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Lessons from High Performing Small High Schools in Chicago

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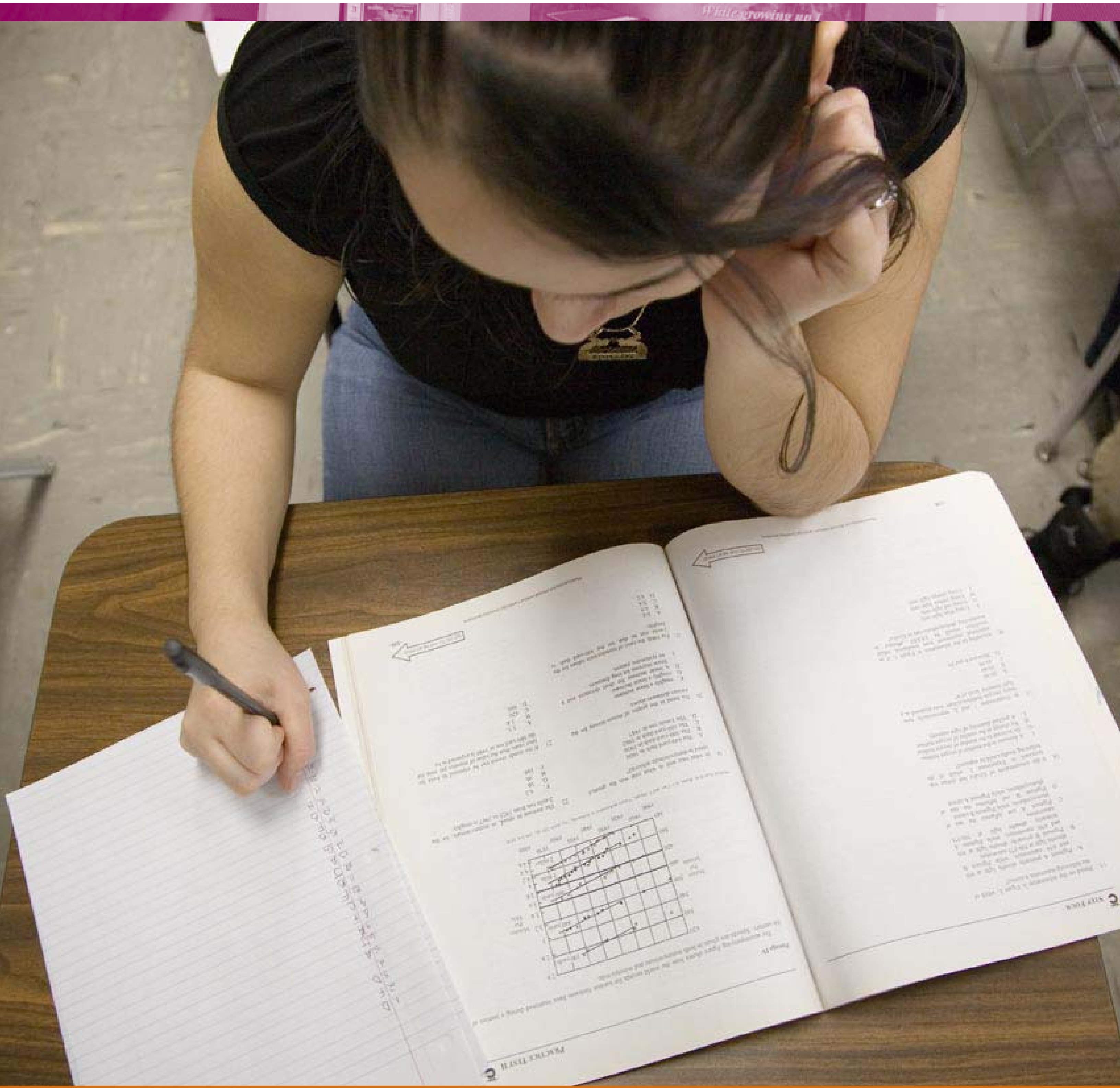

Introduction

For the past seven years, the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI) has worked to improve educational opportunities for Chicago adolescents by opening and supporting small high schools across the city. Schools created under CHSRI aimed to serve low income students with high educational needs by providing learning environments where students are respected, supported, and academically challenged. In addition, the initiative hoped to create working contexts for adults characterized by trust, collective responsibility for student learning, and teacher influence.[1]

While the overall results of the initiative have been mixed, CHSRI has nonetheless produced several individual schools that have improved students' outcomes. In this research brief, we take a detailed look at such high performing schools. Drawing on three case studies, we describe practices and characteristics that high performing CHSRI schools share. First, we describe common elements of their classroom environments. We also detail similarities in how they organize instructional leadership and improvement activities. By highlighting shared practices across these schools, we hope to identify general lessons that other schools may draw upon in their own work to create productive teaching and learning environments.

To select our sample, we focused on two things. First, because research has shown freshman year is so pivotal for students' future high school success, we looked for schools with freshmen who had higher on-track rates and/or higher grade point averages than similar students at similar schools for the 2005–06 and 2006–07 academic years. Second, because CHSRI schools have been emphasizing instruction over the past several years, we looked for schools with students who had better-than-predicted survey responses to measures related to instruction or student-teacher relationships. From this pool, we selected three schools.[2]

In general, students in CHSRI schools enter their freshman year with past academic achievement that is lower than the CPS average. Although eighth-grade ISAT score have been rising across Chicago, to the point where the mean score on the reading portion is well above the "meets standards" cut point of 231, as Table 1 below shows, the mean 2007 spring ISAT score of freshmen in CHSRI schools was seven points lower than the system average. And in the fall of 2007, students in CHSRI schools had a score on the EXPLORE test that was one point lower than CPS overall.

TABLE 1

Eighth-grade ISAT scores and ninth-grade EXPLORE scores for students who were freshmen in fall 2007

All CHSRI Freshmen	
Eighth-grade ISAT scores, spring 2007	236
Ninth-grade EXPLORE scores, fall 2007	12.2
All CPS Freshmen	
Eighth-grade ISAT scores, spring 2007	243
Ninth-grade EXPLORE scores, fall 2007	13.3

To put this achievement at the beginning of high school into context, according to empirical evidence from CPS students, only those students who score at least 17 on the ninth-grade EXPLORE have a solid chance of reaching an ACT of 20, which is the threshold score required for admission by most four-year public colleges in Illinois.[3] Clearly, students in CHSRI schools face academic challenges.

The three schools in our sample reflect this distribution of test scores. The mean ISAT score across the three schools was 237, slightly above the mean in the whole universe of CHSRI schools; the mean EXPLORE score was 12, almost exactly at the CHSRI mean.

The findings reported here are based on qualitative data collected over one month during the spring of 2008. We visited 23 English/language arts classes, observing a total of 15 English department faculty members across our sample schools. We visited teachers once or twice, depending on the size of the English department. If we observed a teacher twice, we sought to visit a different class each time so that our exposure to the different classroom environments experienced by students would be as wide as possible. Our observations covered classes in grades 9 through 12. We also visited freshman reading classes, a junior writing class, and a senior seminar. Two of the classes we observed were AP classes, and one was an honors class. As part of each classroom visit, researchers took extensive ethnographic field notes on several aspects of the classroom environment. Here we report observations focused on academic demands, student classroom behavior, and student-teacher relationships.

In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each school's principal as well as two other instructional leaders, including assistant principals, a curriculum coordinator, and department chairs. Interviews focused on six broad categories: school organization, teacher leadership, the interviewee's instructional leadership responsibilities, school decision-making processes, monitoring and support for instruction, and general instructional improvement activities.

Finally, we also draw on data from teacher focus groups conducted with the English departments in the three schools. The protocol for the group interviews mirrored the one for instructional leaders, focusing on opportunities for reflection on practice, the extent and distribution of instructional leadership, and decision-making processes regarding instructional issues. In addition, the focus groups explored how departments functioned and the extent of teacher and department influence in school decision-making.

Chapter 1

Classroom Environments in High Performing CHSRI Schools

Obviously, students' classroom experiences have a marked influence on how well they perform academically. Yet all too often students claim that their classes are "irrelevant and boring,"[4] and sometimes respond by failing to complete assignments—which then forces schools to slow their pace and water down content.[5] Furthermore, some schools with low expectations of their students don't ask them to do demanding work.[6] In contrast, other schools and classrooms are marked by what the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has called the new 3 Rs for education: rigor, relevance, and relationships.[7]

In this section of the report, we describe the classroom environments in our three high performing CHSRI schools. We chose to focus on three aspects of students' classroom experience. First, we looked at deep intellectual inquiry (or "rigor") in course work, since this is one key area linked to academic achievement.[8] Next, we paid attention to student engagement in class, a possible correlate of "relevance," as this too has been linked to achievement and persistence.[9] Indeed, other Consortium work has shown that what matters most for ACT scores, which have been linked to strong college performance, is a combination of instructional demand and student engagement.[10] Finally, we focused on the nature of the student-teacher interactions and the student-teacher relationships evident in the classrooms we observed.[11] This too has been shown to be highly related to both achievement and persistence.[12]

Because we knew that freshmen in these schools had stronger outcomes than similar students in other schools, we hypothesized that we would find generally strong classrooms. Overall, little in the observations contradicted these expectations. English/language arts classes in all three schools tended to require students to engage in demanding academic work and were characterized by high levels of student engagement and positive student-teacher relationships.

Academic Demand

We explored academic demand by categorizing each classroom activity that we observed by the skills that students were asked to develop. There were roughly five types of activities that we loosely ranked as foundational skill activities or high-level skill activities. The foundational skill activities included vocabulary and grammar, as well as reading comprehension activities. High-level skill activities were those that required students to identify literary techniques for analysis, develop and use research and writing-composition skills, and/or think conceptually and originally without a template. Thinking conceptually and originally could include synthesizing themes and ideas, making connections between different media, and evaluating or assessing ideas or media.[13]

In almost all classes, students were required to complete activities with high academic demand. Students spent at least part of the period in activities aimed at building high-level skills in 21 of the 23 observed classes. For example, one ninth-grade reading class had an activity that required students to identify whether a poem about the primary elections was using an appeal to admiration, emotion, or logic. The students then had to identify literary techniques used in the poem, such as strong helping verbs, rhetorical questions, repeated words or phrases, or lively adjectives. An eleventh-grade English class had an activity that asked students to give examples of dramatic irony from different movies or TV shows and Shakespeare's play *Othello*.

Other high-level skill activities required students to think conceptually without a template. Typically these activities involved making connections between texts and media or extending texts to make inferences. For example, students in an eleventh-grade American Literature class read an interview transcript of Toni Morrison and were then asked to use their new knowledge from the interview to discuss the nature and meaning of community in the book *The Bluest Eye*.

We know from quantitative data that many students in these schools have not yet mastered all of the foundational skills that they need. And research suggests that students who have not yet fully developed their basic skill-set should receive instruction that balances an emphasis on basic skills with challenging intellectual work.[14] While we observed more activities focused on developing foundational skills in vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension in freshman and sophomore classes than in junior and senior classes, we also saw a mixture of activities in classrooms serving the younger students. For example, a sophomore class strengthened reading comprehension and vocabulary skills by circling words that were difficult and then using context clues and dictionary definitions to determine their meaning. The class ended, however, with students searching for literary techniques—such as metaphors, archetypes, and symbols—in the text they were reading.

Student Behavior: Engagement and Disruption

We identified three levels of student engagement across the 23 classes that were observed, assigning each class an overall engagement level based upon the most consistent level of engagement characterizing it. In class periods with high student engagement, researchers observed students following instructions, paying attention, and actively responding and completing tasks to the greatest possible extent, especially as evidenced by students taking their own initiative and displaying a genuine interest in the topic. Classes with medium student engagement were characterized by students generally following instructions, paying attention, responding, and completing tasks, but also having brief periods of off-track behavior. In a class with low engagement, students repeatedly did not follow instructions, pay attention, respond, or complete tasks.

Overall, the sample of classes that we observed was characterized by high or medium engagement levels. Even if students were not genuinely interested in the class activities, they were still generally on-task, paying attention and responding. Only one classroom in our sample could be described as having low student engagement.

Furthermore, the vast majority of classes we observed across the three schools were well-behaved, with a minimum of disruption. It was notable to us that the atmosphere in virtually all classrooms could be characterized as "calm." Even in cases where we saw some disruption, it tended to be short lived, was limited to one or only a few students, and did not seem to cause a major interruption in the class activities.

Positive and Supportive Student-Teacher Relationships

In our observations we paid attention to the quality of interactions between students and teachers to identify the level of emotional and academic support students receive. Almost all of the classrooms contained concrete evidence of generally positive and mutually respectful student-teacher relationships. For example, many of the teachers we observed expressed concern about students' well-being. We heard teachers ask students about how they were feeling, whether their medication or treatment regime was working, and whether they had been to the doctor.

We also saw multiple instances of teachers specifically expressing concern about students' academic progress. In one class, a teacher asked a girl why she hadn't signed up for credit recovery with that teacher. In response to a student's question about why he had to complete a homework assignment, another teacher replied, "Because I care about you." In another case, a researcher recorded the following conversation:

> Student, reporting on a test grade: "I did really bad." Teacher: "How bad?" Student: "Bad bad." Teacher: "Let's talk. I have some ideas." Teacher writes something on note pad and gives to student. Student reads it, nods, and says "thanks."

Researchers frequently noted the general positive tone of feedback, describing teachers as often praising students and frequently saying "good job." One teacher told the class, "Overall nice job of getting into it, finding your books, and reading quietly. Thank you." In another instance, the teacher praised the class as a whole for its performance on a vocabulary test. Another teacher told her students they were "fabulous."

In addition to general positive reinforcement, we also saw several examples of teachers providing concrete encouragement to individual students. For instance, during a class exercise that required students to find quotes to support a particular point of view, a student called out,

> "I think I have one." When the teacher asked what it was, the student backed off, shyly saying, "Nah, never mind." The teacher told him, "Yes, you can. Be confident." After a brief pause, the student read the quote.

Finally, we witnessed frequent examples of teachers telling students that they were available outside of class hours and encouraging them to come in for help. In one instance, a teacher told students to see him/her during the lunch hour or after school. In another instance, students were told that if they wanted to see the teacher the next day (Saturday) it would be fine—but they would need to bring hot chocolate. We also observed that some teachers had their email addresses prominently displayed on the white boards for students to use.[15]

Chapter 2

Organizing Instructional Improvement Work

In a previous report on CHSRI schools, we described how adults working together to improve instruction is central to schools' success.[16] In particular, schools with better-than-expected freshman course performance had principals actively engaged in instructional improvement work, teachers working collectively on long-term improvement projects, and teachers with significant influence over improvement activities. While this finding points to what may be required of schools to improve student performance, it provides little guidance for how to create such conditions. For example, how do schools encourage and solicit teacher participation in decision-making about instructional issues? How do schools involve administrators in improvement activities? And how is teacher participation in instructional improvement activities sustained over time? In this section, we explore these issues by examining the ways in which high performing CHSRI schools organize and facilitate staff participation in instructional improvement activities.

Four Practices for Guiding and Sustaining Instructional Improvement Activities

At first glance, the three CHSRI high schools in our study structurally resemble other CHSRI small schools and, in many ways, traditional high schools as well. For example, each of the three schools used department meeting structures to manage departmental and academic discipline-based issues. Perhaps less common, but still pervasive in small schools, each of the three schools had grade-level structures in which teachers met across disciplines. The schools used these groups for a variety of purposes, such as monitoring and supporting students or implementing grade-specific instructional strategies. The three schools also organized committees and leadership teams to address general school governance and improvement issues. Finally, the three schools created leadership positions common to high schools—such as principal, assistant principal, curriculum coordinator, dean of students, department chairs, and grade-level leads—each charged with some aspect of instructional leadership.

While the above organizational structures and positions are helpful for facilitating instructional development, by themselves they do not distinguish the three schools in our sample from most other CHSRI schools. Instead, we argue that these schools shared four practices that enabled them to use common structures and positions effectively: (1) clearly defining leadership responsibilities, (2) creatively distributing responsibilities, (3) creating and institutionalizing routines to guide and sustain instructional improvement work, and (4) focusing the improvement work of teacher teams around school-wide goals. Most CHSRI schools, including those that have struggled with raising student performance, actively work to develop instruction and student learning. Our previous research highlights, however, that many do not engage in this work consistently over time, maintain a coherent focus in their work, or effectively coordinate staff involvement.[17] As we will show, each of the four practices requires high levels of consistent and coherent planning and staff engagement. By implementing all four practices, our sample schools have created unusually active and focused professional communities. Although we can not establish that these practices "cause" quality instruction and high student achievement, their consistency across our sample schools strongly suggests that they are important elements for improving student performance.

Defining Instructional Leadership Responsibilities

Scholars have long understood that role ambiguity impedes instructional leadership.[18] The importance of clearly defining responsibilities is essential, both to the completion of tasks and to the creation and maintenance of trusting relationships among school staff.[19] The three CHSRI schools in our sample addressed this challenge by clearly defining the instructional leadership responsibilities of school staff. One way they did this was by creating formal documents and procedures outlining responsibilities. For instance, one school created a document detailing the specific job responsibilities of the principal and assistant principals, differentiating their roles from one another and from other instructional leaders in the building. In a second school, a memorandum of understanding defined the appropriate forum and procedures for performing teacher leadership activities. The school's principal described the document this way: "it gives some performance descriptors, and then explains the process for . . . introducing issues, voting and how policies get changed or introduced at the school." Similarly, across these schools formal documents were created to define the purpose of school committees and teams, as well as the parameters of the work of their members.

Creative Distribution of Leadership Responsibilities

In addition to clearly defining instructional leadership responsibilities, schools in our sample considered organizational needs, as well as the expertise and interests of individuals, when distributing those responsibilities. As a result, responsibilities moved beyond traditional roles for teachers and administrators. For example, teachers frequently participated in school governance activities by proposing, implementing, and monitoring instructional policies and practices. In one case, the principal said teachers contribute to decision-making

> "in every aspect, from making final decisions of how we spend the budget [to how we develop] our curriculum practices."

A leader in another school described how a teacher committee was overseeing a new classroom observation process.

School principals and administrators meanwhile reported performing several direct and indirect instructional tasks. For instance, administrators in all three schools described teaching lessons in classrooms to assist struggling teachers. One assistant principal told of this experience:

> "A teacher wanted me to do [a unit]. She was a little bit hesitant on how it works so I came in and modeled it for her for an entire week that first period so that she could watch and then do it the rest of the day."

A principal in another school described providing instructional professional development to school staff to compensate for perceived drawbacks of using external providers. The principal explained:

> "[External providers] aren't as invested. I'm just not always impressed with their level of commitment. They have something packaged that they want to show my teachers that they think is the . . . answer to everything. But they don't want to come in and do [follow-up] observations. [M]ost of the instructional stuff, I want it [to] come from within. I want the sessions to be working sessions where we say we're gonna do this and spend time figuring out how best to do it."

Other school administrators reported engaging in a variety of activities, such as substitute teaching and helping teachers develop units for their classes.

Work Routines

Clarifying instructional leadership responsibilities is only one of the challenges impeding instructional improvement activities. Another is organizing and directing school staff to perform those responsibilities. To meet this challenge, the three CHSRI schools used established and repeated activities to guide and sustain instructional improvement tasks. These routines helped to set common expectations for instructional improvement work, provided guidelines for carrying out that work, and created mechanisms for giving feedback to staff on their efforts.

For example, in one school, the administrative team regularly attended grade-level and department meetings to provide feedback on how meetings are facilitated and to ensure departments continue to work on school-wide initiatives. One administrator described giving feedback to department chairs on using the Authentic Instructional Assessment process (discussed in more detail below) in department meetings. The administrator explained that teachers tend to give feedback to each other based on personal preferences instead of best practices. To correct this, the administrator worked with department chairs on how to encourage teachers to keep their comments objective by adopting a professional tool.

The sample schools also used routines to monitor the work of individual teachers. For instance, two schools regularly reviewed course maps and unit plans. One assistant principal described the elaborate and tightly coordinated review process in their school this way:

> "The course maps are submitted at the end of July. And that gives [the administration] some time to review them [and] give comments back to the teachers. Then the unit plans are submitted on a rolling basis every five weeks, on the same basis on which we send out the progress reports, which go out every five weeks. So the day after the teachers have to do grades for the progress reports the next unit plans are due for any units that are starting during that next five week period."

Each of the three schools also monitored instructional practice using a tool called Authentic Instructional Assessments (AIA)—a detailed procedure and rubric for examining assessments and assignments.[20] This system provided a concrete blueprint for giving feedback to, and receiving feedback from, department colleagues. In addition, one school created a manual of effective instruction. This staff-developed guide outlined the agreed upon components of effective instruction and was used both for peer observations and for those performed by administrators. It established common expectations for effective instructional practice and a shared rubric for identifying it.

Finally, each school in our sample also created routines for developing and implementing new instructional policies. In one school, this included a process to secure consensus around new proposals. Whenever a new activity was submitted for consideration, the entire staff would vote on whether to accept it by using a five point voting system. Teachers vote five if they approve of the proposed program or initiative. They vote three if they will approve the policy, but "they're not crazy about it." Teachers vote zero if they wish to reject the policy and continue dialogue. If more than two teachers vote zero, the policy does not pass. One leader from the school described how this process was applied to a specific decision to adopt a new program. Initially, the proposal was rejected because too many teachers voted zero. The proposing teachers re-drafted the proposal to respond to the criticism of those opposing the policy. After a re-vote, it was adopted.

Guiding Goals

A third challenge schools often struggle with is that once structures are created to bring teachers together for collaboration, little time in meetings is actually devoted to discussions about common instructional issues: Bureaucratic and administrative issues dominate meeting agendas, immediate crises and deadlines easily command people's attention, and competing interests create uncertainty about group priorities.[21] One strategy that helped the schools in our sample manage this issue was the use of school-wide instructional goals to guide the collaborative work in instructional teams.

For instance, all school leaders talked about a school-level focus on either literacy integration across disciplines, assessments, or improving differentiation. These school-level goals then filtered down to department and grade-level meetings. "We make a priority of what our professional development goals are for the year," one leader explained. The leader went on to say:

> "So this year we are focusing on differentiation, literacy, use of internal assessments to drive instruction . . . Then grade levels focus on literacy planning, for example, within their own grade-level teams. So the sophomore grade-level teams are focusing on the perfect paragraph. Freshman team is focusing on something different."

Similarly, teachers in another school's English department described how they have incorporated a school-wide focus on improving assignments by devoting one of the two department meetings per week to examining them:

> "So one teacher will bring in a lesson that they have either already done or are planning to do . . . Our [team] will then look at the assignment or look at any student work. We will rate the different qualities of the teacher assignment, and then we will go around and give feedback."

In both of these cases, overarching school goals provide concrete focus and content for instructional improvement work in teacher teams.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

The three schools described in this report successfully serve African American and Latino students with high academic needs. Previously low achieving students entering these schools perform better in their freshmen year academic courses compared to similar students in similar schools. This first-year performance bump will increase their chances of graduating high school four years later.

Our discussions and observations in these schools have revealed a few lessons that other school leaders might draw on as they work with similar students. Although there are differences in the student characteristics and achievement levels across the three schools whose English/language arts classrooms we observed, we noted three important and salient classroom characteristics. First, students were universally exposed to academically demanding activities. Second, students were moderately or highly engaged with these activities. And finally, teachers exhibited support and care for their students, and the relationships between students and teachers were marked by mutual respect.

A second clear lesson from our look at high performing CHSRI schools is that they do not leave instructional leadership or improvement to chance. Each of the schools in our sample took concrete steps to ensure that their staff engaged in instructional development, that both teachers and administrators participated in that work, and that teachers contributed to decision-making. While the specific practices and strategies differed from school to school, they all had one thing in common: reducing ambiguity around instructional development. By clearly defining leadership roles—as well as by explicitly articulating expectations, priorities, and procedures—these schools eliminated much of the mystery surrounding “what to do.” Relieved of this burden and confident of next steps, school staff pushed forward to do the work of instructional improvement.

However, it is important to keep in mind that while practices described above may be helpful they should not be taken as the “answer” to improving teaching and student achievement. The social character of schools (e.g., the absence or presence of trusting relationships, beliefs about what students can do, and commitment to holding students accountable for learning) play a critical role in how effectively new practices and strategies are implemented and whether they are sustained.[22] While we have described characteristics of classrooms in high performing schools and have shown what these schools do to facilitate instructional improvement, we have not addressed how they create cultures supportive of, and committed to, such work. Further research exploring the social dimension of school improvement would provide additional insight into the foundations of schools’ success.

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Endnotes

1. See Kahne, Sporte, and de la Torre (2006), Stevens (2006), and Stevens (2008) for detailed descriptions of the history and goals of CHSRI, as well as the characteristics of the students served by these schools.
2. See Stevens (2008) for a description of how better-than-expected performance is calculated.
3. Easton (2008).
4. American Youth Policy Forum (2000), p. 8.
5. Joftus (2002).
6. Wurtzel (2006).
7. For example, Hendrie (June 16, 2004).
8. Newmann, Lopez, and Bryk (1998); Newmann, Bryk, and Nagaoka (2001); Mitchell et al. (2005).
9. Lee and Smith (1995); Finn and Rock (1997) as cited in Fredricks et al. (2004); Marks (2000) as cited in Fredricks et al. (2004); Rhodes et al. (2005).
10. Allensworth (2008).
11. Shear et al. (2005); Quint (2006).
12. Allensworth (2007).
13. Researchers observed very few instances of direct ACT/SAT test preparation in the twenty-three classes observed. In light of the recent Consortium on Chicago School Research study *From High School to the Future: ACT Preparation—Too Much, Too Late*, which reports that test preparation using test strategies and item practice are not effective in improving ACT scores, this is notable. In two of the instances, students spent five minutes answering and discussing a practice question. In the remaining two instances, including the one described above, ACT test preparation was integrated naturally into the curriculum. It is also important to keep in mind that our indicator of academic demand does not capture whether students learned each skill, since the qualitative research did not examine student outcomes.
14. Sebring et al. (2006).
15. These examples are not meant to imply that all classrooms in our sample schools were exemplars of perfectly well-behaved, engaged, and academically demanding classes. We saw some scattered instances of negative student-teacher interactions, where students bordered on being rude. We also saw our share of disengagement and disruption, with students walking around the classroom during small-group time, tussling with each other, and having conversations unrelated to academic work. Furthermore, while we could not observe student outcomes (e.g., test scores, assignments, and class grades), it was not always clear that students were consistently meeting the high academic demands in these classes. Nevertheless, on the whole the classes that we observed contained high academic demand, high or medium student engagement, and positive interactions.
16. Stevens (2008).
17. Sporte, Kahne, and Correa (2004); Stevens (2006); Stevens (2008).
18. Wasley (1991).
19. Hart (1990a); Hart (1990b); Smylie and Denny (1990); Bryk and Schneider (2002).
20. The CHSRI organization conducted workshops for all schools on how to use the AIA process. These three schools continued using the process beyond the initial training.
21. Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001); Little (2003); Stevens (2006).
22. Payne (2008).

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The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. CCSR encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

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