

Sleuths Seek Secrets of High-Flying Schools

BY LYNN OLSON

Belleville, Ill.

The interviewers pepper the teachers with questions: To what do they attribute their school's level of success? How do teachers know exactly what is to be learned in their grades and subjects? What's their involvement in curriculum development? How does the school provide instructional support for teachers?

Like sleuths searching for clues, the interviewers are trying to ferret out why the two junior high schools—Central and West—here in this city of some 42,000 people outperform others with similar student populations across Illinois, and how those practices might be spread.

Over the past decade, an explosion of data on student performance has generated increasing attempts to identify what have been dubbed high-flying schools and learn from them. Just this spring, a free Web site, launched by the New York City-based Standard & Poor's, began providing a tool that enables users to identify schools that do better than others with similar demographics. (*See Education Week, March 30, 2005.*)

But the investigations here in Illinois, and in other states affiliated with the Austin, Texas-based National Center for Educational Accountability's best-practices studies, stand out on several fronts.

Rather than drawing on the experiences of a handful of high performers, by the end of this year, the NCEA and its state affiliates will have conducted such case studies in more than 400 schools in 17 states, supported in part by a \$1.2 million grant from the Los Angeles-based Broad Foundation. The group also has devised a rigorous methodology for identifying such schools and a detailed protocol for studying them that helps unearth patterns of behavior.

"We try to be very careful not to draw conclusions from any one school," said Jean Rutherford, the director of educational initiatives for the nonprofit center. "We say, 'We've been in 300 schools, and here's what they all say.'"

High performers, in her view, "sound, walk, and talk alike, not in a negative way, but in an enthusiasm, a positive sense of efficacy."

Identifying Schools

Studying high-performing schools and figuring out what makes them tick dates back at least to the "effective schools" movement launched by the late researcher Ronald Edmonds in the 1970s. But a resurgence of such work has occurred in the past few years from both ends of the political spectrum, as educators struggle to bring all students to higher levels of achievement.

In 2000, for example, the conservative Heritage Foundation, a Washington think tank, published *No Excuses: Lessons From 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*. And in 2002, the liberal-leaning Education Trust, a research and advocacy group also in Washington, published a list of 1,320 "high-flying schools" nationwide that had both strong test scores and student enrollments that were at least half poor and half made up of minority children.

A year later, the trust launched a searchable computer database, the High Performing Schools and Districts initiative, designed to identify high-poverty schools of high academic caliber and learn from them.

Many of those studies have been criticized, though, for focusing on just one year's worth of test data, including schools with selective enrollments, or looking at results in just one grade or subject.

In contrast, the NCEA identifies high performers based on state test results over three years and in multiple grades and subjects.

A Common Framework

To probe what sets high-performing schools apart from others, the NCEA has designed a best-practices framework that forms the basis for structured interviews with district administrators, principals, and teachers.

Underlying the framework, said Ms. Rutherford, are clear and specific academic goals for students, rooted in state content standards. "That clearly has emerged," she said, "as the

bedrock foundation: this penetrating, deep understanding of what it is children are to know and be able to do and how to connect it across grades.”

The site investigations, which involve a team of two to four researchers working over one or two days, do not include classroom observations, in part because of the concentrated nature of the visits.

The protocol stems from work that started in 1999, when Just for the Kids, the Austin-based predecessor to the NCEA, began investigating the practices of consistently high-performing elementary schools in Texas. The center was founded in 2001 by Just for the Kids, the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, and the University of Texas at Austin to promote higher student achievement by improving state data collection and identifying practices that distinguish consistently high-performing schools from others and disseminating those findings. The center receives funds from foundations, corporations, individuals, and the U.S. Department of Education. Today, it works with affiliates in nearly half the states.

Those affiliates receive training in how to conduct the interviews and collect supporting documents, such as curriculum frameworks, that detail each school’s practices. Each state can choose to supplement the NCEA materials and to adapt the framework to reflect its own context. The Illinois affiliate, for instance, has added questions about school climate and about how schools replicate good ideas.

“What we’re interested in a lot is the transferability of the information,” said Lynne Curry, a research associate in the college of education at Illinois State University, in Normal, which is leading her state’s investigations. The Illinois Business Roundtable serves as the primary affiliate organization. “We’re also interested in the attitudinal, affective side of all this,” Ms. Curry said.

Having a common framework and set of questions, said the NCEA’s Ms. Rutherford, has made it possible to talk about improvement practices across sites. “Even high-performing schools can’t always articulate the reasons for high performance,” she said. “There’s just not that much reflection time to sit down and know what it is that’s leading to your high performance.”

All state study results are published on www.just4kids.org. In addition to detailed test data and descriptive information about each practice from the field investigations, the Web site includes actual examples of tools and documents used by schools and districts.

“We can learn by watching successful districts,” said James T. Rosborg, the superintendent of the Belleville school system. “We don’t do enough of that.”

‘Whatever It Takes’

Belleville School District No. 118, located on high ground just east of the Mississippi River, in southwest Illinois about 17 miles from St. Louis, shares many of the features of other high-performing sites.

“Our concept has always been: Show us the kids, and we’ll teach them,” said one 8th grade science teacher at West

Junior High School here. “I think that attitude of whatever it takes, that’s what happens.”

Clear expectations for what students should know and be able to do are communicated through a grade-by-grade skills continuum that the district updates regularly. District exit tests, given at the end of each year and crafted and refined by committees of classroom teachers, measure whether students are learning those objectives. Any changes in the curriculum flow through a district curriculum committee, which meets monthly and includes representatives from every grade and school.

New instructional strategies, such as the Reading Recovery program or math problem-solving, are first piloted in a handful of schools or classrooms, and then refined to make sure they really work, before being copied districtwide. In the summer and early fall, teachers and principals pore over test results to identify targets for the coming year and how they will address them.

The two junior high schools also have designed a number of ways to help struggling students, such as individual improvement plans signed by the students’ parents and teachers. Those strategies also include a 7th grade and an 8th grade classroom that are limited to 20 students who take all the core subjects with one teacher and cover the same material on a more individual timetable.

Belleville educators also point to other factors contributing to their success: the high level of trust and collaboration in the district and its attention to fostering a strong, positive relationship with every student. With just eight elementary schools, two junior highs, and some 3,700 students, Belleville School District No. 118 is small enough to have developed a strong, cohesive sense of community. Most of its principals are hired from within, for example, and many teachers started out student-teaching here.

“I think we’re all allowed to breathe, to be creative, to make mistakes,” said Pam Knobloch, the principal of West Junior High. “It’s an attitude; it’s a philosophy; it’s a way of treating people.”

“They make it real easy for us to confer, to collaborate,” agreed Bill Miller, a 7th grade social studies teacher at Central Junior High School, who says that teachers know the administration is on the same page. “There’s mutual respect,” he said. “The bottom line is the kids. We’re all here working for them. I think that’s what unites this district.”

Translating Into Action

Honoring the context of each district—and school—while identifying the commonalities across sites is part of the challenge in doing such qualitative studies.

The work across states presents benefits along with the challenges. When the Washington state affiliate could not identify any high-performing schools with large percentages of Hispanic students, for example, it sent teams to Texas to study high performers in the Rio Grande Valley and report back.

But every state is also different, ranging from the types of tests it administers to its timeline for releasing results.

Best-Practices Framework

The National Center for Educational Accountability structures interviews with district administrators, principals, and teachers around a common framework.

SOURCE: National Center for Educational Accountability

EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING					
High-quality Instruction					
THEMES	Curriculum and academic goals	Staff selection, leadership, and capacity-building	Instructional programs, practices, and arrangements	Monitoring: compilation, analysis, and use of data	Recognition, intervention, and adjustment
CLASSROOM	Ensure teaching content is based on specified academic objectives	Collaborate in grade-level or subject teams focused on student work	Use evidence-based programs, practices, and arrangements	Monitor student learning	Recognize, intervene, or adjust based on student performance
SCHOOL	Center school plan on explicit improvement of specified academic objectives	Select, develop, and allocate staff based on student learning	Ensure the use of evidence-based programs, practices, and arrangements in every classroom	Monitor teacher performance and student learning	Recognize, intervene, or adjust based on teacher performance
DISTRICT	Define clear and specific academic objectives by grade and subject	Provide strong leaders, highly qualified teachers, and aligned professional development	Provide evidence-based instructional programs	Develop student-assessment and data-monitoring systems to monitor school performance	Recognize, intervene, or adjust based on school performance
District's clear and specific academic objectives					
STATE STANDARDS					

Local influences, relationships, and communication
Resource allocation
Core beliefs about teaching and learning

Gauging High Performers

The National Center for Educational Accountability identifies high performers based on state test results over the latest three years and in multiple grades and subjects. The center uses a regression analysis to compare the performance of each school in a state with the average performance of schools with similar demographics in each grade and subject. Only those whose distance from the average consistently ranks them in the top tier—across multiple grades, subjects, and years—among schools with similar percentages of low-income students are identified for the best-practices research.

Starting in 2003-04, the center also required that such schools make adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The NCEA and its affiliates also investigate a comparison group of average performers in participating states to see how they differ.

Ideally, for example, the NCEA considers test-participation rates and the skills of incoming 7th graders when gauging a junior high school's performance, but Illinois lacks a longitudinal database that would enable it to include such information. The state also did not have information on which schools had made adequate yearly progress for 2003-04 in time to identify schools for the best-practices study, so high performers were picked based on 2002-03 test data. As it turned out, West Junior High did not make AYP last school year, although state test data consistently rank the school far above others with similar percentages of low-income and English-language-learners across three years and multiple grades and subjects.

"Every state has its own witches' brew of small- to medium-sized data problems," said Chrys Dougherty, the director of research for the NCEA. "We're trying to get policymakers to understand that even though data sounds like the most boring thing in the world, if you're going to improve schools, you've got to improve the information that schools have to work with."

In some states, which identify their own lists of high performers based on different criteria, questions also arise about exactly what it means to be a high-performing school.

But perhaps the biggest challenge is how to take the

NCEA's growing trove of information and translate that into action in low- and average-performing schools.

"To me, that is the central issue that we face now," said Mike Hudson, the organization's president. "How do you effectively and efficiently transfer what we know is working out there to help those in need of assistance?"

The organization has devised self-audits for schools, based on the best-practices framework, that allow educators to benchmark their practices against those of higher performers, to help decide where to begin their work.

By the fall, the NCEA plans to pilot a School Improvement Services kit that would put educators at average- and low-performing schools in touch with a network of high-performing mentors who could walk them through the improvement process.

'Something to Nurture'

Although most education analysts agree that it's important to identify and learn from high-performing schools, others caution against concluding that schools alone can close achievement gaps between students of different racial and social backgrounds.

"Some schools do a much better job with disadvantaged

children than other schools,” said Richard Rothstein, the author of *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*. “I think we know a little bit about what their best practices are, and those should be duplicated and imitated.”

Still, he added, “too many people are quick to conclude that because some schools do better than others, therefore, schools can close the achievement gap on their own. There’s no evidence for that.”

“Nobody is sitting around saying that poverty or social conditions don’t matter,” said Mr. Dougherty of the NCEA. “We’re trying to say that schools are important, and social conditions are important.”

Nonetheless, he said, “Educators have to work with what they have. So the ones who are best at working with what they have are the ones we want to highlight, because they’re the ones from whom educators can learn.”

Such work is important, said Doug Carnine, a professor of education at the University of Oregon in Eugene and the director of the National Center to Improve the Tools of Education, in part because few controlled experiments are

available in education to identify what works. While the NCEA is still refining its methodology, he said, the organization “is making concerted efforts to do it well.”

“And because of their penetration,” he said, “it really deserves attention and support. A framework for a national dialogue around the elements of effective schooling that’s not so fragmented is really something to nurture.”

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Education Week is published 43 times per year by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Subscriptions: U.S.: \$79.94 for 43 issues. Canada: \$135.94 for 43 issues. ©2005 Editorial Projects in Education.

National Center for Educational Accountability

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The National Center for Educational Accountability is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization (EIN 01-0577238). Sponsoring organizations include Just for the Kids, The University of Texas at Austin and the Education Commission of the States. For more information, contact Janet Spence, Director of Communications: **National Center for Educational Accountability** c/o: 4030-2 W. Braker Lane, Austin, Texas 78759; 512.232.0770 or 800.762.4645; fax: 512.232.0777; jspence@mail.utexas.edu and jspence@just4kids.org