

# Programs of School Improvement: An Overview

Universities, state agencies, and school districts have established school improvement programs based on effective schools research.

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Educators have become increasingly convinced that the characteristics of schools are important determinants of academic achievement. Since 1978 an extraordinary number and variety of school improvement programs have concentrated on a school effects interpretation of the relationship between achievement and family background. Such programs represent a major educational reform and derive from a fairly rapid educator acceptance of the research of Brookover and Lezotte (1977), Edmonds (1979), Rutter (1979), and a number of others who have studied characteristics of both effective and ineffective schools.

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Several school effects researchers have independently concluded that effective schools share certain essential characteristics. However, two important caveats exist: researchers do not yet know whether those characteristics are the causes of instructional effectiveness; nor have the characteristics been ranked. We must thus conclude that to advance school effectiveness, a school must implement all of the characteristics at once.

The characteristics of an effective school are (1) the principal's leadership and attention to the quality of instruction; (2) a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus; (3) an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning; (4) teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery; and (5) the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation.



Photo: Charles Shoup

To be effective a school need not bring all students to identical levels of mastery, but it must bring an equal percentage of its highest and lowest social classes to minimum mastery. This measure of school effectiveness serves two broad purposes. First, it permits the middle class to establish the standard of proportionate mastery against which to judge a school's effectiveness. Second, it permits schools to

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be easily characterized as improving or declining as the proportion of the lowest social class demonstrating mastery rises

or falls.

Three types of school improvement programs have resulted from the school

effectiveness research: (1) programs that are organized and administered within schools and school districts; (2) programs that are administered by state education agencies, which provide incentives and technical assistance to local schools and districts; and (3) programs of research, development, and technical assistance usually located in a university. The university programs tend to emphasize the dissemination of knowledge gained from research on school and teacher effects as well as description and analysis of the technology of school intervention.

#### **Local District Programs**

There are now more than a score of urban school districts at various stages of the design and implementation of school improvement programs based on the characteristics of school effectiveness. Five such programs—in New York City, Milwaukee, Chicago, New Ha-



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ven, and St. Louis—all attempt to introduce approaches to leadership, climate, focus, expectations, and assessment that conform to characteristics of school effectiveness. These programs are dissimilar in that their designs for change are different. Some of them invite schools to voluntarily participate while others require participation. Some were initiated by school officials while others were initiated by outsiders.

*The New York City School Improvement Project (SIP)* is the most widely publicized of these efforts. Between August 1978 and February 1981, I was chief instructional officer of the New York City Public Schools. I therefore presided over the design and implementation of SIP, which was part of a larger attempt to improve the school system's basic approach to teaching and learning. Since 1978 there have been changes in the New York City schools



*Photo: Susan Ujka*

in such basic areas as curriculum requirements and the minimum standards for pupil promotion.

SIP was and is the most generously funded of the five projects described here. The project began in October 1979 with nearly a million dollars of support provided by the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the New York Foundation, the New York State Department of Education, and the New York City Public Schools.

During the 1978-79 school year about 15 persons were recruited and trained as school liaisons. The training covered the research on school effects, the use of instruments to evaluate the schools, and procedures the staff were to follow when consulting with individual schools. Initially each participating school was assigned a full-time liaison; by 1980-81 each liaison was assigned two schools. All of the participating schools were volunteers.

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A committee of principals, teachers, and parents was then formed to participate in and approve all project activities in the school. Using interviews and classroom observations, the liaison conducted a “needs assessment” of the school in order to determine the principal’s style of leadership, the instructional focus of the school, the climate, the nature of teacher expectations of pupil performance, and the role of standardized measures of pupil performance in program evaluation. On the basis of the needs assessment, a plan was developed by the liaison and the school’s committee to introduce the effective school characteristics where they were absent and to strengthen them where they were weak. Descriptions of supportive educational services were developed inside the school district and in greater New York City. These descriptions were used by the liaison to decide which services were required by the school improvement

plan.

In New York City, typical interventions included teaching principals the elements of instructional leadership; seminars to improve teachers’ use of achievement data as a basis for program evaluation; and developing and disseminating written descriptions of the school’s major focus.

The New York City School Improvement Project is annually evaluated on measures of organization, institutional change, and measures of pupil performance on standardized tests of achievement. The Ford Foundation conceived of and funded a “documentation unit” to evaluate the outcomes of the project and to record its evolution. The achievement data for each school have shown an annual increase in students demonstrating academic mastery.

*The school improvement project in Milwaukee* is also based on school effectiveness research, but is substantially

different from the New York City project. During the 1979–80 school year, 18 elementary schools—regarded at the time as the least effective in the Milwaukee school district—were assigned by the superintendent to participate in this project.

The Milwaukee project was primarily designed and implemented by Maureen Larkin and relied solely on school district resources. It initially focused on teacher attitudes toward the educability of the schools’ predominantly low-income students.<sup>1</sup>

*The St. Louis project* was initiated from outside the school district. During the 1980–81 school year, John Ervin, Vice President of the Danforth Foundation, persuaded St. Louis school officials to permit several inner-city schools to participate in a project designed to introduce the characteristics of effective schools. From the beginning, Ervin and area superintendent Rufus Young used



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a design focused on broad participation and shared decision making. With Danforth support, teachers and principals were chosen to visit New York City's SIP and a Pontiac, Michigan, improvement project based on the Brookover-Lezotte characteristics of school effectiveness. From these visits, St. Louis educators gained personal knowledge of effective schools.

The 1980-81 school year was spent in intense planning with the assistance of area university faculty who illustrated the processes of change and the behaviors associated with school effectiveness. Area superintendent Young has reported achievement gains for all participating schools.

*The New Haven, Connecticut, project* focuses on all schools within the district and is directly supervised by the superintendent. New Haven is especially interesting because of its long association

with Jim Comer of Yale. Comer's *School Power* (1980) describes a ten-year history of direct intervention in three predominantly black New Haven elementary schools. Comer's approach to school improvement emphasizes the mental health skills of educators and seeks a qualitative improvement in the interaction between teachers and students, school and family, adults and children. The New Haven schools in which Comer has worked have dramatically improved both interpersonal relations and the quality of teaching and learning. Superintendent Jerry Tirozzi has set out to build on Comer's model in an overall approach that derives from my correlates of effectiveness (Edmonds, 1979).

My major differences with Comer focus on tactics and outcomes. Comer's approach is grounded in the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry in that he teaches the psychological origin of pupil

behavior in order to improve the quality of educator response. This orientation has required many educators to learn new skills. Comer's program not only raises achievement but has a desirable effect on the affective outcomes of schooling. My approach is somewhat more modest in that the goal is increased achievement and the measure of gain is exclusively cognitive. The attempt to integrate these two approaches has not been under way long enough to permit evaluation.

*The Chicago project* represents yet another alternative design. During the 1980-81 school year, Dean Robert Green of Michigan State University's Urban Affairs Program was hired by the Chicago Board of Education to preside over the design of a desegregation plan for the Chicago schools. Green is a national authority on desegregation designs, especially as they relate to pupil placement, equitable rules governing



student behavior, supplementary services, and the myriad elements that contribute to effective desegregation.

I was hired by the Chicago Board of Education to design the portion of the desegregation plan that would directly affect teaching and learning. This division of labor produced two distinct plans (Green, 1981) which were submitted to the Chicago board in the spring of 1981. Green's plan focused on pupil placement to desegregate the schools. My plan was intended to standardize the curriculum, emphasize achievement in evaluation, and otherwise cause the system to implement what is known about school effectiveness.

The school board rejected Green's plan for pupil placement and only recently submitted to the federal court a plan for voluntary desegregation. My plan, however, was adopted, submitted to the federal court, and ordered into effect in September 1981. That was an unfortunate development. Had the board adopted both plans, it would have advanced desegregation and achievement simultaneously. Its failure to do so, however, implies that programs of school improvement can substitute for pupil placement plans for desegregation. Improved achievement for black students is unrelated to the legal, moral,

and ethical obligation to eliminate discrimination as a characteristic of pupil placement.

Superintendent Ruth Love didn't arrive in Chicago till after both plans had been submitted to the board. It is therefore reasonable to expect that Love will interpret the court order in ways that reflect her formidable mastery of the various elements that advance achievement in a large urban school system.

The school improvement programs thus far discussed are but a few of many now under way. Our experience with implementation gives no basis for preferring any particular design. We know far more about the characteristics of school effectiveness than we do about how they become effective. Nevertheless, it is possible to make summary observations of potential use to all programs of school improvement.

Clearly, change must be schoolwide and include both principals and teachers. All programs of school improvement should be evaluated on at least two distinctive measures. Changes in student achievement are an obvious important measure. Of equal importance are observable changes in the institutional, organizational nature of a school as a function of changes in principal and teacher behavior. Formative evaluation

is distinctly preferred over summative evaluation. Finally, while most changes will occur within the school, some important and desirable changes can only be made by the school board or the superintendent. Local school designs for improvement will from time to time reveal aspects of board policy or administrative rules that impede the plan. It is important at such times to continue the local school plan while acknowledging that districtwide changes may not occur or may take a long time to accomplish. Thus no local school design should depend on changes over which the local school does not have control.

#### State-Administered Programs

A number of state departments of education are circulating materials designed to encourage local school districts to adopt school improvement plans based on school effectiveness research. For example, the Missouri Department of Education has produced a film now circulating throughout the state; and the Ohio Department of Education, in addition to dissemination activities, is offering modest financial support to Ohio school districts willing to pursue school effectiveness programs.

The most formal state program is the Office of School Improvement of the Connecticut Department of Education. During the 1979-80 school year, department staff spent substantial time in New York City observing the SIP training program and liaison behavior in project schools. Connecticut was especially interested in the instruments that had been developed to evaluate the correlates within the schools. The Connecticut Office of School Improvement now offers two services to local school districts.

First, districts are invited to submit designs for school improvement based on the characteristics of effective schools. Some of those designs are funded with grants from the state. Second, whether funded or not, all Connecticut school districts may request technical assistance from the Office of School Improvement. For example, any district may ask state personnel to use the evaluative instruments to conduct a needs assessment in a local school. State personnel also teach officials of the local district how to use the instruments. As a result, a number of Connecticut districts have designed and implemented programs of school improvement based on the characteristics of effective schools. The preliminary reports are enthusiastic although no formal evalua-



Photo: Robert Zamora



tions have yet been produced.

The New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) offers an interesting variation on these state programs. Officials of the state office of the NJEA were also sent to New York to observe SIP, and in 1980-81 NJEA launched its own Effectiveness Training Program. Local chapters of the NJEA may request assistance from the state office to design and implement a program of school improvement. The state office then sends to the local chapter a team of trainers to conduct needs assessments and staff development activities designed to encourage the development of local plans. Unfortunately, none of these state activities has produced evaluative materials that permit assessment.

#### University-Based Programs

The Title IV Kent State University desegregation assistance center is a program that combines dissemination and technical assistance.

In cooperation with the Ohio Department of Education, Kent State has held statewide improvement conferences and is working with a number of Ohio districts in the design and implementation of local plans for school improvement based on the school effectiveness research. Kent State has interpreted the school effectiveness research as complementary to and supportive of local plans for desegregation. The Kent State Desegregation Center graphically illustrates that regardless of the particular plan for desegregation, all schools profit by exploiting what is known of the characteristics of effective schools.

A similar program is now under way at the University of Michigan's Program of Equal Opportunity (PEO), which is also a Title IV desegregation assistance center. PEO's dissemination materials explicitly note the complementary nature of school effects research and teacher effects research (*Breakthrough*, 1982).

Finally, there is Michigan State University's NIE-funded Institute for Research on Teaching, which is part of MSU's College of Education. Some faculty of the Institute study the correlates of effective teaching while others focus on the correlates of effective schools.

The College of Education has formed a unit called the Center for School Improvement whose purpose is to synthesize and disseminate the knowledge gained from research on effective schools and effective teaching. During the 1981-82 school year, Michigan school districts were invited to partici-



pate in a training program focused on the implications of this knowledge for practice. More than 100 principals, teachers, and central administrators from Michigan's 21 largest school districts are now designing local programs of school improvement to be implemented in one or more of the schools in their district. The demand for training programs based on research on effective schools and effective teaching illustrates widespread educator interest in knowledge-based designs for school improvement.

These brief descriptions of local, state, and university programs of school improvement are typical of the range and variety of such programs and activities, although they do share certain similarities.

#### Common Characteristics of Improvement Programs

In all of these improvement programs the local school is the unit of analysis and the focus of intervention. All of these programs presume that almost all school-age children are educable and that their educability derives from the nature of the schools to which they are

sent. While all of these programs would advocate increased financial support for schools, their designs focus on more efficient use of existing resources. Finally, all of these programs use increased achievement for low-income children as the measure of gain while presuming that such gains will accrue to the even greater benefit of middle-class children. These shared characteristics form an interesting basis for judging the long-range prospects of the programs. I strongly urge all programs of school improvement to provide the basis for their systematic evaluation.

It is equally important to suggest advances in educational research that would benefit these projects. More basic research on school effectiveness would reinforce the correlates of school effectiveness and further advance our knowledge of effective schools. Among the fundamental research issues yet to be studied is whether the correlates of school effectiveness are also the causes of school effectiveness. Basing improvement programs on the causes of school effectiveness would dramatically increase achievement rates.

Research on school effectiveness has been complemented and reinforced by





Photo: Sharon Blalock

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research on teacher effectiveness. Brophy (1974), Good (1979), and Rosenshine (1978), for example, have focused on the teacher behaviors and classroom characteristics that describe instructionally effective classrooms. Teacher effects analysis of the interaction between pupil achievement and pupil family background parallels school effects analysis in that both focus on aspects of the school to explain why some schools succeed with greater proportions of their pupil populations than do others.

The major findings from research on schools and research on classrooms should be integrated. From a conceptual point of view both groups of researchers emphasize behaviors within the school as the major determinants of achievement in basic school skills. Both groups of researchers depend on the discovery of effective practice in contrast to invention of recommended practice theorized to improve achievement. Furthermore the correlates of effective schools and effective classrooms derive exclusively from the environment over which local schools have control.

These two sets of research findings also complement each other and would

be strengthened were they integrated. For example, one of the correlates of effective schools is the principal's instructional leadership. One of the manifestations of instructional leadership is frequent principal-teacher discourse focused on diagnosing and solving instructional problems in the classroom. Principals who have intimate knowledge of the most effective techniques of classroom management and instruction are well prepared for discussions with teachers focused on the classroom. It is probably safe to say that as schools acquire the characteristics of effective schools, they create a school climate more receptive to teacher use of the correlates of effective teaching.

Finally, only a few of the programs of school improvement reflect the findings from research on organizational change. The disparity of designs for local school improvement exists partly because of their different analyses of the means by which organizational change might occur. As we record the progress of these projects, it would be well to note the extent to which their successes and failures derive from the presence or absence of the principles of organizational development.

This much is certain: significant numbers of educational decision makers have concluded that the findings from research on effective schools are accurate and efficacious. We are thus observing the proliferation of programs of school improvement based on a common body of knowledge. This intimate interaction between research and practice validates the usefulness of research on schools and classrooms and encourages an expanded agenda of educational inquiry. □

The details of the Milwaukee program appear in this issue in an article written by Larkin, "Milwaukee's Project RISE," pp. 16-21.

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