction throughout the school. Because of this philosophy, the principals and staff members have worked to create a culture where individual students are valued. They take responsibility for ensuring that struggling students get the additional help they need. The principal and teachers have an open door policy, and a kindness theme sets the tone for each of the buildings.

The staff members at these schools have high expectations for all of their students, regardless of the students’ prior academic or behavioral challenges. Students are told that the expectations

for learning and behavior are the same for every student. That means that all students are expected to be active participants in the learning process in the classroom and to refrain from engaging in distracting activities. Schoolwide behavior plans are in place in all of the schools. At some, the plan is the result of training through the Positive Behavior Support Project; at others, behavior is monitored and tracked through a colored-card-coding system. High expectations are kept at the forefront as teachers emphasize them on a regular basis and print copies are usually posted in every classroom. While the primary behavior management tool is "catching students being good" and rewarding them for positive behavior, measures are in place to help students learn from the experience when their actions result in detentions.

Students also are honored for a variety of other reasons, including academic improvement, academic achievement, improving work habits, and community service. At one elementary school, a Hero Party is held weekly for students exhibiting excellent social behavior and work habits throughout the week. At a middle school, a quarterly awards assembly recognizes students for academic achievements, citizenship, athletics and achievement in many other areas such as art and student contests. At one of the high schools, each teacher determines the students that he or she will recognize and the category for recognition at the school's Award Assembly. Students are honored for classroom participation and improvement, as well as grades, so more students have the opportunity to receive awards.

POSTSCRIPT

It is important to note that incorporating all of the research-based activities covered by these themes did not take place overnight in any of the schools. In each school, it has taken concentrated, committed, collaborative and ongoing effort of everyone involved to improve student performance. Each school has its unique geographic location, demographic characteristics, history, personnel and programs, so the path each is taking varies to achieve an equitable and excellent education for all students. The common denominator is a consistent focus on students and doing whatever is necessary to help them learn and progress. None of the schools claims to have all of the answers for improving student achievement across all grade levels and among all groups of students; but the staff members at all the schools are willing to put in the effort required to learn more of the answers.

Rural *Schools of Promise*

ODE contracted with Ohio University to study effective instructional practices of rural *Schools of Promise*. This case study describes the school improvement activities taking place in six rural *Schools of Promise* identified because of their high performance in mathematics; and compares their activities to those taking place in two comparison schools with similar demographics but less notable performance in mathematics.

Ohio University selected six rural schools from among the 2003-2004 *Schools of Promise* based on the following criteria: high mathematics achievement; variety in grade levels (e.g., kindergarten through six, ninth through 12th); and availability and willingness to participate. Two comparison schools with similar demographics that were not *Schools of Promise* also were included in the study.

During each school's site visit, which ranged from five to eight days, researchers conducted interviews, classroom observations, and student focus groups. Interviews included

administrators, teachers, parents and community members. In addition, various documents were reviewed, including lesson plans, teacher-made tests, school handbooks and continuous improvement plans.

The research found that all of the studied schools are taking Ohio's accountability mandates seriously. To increase student achievement, the schools devoted attention to aligning curriculum with state standards and explicitly preparing students to take the tests. Educators at the schools saw the value of strong leadership, respectful relationships, collegiality, an explicit focus on academics, and community engagement. Schools differed considerably, however, in the approaches they favored to improve performance.

LEADERSHIP

In each of the *Schools of Promise*, certain individuals provided strong leadership, particularly during implementation of an improvement plan. Leadership involved the development of a shared vision and the encouragement of teachers to take ownership of and accountability for particular improvement practices. In four of the schools, leaders used a top-down approach to stimulate reform, gradually introducing more democratic processes as time went on. Democratic leadership had a longer history and greater cultural resonance at the other two *Schools of Promise*. At these two schools, administrators explicitly encouraged all teachers to take leadership roles, which allowed for greater stability when there was a change in principals.

- Leadership in the comparison schools was less coherent and less focused on collectively engaging reform.

RELATIONSHIPS

Teachers in the *Schools of Promise* saw the character of the relationship they developed with their students and with one another as central to the improvement effort.

Discipline. Educators worked to establish compliant behavior among students, seeing increased attention to student discipline as a precursor to high academic performance. Efforts to improve student discipline were structured and consistently enforced throughout the school.

- Educators at the comparison schools did not see an explicit linkage between improved discipline and improved academic performance, nor did these schools develop or enforce a unified code of discipline across their buildings.

Professional collaboration. Teachers in the *Schools of Promise* attributed their schools' improvement, in part, to the quality of their professional relationships with one another. Even though the nature of the collaboration differed from school to school, teachers in all of the schools engaged in ongoing collaboration with colleagues on issues of curriculum alignment and changes in instructional practices.

- Teachers in the comparison schools focused more on improving the instructional practices in their individual classrooms, instead of working collaboratively to improve student performance schoolwide. Improvement efforts at the comparison schools were more piecemeal and tended to reflect the initiative of individual teachers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The *Schools of Promise* made professional development a priority and viewed it as a way to foster school improvement. Procedures for planning and implementing professional development differed in significant ways across the *Schools of Promise*, as did the content of

the professional development activities. At some schools, professional development was planned at the district level and focused on district priorities, whereas at others it was primarily a school-based initiative. In most cases, professional development encompassed activities that teachers selected themselves as well as those chosen for them by professional development committees or administrators.

— Professional development was viewed as a priority in the comparison schools. However, unlike the *Schools of Promise*, professional development in comparison schools was less integrated into the schoolwide efforts to improve.

ACADEMIC FOCUS

The state's accountability system has driven all of the schools in this study to focus on academics, primarily through curriculum alignment to the state standards and preparing students to take the tests. Educators in the *Schools of Promise* changed their teaching strategies in ways designed to improve student achievement. The type of changes adopted by each school varied from traditional drill-and-practice to problem-solving approaches.

— Less attention to mathematics instruction was found at the comparison elementary school.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In the *Schools of Promise*, as well as the comparison schools, strong school and community relations were viewed by all as an important resource for school improvement. Not all schools, however, were at the same point in their relationships with parents – some were still reversing past alienation of parents and community. Some schools were developing new initiatives, such as "Family Reading Night" and parent volunteer programs, in order to cultivate increased involvement. Other schools were just beginning to consider ways to connect in positive ways with parents and community members.

CONCLUSIONS

The research showed that *Schools of Promise* and comparison schools did not differ systematically with respect to the practices that were considered useful for fostering improvement. What seemed to differentiate the two groups of schools were: the longevity of the improvement initiative; coherence of the reforms adopted; and, the severity of the challenges that the schools confronted. The six *Schools of Promise* each had a coherent, collaborative effort that did not happen by chance. The two comparison schools were dealing with the consequences of unpopular school consolidations, a circumstance that seemed to delay their efforts to implement coherent educational reforms.

Teacher Effectiveness in *Schools of Promise*

ODE contracted with Strategic Research Group to study what factors and resources contribute to the success of *Schools of Promise*, and in particular, teacher quality and the role that teachers play in these high-performing schools.

Eight of the 113 *Schools of Promise* recognized in the 2004-2005 school year are included in this case study. These eight schools were selected from a cross-selection that considered high

student poverty, high and low percentages of minority students, and the number of years that the school had been recognized as a *School of Promise*.

Prior to each site visit, researchers surveyed all teachers in the school, and each school administrator completed a survey with pertinent statistics. During each site visit, researchers observed three mathematics and three reading and language arts classrooms. Later, they conducted personal interviews with key instructional staff, administrators, and the observed teachers. They conducted two focus groups with students recruited from the observed classrooms. After each site visit, they interviewed 20 parents and other key community members over the phone.

Overall, this study's findings provide further support for the "Five Lessons Learned" and expand our insight into the role that teachers play in these successful schools.

RIGOROUS INSTRUCTION ALIGNED TO THE STANDARDS

All of the schools studied share a rigorous adherence to the state academic content standards. Alignment to Ohio's academic content standards was described as an incremental process, with teacher involvement critical. Although several years ago teachers may have resisted the idea of standards-based instruction, involving them in alignment, clearly communicating achievable goals for student improvement, and encouraging teachers to collaborate have been effective practices for these schools.

Teachers regularly collaborate and share best practices to align instruction vertically across grade levels, and horizontally within grade levels. Student performance data are typically broken down to the teacher level, which helps teachers identify student weaknesses, set attainable goals, and pinpoint academic standards that need additional attention in the classroom.

Because educators view reading and literacy as critical to student success in all other subject areas, reading and literacy form the core of the curriculum in the four elementary schools. For example, one elementary school uses an "Achievement Word of the Day" that teachers in all subject areas (even art, physical education, and music) integrate into the day's lessons. Another elementary school participates in a Literacy Collaborative, which extends reading instruction up to three hours a day, and students write daily in journals in both reading and mathematics classes.

In the four high schools, educators' goals for student achievement are more far-reaching than passing the Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT). These educators consider the OGT as one step in preparation for a successful college experience or for life after graduation. Two of the high schools focus their attention on building student readiness for college, both in terms of content knowledge and study skills. By partnering with local colleges, these two schools provide their high school students with access to college experiences. In addition to college preparation, the other two high schools emphasize the value of career education. Educators in these two schools encourage students to take both career/technical and academic courses – both are viewed as critical to applying knowledge in the workplace.

STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

The principals in these eight *Schools of Promise* serve in supportive, collaborative roles and empower teachers to act as leaders in their schools. In particular, the high school teachers agree that there is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their schools. Principals in

these schools solicit teacher feedback in decision making and empower teachers to make informed decisions. At three of the high schools, student performance data are routinely examined at the teacher level as part of the continuous improvement process. School leaders support this process, which identifies areas where individual teachers can focus to help students improve.

With encouragement from their principals, teachers take on leadership roles by actively seeking out, piloting, and integrating new technology and materials into their instruction. For example, teachers in one of the elementary schools sought out the school's current phonics program and championed the Accelerated Reader program, both of which have been fully integrated into the school's curriculum. In another elementary, teachers serve as grade level chairs to handle administrative issues, and other teachers serve as curriculum leaders to maintain alignment to standards.

Teacher leaders actively participate in the professional development of their peers, and in the process, help to reduce the costs of training additional staff. For example, only a few teachers in one of the high schools participate in national conferences and training, but through structured and informal collaboration with peers, the information is disseminated teacher-to-teacher. Teachers in one elementary school regularly attend statewide training on Enhancing Education Through Technology and then convey the information to their peers through teacher-to-teacher training sessions at the school.

All schools either build in common planning time or require meetings specifically for the purpose of teacher collaboration. Teachers regularly share ideas, information and strategies to improve instruction through structured meetings and informal networks during lunch, in the hallways and after school. In one of the elementary schools, common planning time has been facilitated with substitute teachers, who provide 90-minute blocks once a week for teachers at each grade level to plan and collaborate.

INSTRUCTION DESIGNED FOR ALL STUDENTS' SUCCESS

Teachers play a critical role in the way these schools design instruction to ensure every student's success. By being responsive to feedback, engaging in self-reflection, and collaborating with colleagues, the elementary teachers actively seek out ways to improve their instruction. With support from school leadership, teachers regularly use student assessment data to reflect on areas where students need support or intervention and provide students additional time and help to improve in that area. Teachers in these schools generally take a personal stake in student improvement and share a sense of responsibility for helping students learn.

A commonality among most of the high school teachers is a high degree of enthusiasm and excitement, not only for their subject areas but also for working with high school students. Based upon classroom observations, interviews and survey results, teachers' attitudes toward teaching were clearly positive, and administrators, students, parents, and even outside observers could not help but recognize it. Teachers in these high schools spend time before, during, and after school working individually with students to help them understand and apply new material. This teacher dedication is critical to the intervention of struggling students.

Teachers at these *Schools of Promise* vary their instructional techniques and incorporate technology to enhance their lessons. The high schools that use interactive technology like graphing calculators, SmartBoards, and PowerPoint create opportunities to engage students

and to support concept development, active “hands-on” learning and higher-order thinking. Beyond technology, teachers at two of the high schools also emphasize the importance of discussions to engage their students.

Elementary school teachers frequently use technology to customize instruction and focus on the specific needs of each student. Two of the elementary schools use self-paced programs (e.g., Accelerated Reader or Accelerated Math), which allow students to set goals with the teacher and work at their own pace, complete assessments on a computer, and evaluate their own progress toward meeting their goals. Teachers in a third elementary school use a computer program to individualize assignments and generate detailed reports on each student’s progress to differentiate instruction based on a student’s particular needs. Students can even access the software from home or the local library.

Intervention for struggling students begins early in the elementary schools. In one of the schools studied, kindergarten students are assessed during the first six weeks, and those with the lowest scores are put into a literacy skills class for half a day, making for day-long instruction. A second elementary school uses a specialist trained in Reading Recovery to provide intervention to first-grade students who are having difficulty learning to read and write.

All of the elementary schools rely on Title I intervention for closing gaps and providing individualized instruction. Two of the elementary schools fully integrate their Title I teachers into the regular classrooms, therefore providing additional assistance to all students during small group instruction. At one of the elementary schools, intervention intensifies in preparation for proficiency tests between January and March. Each grade level meets together twice a week and substitutes are brought in so students can be divided into four small groups. Teachers rotate through the groups, providing focused small group instruction in language arts and mathematics, focusing on the standards that students are struggling with.

Intervention also is important at the high-school level, but more actively involves students in formulating solutions. The Building Assistance Team at one of the high schools – including the student, teachers, guidance counselors and parents – works to identify a struggling student’s problems and customize the intervention strategies. Another high school monitors students’ assessment scores across multiple tests and over time to determine its mathematics intervention. This high school uses Accelerated Reader to provide teachers with a way to monitor students’ guided reading practice. Students choose their own books, then complete assessments on the computer specific to the book they read.

ENGAGE PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS

The high level of poverty in these schools complicates educators’ efforts to increase parental involvement. Regardless, teachers and educators in these eight schools make frequent efforts to engage parents and keep them informed of their children’s progress. All of the schools provide information to parents through newsletters, fliers or parent associations. Two elementary and two high schools utilize web-based technology to communicate with parents on their children’s performance. Parents can frequently monitor their children’s daily progress and communicate with teachers during any time of the day. To further reach out and inform parents, one elementary school extends the number of days and the range of times for its parent-teacher conferences.

Teachers are a key point of communication with parents, and they actively seek out the most effective ways to reach parents in their school and community. A critical communication with

parents is explaining academic content standards. Schools provide information through presentations, parent guides and standards-based report cards.

Three of the schools partner with community agencies to provide social and emotional support to parents and families. Two of the elementary schools operate programs that help parents work more effectively with their children. Through the local funding of a nonprofit agency, one high school provides onsite counselors for social services and support to students.

Because the goal of these high schools is to prepare their students for a successful college experience or for life after graduation, strong partnerships with local universities, community colleges and technical programs are especially critical to the success of three of these *Schools of Promise*. Two of the high schools partner with their local community colleges to provide students with college preparation, dual-credit opportunities and advanced technical skills.

Through the dedicated efforts of school administrators, the third high school has established strong partnerships with two local universities. Besides providing staff development in science and mathematics, one of the universities assists students with the transition between middle and high school. Incoming freshmen attend a five-week summer program located on the university's campus, where students become acclimated to the college-bound culture of the high school, and learn about the high school's policies and expectations. During this summer program, teachers assess students' mathematics, science and English skills, and then group them according to their freshman year performance level.

CREATES A SCHOOL CULTURE WHERE EACH INDIVIDUAL FEELS VALUED

Along with their alignment to standards and emphasis on academic rigor, perhaps the most important characteristic of these schools is the warm, supportive, "family" environment cultivated among staff and students. Teachers are important role models and provide stability, support and structure. Discipline, structure, and order were also particularly important among these schools, perhaps in part because students often come from difficult home lives, making structure in the school day particularly important. Positive reinforcement is used to encourage good behavior. Student success is promoted publicly in the schools on a regular basis.

Teachers in these schools care deeply about connecting with their students, helping and supporting them; however, teachers also hold students to high standards. While these teachers acknowledge that many of their students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and often deal with complex and difficult problems at home – they still maintain high standards and hold high expectations for what students can achieve.

Teachers in the four high schools invest significant time working individually with students who need extra help. Teachers' connections with students are important both academically and emotionally. The ability to develop and maintain rapport with students is a critical aspect of their effectiveness. The four elementary schools emphasize discipline and mutual respect among staff and students, frequently utilizing praise and positive reinforcement. Principals and teachers know the students well and have personal connections with them that reflect an interest in students' well being beyond the classroom.

Researchers observed frequent praise and positive reinforcement at all schools. One elementary school principal leads a "caught doing good" campaign by rewarding students with public recognition when they are caught demonstrating good behavior during the principal's classroom walk-throughs or in the hallways.

A clear common denominator in the four high schools is an emphasis on discipline, structure and mutual respect, providing an important foundation for learning. One high school's discipline policy extends to a carefully monitored dress code policy. The school also implements gender-based classes (i.e., exclusively male or female classes) as a disciplinary measure. Staff and students believe the gender-based environment helps students focus on their lessons. Another high school also implements a dress code policy and bans earrings and beards for males, visible tattoos, holes in jeans, and the use of cell phones in the building. The policy, administrators believe, reflects the community's values and emphasizes structure and respect. All four high schools foster a sense of community, where everyone in the building—administrators, teachers, custodians and cafeteria workers—share a stake in student success. Administrators consider all staff part of the same team.

Social support for students and families is also an important consideration in these eight *Schools of Promise*. Often these resources are in the form of social workers and counselors. For example, one of the high schools operates the "Families Forward" program, funded through the United Way, which provides two counselors onsite for social services and support to students. An elementary school participates in the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program to support and engage parents of at-risk students.

ROLE OF TEACHERS

A particular focus of the present research is the role of teachers in *Schools of Promise*. Clearly, teachers are fundamentally important in terms of designing instruction to ensure every student is successful, but teachers also play key roles in terms of alignment to standards, continuous improvement, connections with parents, and creating a culture where everyone feels valued.

In the present *Schools of Promise* research, teachers serve a central role. They are highly trained professionals with significant experience. Many of the teachers had been teaching for a long time and had close relationships with their colleagues and with their students. Nearly half or more of teachers at all schools have master's degrees, and more than three-fourths of are considered Highly Qualified under the federal definition.

Across the eight schools studied, researchers found teachers who were committed to their schools, their colleagues, and most importantly – their students. They believe what they are doing in their classrooms is important, they feel valued and supported by administrators, and they work collaboratively with colleagues in a "team" atmosphere.

Teachers contribute in important ways to the school climate and culture. Although leadership often sets a direction and example for teachers, the teachers respond to leadership in positive ways. Teachers are held accountable to their students, to school leadership, and to one another. Regular classroom visits from the principals are customary at many of the schools studied and serve as support as well as evaluation. Student performance data at the classroom level is often shared openly and strategies are discussed collaboratively. Teachers support their schools' efforts to improve or maintain high levels of achievement in their words and actions. They actively participate in meetings and trainings supported by the school or district, they frequently communicate with colleagues to improve their effectiveness and share resources, and their behaviors in and out of the classroom are consistent with the school values.

Perhaps the strongest theme across all eight schools is openness to change among administrators and teachers and a tendency to be self-reflective. Staff members at these

schools constantly seek ways to grow, change and improve. This is common among principals in their support of the school's continuous improvement efforts, as well as teachers, who often use student performance data diagnostically and modify their instructional delivery as necessary to maximize their effectiveness. In turn, they model this behavior for students.

Effective Practices in Urban *Schools of Promise*

The purpose of the *Schools of Promise* (*SOP*) Multiple Case Study on effective practices in six urban high-poverty schools was to highlight and document their use of effective research-based strategies that are aligned to the *SOP Framework of Practice* – a review of research and literature organized around five themes. A second aspect of this study was to pilot the *SOP Implementation Inventory*, a tool designed to help a school examine and document its practices using the *SOP Framework of Practice*.

In 2005, the Ohio Department of Education selected six urban schools for this study based on student performance on the 2004-2005 state assessments in either reading or mathematics or both. The sample included: Central Community Elementary in Reading, Harold R. Walker Elementary in Canton, Douglas MacArthur Elementary in Cleveland, Eastmoor Academy High School (EAHS) and Columbus Alternative High School (CAHS) in Columbus, and Memorial High School in Campbell. The number of years ODE recognized these as *Schools of Promise* ranged from one to four years. All six schools received recognition as *Schools of Promise* for their performance on reading assessments. Central Community, Walker and CAHS also were recognized as *Schools of Promise* for their performance in mathematics.

Findings from this study indicate that these six urban schools are high-performing, high-poverty schools in Ohio that challenge the low performance trend on state assessments evident in other urban schools. What differentiates these schools is the conscious effort of principals and staff to not only set deliberately high academic and behavioral expectations for the school and students, but to provide the time, support, intervention and resources necessary so all students can reach those standards. Administrators and teachers demonstrated a drive to succeed, a willingness to work hard, and continuous examination and monitoring of the effectiveness of their practices. They held each other and students accountable for meeting these expectations. As a result, these schools exceeded the state standards and average results on assessments in reading and mathematics and graduation rates in 2004-2005.

The study's findings are organized around the five themes of *Schools of Promise*.

Delivering Rigorous Instruction Aligned to State Standards

The first of five *SOP* themes is: *Schools of Promise deliver rigorous instruction aligned to the state's academic content standards.* Research on high-performing, high-poverty schools has documented that effective schools use state standards to explicitly plan, design and evaluate curriculum and instruction, and assess student work (Haycock, 1999).

- These schools not only use the state academic content standards in English Language Arts and mathematics, but aligned their curriculum, instruction, and assessments with the standards to some degree. Most have curriculum matrices or pacing charts that identify the scope, sequence and pacing of instruction aligned with state standards and assessments. Elementary schools have extensively aligned their curriculum, instruction and assessments

both vertically and horizontally to the state's academic content standards, benchmarks and indicators. High schools viewed the state academic content standards as the minimum standards for students.

- These schools restructured the school day or school year to provide teachers more time for collaborative planning, instruction in English Language Arts and/or mathematics, and student intervention. They not only extend instructional time to help students meet the standards but provide additional intervention.

- Instructionally, these schools use a variety of strategies, including large group and small group instruction, individualized instruction and tutoring, inquiry-based instruction, higher-order thinking skills, and cooperative learning. They incorporate technology and software applications into academic subjects.

- These schools set yearly measurable, performance goals for all students on state assessments. They prepare students for the state assessments by explaining terms, using practice tests, or by focusing on specific targeted subtopics based on analyses of student performance. School personnel are actively involved in frequently assessing students and their progress through a variety of formal and informal assessments. The schools immediately intervene when students are struggling to meet expectations.

Providing Leadership that Leads to Continuous Improvement

The second *SOP* theme is: *Schools of Promise have leadership that leads to the continuous improvement of the school.* Research on effective schools shows that administrators and other leaders continually strive to improve the instructional effectiveness of schools (Cotton, 1995).

- Principals in these schools promote a sense of well-being among teachers and staffs and positive staff relationships and cooperation. They are approachable and open to helping teachers and staff solve problems, providing opportunities for teachers and staff to give input on important decisions. They are highly visible to students, teachers and parents, and create frequent contacts with students.

- Principals also establish high expectations and concrete goals for all students and staff to meet. They work with school teams to establish yearly improvement goals based on student performance data, and keep staff and students focused on reaching those goals and targets. Principals closely monitor the effectiveness of school practices on teaching and learning.

- These schools have improvement teams that meet monthly to review the schools' progress toward meeting the yearly goals and targets, creating a collective sense of responsibility for ongoing improvement.

Findings on Professional Development Across Schools

Research on effective professional development shows that teachers need to participate in ongoing, continuous, sustained staff development focused on what students are to learn and how to address different problems students may have (*National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching*).

- Principals ensure that professional development opportunities directly enhance the teaching and learning in the schools. In addition to the scheduled district in-service days, schools have rearranged schedules and organized staff so that job-embedded professional development activities are provided during the school day. Teachers assume greater roles in collaboratively planning professional development opportunities.

- Professional development directly relates to teaching and learning. Professional development contributes to the school's improvement processes and keeps teachers up-to-date with the latest literature and research, particularly on instruction.

Providing Instruction to Ensure Every Student Succeeds

The third SOP theme is: Schools of Promise design instruction to ensure every student's success. Research on high-performing schools shows that effective schools establish high expectations for all students and provide the supports necessary to achieve these expectations (Brook, et al., 1989, Howard and McCabe 1990).

- These schools develop plans with yearly goals and targets focused on state indicators, particularly those addressing student performance and meeting adequate yearly progress targets. Goals and targets are based on the analyses of student performance on previous district and statewide assessments, and the district and schools' leadership or improvement teams set these goals and targets. Elementary schools set instructional goals and targets for each grade level, based on item analyses of student performance on state assessments.

- These schools provide additional support and assistance to students. They have scheduled and schoolwide intervention programs and approaches for students who are struggling or are at risk of failing courses or grades. Daily and weekly interventions are available to students and include after-school tutoring and academic content programs.

- To address the needs of English-language-learners, these schools provide part-time tutoring, support for students in general education classes, and direct instruction in English-as-a-Second Language. These schools provide special education services to students with disabilities in general education classes while also using self-contained special education classes. Special educators work closely with classroom teachers to support students with disabilities in general education classes.

Engaging Parents and the Community to Support Student Performance

The fourth SOP theme is: Schools of Promise engage parents and the community to support student success. Research shows that effective schools focus their efforts on engaging families and communities in developing trusting and respectful relationships with school staff and building strong relationships with community organizations (Henderson and Mapp, 2002).

- These schools believe that parent engagement is a key component of improvement efforts and welcome parents as important members of the school community. Parents contribute time, resources and assistance that help make the schools more responsive to their children's needs.

- These schools welcome parents, frequently communicate with them, and provide frequent activities to engage parents in learning more about the school, the school's expectations,

and how to support children's learning at home. They communicate expectations for students and parents in each subject at each grade level through phone calls, e-mails or assignment sheets. Student progress in meeting these expectations is also frequently reported to parents.

- These schools build strong connections with community organizations to supplement or enhance the schools' programs. They partner with local businesses, universities or community organizations to support learning and provide internships or career information.

Creating a Culture Where Individuals are Valued

The fifth *SOP* theme is: *Schools of Promise create a culture where each individual feels valued.* Research on high-performing schools demonstrates that an effective school maintains a safe and orderly environment where students show respect for each other and are free of fear, and where the code of conduct is well-publicized, fair and uniformly enforced (Schwartz, 20001).

- These schools develop strong and supportive relationships among teachers and staff, and teacher-student relationships create a sense of family and personalized learning environments. Teachers are caring, committed individuals who know students well and focus on maintaining high expectations and standards. Students' relationships with teachers motivate them to excel.

- These schools have activities and programs to recognize students when they meet or exceed academic and behavioral expectations. They also have disciplinary rules, policies and procedures that create safe school environments and foster students' sense of responsibility for appropriate behavior.

- These schools have specific activities and programs that foster student engagement in the schools' cultures and promote positive student-student and teacher-student relationships. They have anti-bullying programs, student support groups, and courses and programs to increase the sensitivity of students to the diverse backgrounds of other students.

Given the size and descriptive nature of this study, claiming cause-and-effect relationships is impossible. Yet the findings provide insight into how high-poverty urban schools can use research-based practices aligned with the *Schools of Promise Framework of Practice* to increase student achievement.