SUCCESSFUL TEXAS SCHOOLWIDE PROGRAMS:

RESEARCH STUDY RESULTS

The Charles A. Dana Center
The University of Texas at Austin
2901 North IH-35, ECN 2.200
Austin, TX 78722-2348
(512) 475-9708
Fax: (512) 232-1853
http://www.starcenter.org

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Primary Authors
Laura Lein, Ph.D.
Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Ph.D.
Mary Ragland

Research Staff and Contributing Authors
Kim Anderson
Rose Asera, Ph.D.
Margery Ginsberg, Ph.D.
Veena Kaul
Liz Lilliott
Sandra Okolica
Janine Saunders
Darlene Yanez

The Charles A. Dana Center
The University of Texas at Austin
Philip Uri Treisman, Ph.D., Executive Director
Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., Ph.D., Director of School Improvement Initiatives
Rose Asera, Ph.D., Director of Research and Evaluation
Mary Ragland, Project Director

BACKGROUND

Contrary to what is heard and read in mass media and educational literature, there is good reason to be hopeful about the education of students who attend public schools in poor communities. Schools where almost all students live in low-income situations can be schools in which almost all students achieve high levels of academic success. This is known not in theory, but in the practice and the results generated by real schools in Texas.

Through a grant provided by the Texas Education Agency and funding support from the U. S. Department of Education's Region VIII Comprehensive Center: the STAR Center (Support for Texas Academic Renewal, the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin has studied schools in Texas that met all three of the following important criteria:

1. In the 1994-95 school year, the schools had a high percentage of students who met the federal criteria to receive free or reduced-price lunches. All of the schools had over 60 percent of the students meet free or reduced-price lunch criteria. Most of the schools had over 75 percent of the students meet the same criteria.
2. The schools received Title I funds and were at various stages of implementing Title I schoolwide programs (an approach involving the use of Title I funds to improve the entire school).
3. In the Spring of 1995, in each school, at least 70 percent of the students passed the reading section of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and at least 70 percent of the students passed the mathematics section of the assessment. In 1995, few Texas schools had reached this level of academic achievement. The 70 percent criterion was selected because it was a key element for identifying schools as "recognized" in the state's accountability system.

In total, the criteria led to the identification of over 50 schools in Texas that were among those most heavily impacted by poverty, yet where achievement on the state's assessment of academic skills was among the highest of all schools in the state. Individually, each of the schools represents an existence proof that high-poverty schools can ensure high levels of academic success for almost all students. Furthermore, in combination, the schools suggest that there are good practices that would enable any high-poverty school to create an environment in which almost all students achieve high levels of academic success. The purpose of our study was to identify those key practices and to bring them to the attention of teachers, principals, parents, and other educational leaders.

Limited resources did not allow us to study all of the schools that met the three criteria. Thus, from the list of over 50 schools, 26 schools were selected to represent the diversity of Texas. As such, schools were selected from 18 of the state's 20 regional education service centers. The 26 schools included urban and rural schools, from large and small districts, and served very diverse ethnic populations.

Our team of researchers and educators spent the spring semester of 1996 visiting these schools and interviewing teachers, principals, parents, aides, support personnel, and central office administrators. We observed classrooms, playgrounds, lunch rooms, and staff meetings. We listened to the stories of their struggles, their successes, and their failures. We read their plans, pored over their data, and tried to understand the roots of their success. After visiting all of the schools once, we returned to conduct more in-depth visits at five of the schools.

Our approach relied heavily on qualitative, case study research methodology. Merriam (1988) explained that case study research designs are appropriate when description and explanation are sought (in contrast to prediction), when there are many variables within a case (as opposed to relatively few variables across many cases), and when a holistic picture of the case is desired (as opposed to a narrow picture with limited dimensions). Thus, case study methodology seemed appropriate for this project.

Merriam also explained that the nature of case study research allows for the evolution of questions throughout the research process. Sometimes, all of the right questions are not known prior to data collection activities. Sometimes, in the process of collecting data, new questions emerge. Thus, our team of researchers met frequently to compare notes and discuss findings. New hypotheses emerged as we visited schools and came to deeper understandings of the common characteristics among the schools. These common characteristics are described in the following section.

FINDINGS

Before describing what we found, it is probably important to describe what was not found. First, if there is a magic formula, a simple prescription, or a miracle program that makes all the difference, we did not find it. We found more differences than similarities in the instructional programs and approaches used in the 26 schools. Some schools used whole language approaches, while others focused more on phonics. Some used constructivist learning approaches, while others engaged in direct teaching. Some were making cutting edge uses of instructional technology, while in others, computer technology was virtually absent in instruction. Some of the schools had joined Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools Project. Some were becoming engaged in the Success for All Program from John Hopkins University. Some were using Reading Recovery approaches. Others seemed to take pride in not having a clear allegiance to any specific program or methodology.

Also, it should be noted that although all of these schools achieved important accomplishments, the schools did not perceive themselves, nor did they wish to be perceived as perfect. They recognized their potential for further growth and they were committed to their ongoing improvement. In each area where we identified common characteristics, a large percentage of the schools exemplified the characteristics, while a few of the 26 schools might not have been strong in that particular area. In other words, each of the schools had areas of strength, and each of the schools had areas where they might improve. Nonetheless, these schools have all achieved important and impressive results.

The common characteristics can be grouped into seven areas or themes. These themes describe the common attitudes, activities, and aspirations of the schools studied. The themes describe the attributes that have influenced the growth and success of the schools. The reader will quickly note that the themes are closely related and to some extent interdependent. Thus, in some ways the division of the themes seems artificial. However, the themes provide an easier way to discuss the complexities of the schools studied.

Theme 1: Focus on the Academic Success of Every Student

Many studies of effective schools emphasized the extent to which successful schools shared a common mission (Texas Education Agency, 1989). Similarly, a study of 12 successful Title I schoolwide projects (U. S. Department of Education, 1994) found that the schools had an agreed-upon vision for all students that was based on higher academic standards. Our study underscores these findings. In all of the 26 schools studied, there was a strong focus on the academic success of every student.

It should be noted that these schools did not simply have a mission. Rather, they had the mission of ensuring the academic success of every student. They did not merely have mission statements. Their sense of mission was articulated in every aspect of their planning, organization, and use of resources.

Almost every decision about the selection of instructional materials or strategies; the adoption of staff development strategies; the use of fiscal resources; the scheduling of the school calendar; the assignment and use of teachers, support personnel, and volunteers; the use of classroom, playground, and building space; or the use of any other resources was guided by a focus on the mission of ensuring the academic success of every student. For example, when the staff at one school decided to supplement the district's whole-language curriculum with phonics-based instruction, it was because they had reason to believe that such a change would allow them to improve the reading achievement of more students. When the staff at another school decided to seek a modification of their school's instructional week, it was done with the goal of creating more time for teachers to come together to plan and learn more about improving instruction.

As mentioned earlier, these schools used a great variety of instructional approaches. However, common among the schools is that they chose their approaches because they believed that the particular approach would be effective in meeting the specific needs of their students and in utilizing the unique strengths of their staff and community. Their beliefs about various approaches were influenced strongly by their formal and informal efforts to collect and analyze information that helped them determine which policies, programs, and practices were most likely to result in improved academic achievement for their students.

"What's best for kids?" was heard repeatedly in the 26 schools as a benchmark for making decisions. To determine what was best, some teachers developed small, informal pilot studies to empirically determine the approaches that were most likely to lead to the academic success of their students. In other cases, educators reviewed the educational literature related to their area of concern and came to conclusions about what might work best with their students. In some cases, principals and teachers visited other schools within or outside of Texas to learn about promising practices. They asked challenging questions to determine the potential of those practices to influence the academic success of their students.

The focus on the academic success of every student was evident in the planning of individual teachers, just as it was evident in whole school planning activities. Teachers planned lessons with a focus on getting each and every student to succeed academically. Teachers were attuned to the special ways in which individual students learned best. They exploited this knowledge to create learning environments that allowed many students to attain challenging academic skills.

In almost all of the 26 schools, teachers were supported in their planning through extensive school and/or district efforts to align curriculum, staff development, and technology purchases with the objectives of the TAAS. Teachers were more likely to use teacher guides as tools for accomplishing instructional objectives rather than as scripts that they were required to follow. Teachers knew what objective they were teaching and why the particular instructional approach was most likely to work with their students.

Formative assessment results were used widely by teachers to assist them in planning instruction. In some schools, teachers used their own formative assessments,

in other schools, teachers used formative assessments created by the school district. In either case, the formative assessments allowed teachers to accurately determine areas of strength and need. When students had mastered the expected skills, teachers frequently went further into other extensions and applications of the academic skills.

Teachers consistently reported that they were actively supported by their principals as they attempted to focus on the academic success of every student. "She'll get us whatever we need," was articulated by many teachers in many schools as they spoke of their principals. Teachers felt supported with adequate instructional materials and relevant staff development. Similarly, principals often indicated that they felt supported by their superintendents and central office colleagues. As well, there was often strong support from the community through volunteer activities and school-business partnerships. As such, the mission seemed to be shared by everyone. There seemed to be little doubt that a school would be successful in improving achievement because everyone (including teachers, support staff, parents, central office staff, and community leaders) had a role in actualizing the school's mission.

Theme 2: No Excuses

Even when schools have a strong sense of mission, there are times when the mission is not achieved, when students do not learn as much or do not perform as well as expected. In such situations, the tendency might be to blame or to make excuses; however, the schools we studied did not accept excuses for failure with any student. Educators at these schools tended to believe that they could succeed with any student, regardless of the nature of the home situation, regardless of the student's previous performance or diagnosis, regardless of resource difficulties, and regardless of whatever other constraints might confront the school. Ultimately, there were no excuses for low performance.

In almost all of the 26 schools, teachers talked about students who lived in difficult situations (often related to their families' low income). However, the teachers never accepted that the difficult situation was a reason to lower their academic expectations for students. Instead the teachers often engaged in creative efforts to respond to the situation. Whether it meant having the student do his homework after school each day, calling home to provide a wake-up call on mornings when the mother worked the night shift, allowing a student to take extra portions of lunch home in the afternoon so that she would have dinner, or modeling to a mother how to read a story to her preschool child, the school personnel evidenced a powerful "whatever it takes" attitude.

In several schools educators commented, "Money is not going to keep any child from participating." Schools were creative in finding ways to stretch their Title I budgets, to use their parent-teacher organizations to raise funds, to tie into existing community services, or to broker new support from business partners. In some cases, school personnel went as far as to use their own personal financial resources to assist students with basic needs such as food and clothing.

Similarly, a lack of resources was not accepted as an excuse for providing any less than an excellent academic program. When funds were needed for professional development activities, instructional technology, or other instructional materials educators demonstrated both persistence and creativity in "finding" the needed funds. Some schools sought new funding from state, federal, or private grant sources. Others developed new business partnerships. In many cases, schools became very deliberate in prioritizing the use of their discretionary resources, including their Title I dollars. They made tough choices and eliminated less effective expenditures so that they could afford expenditures that would more likely result in greater student achievement.

For schools in general, rules and regulations present a different type of barrier that can sometimes impede a school's ability to respond to the unique situations of students. While some schools might accept such barriers as legitimate excuses for failure, many of the schools we studied took a dramatically different approach. In essence, these educators seemed to assume that rules must be negotiable if they impair the school's ability to meet the needs of students. Principals were willing to debate with the food services director, the city fire marshall, the transportation director, or whoever seemed to be imposing a rule that did not seem to serve students well. Often, their persuasiveness and persistence were rewarded with compromises, waivers, or other efforts to relax requirements.

In schools where the motivation to achieve was so strong, one might have expected to see more blaming when results did not meet expectations; however, educators at the schools we studied did not blame their students, parents, outside forces, or each other. Instead, they reflected upon their own efforts to find opportunities to improve. Also, we saw schools celebrating their accomplishments and acknowledging the contributions of the teachers, support personnel, parents, students, and administrators who had a role in the success. At the same time, we saw thoughtful consideration of the steps that needed to be taken to build upon prior successes toward the goal of high achievement for all students.

Several effective schools studies have focused on the importance of high expectations (Texas Education Agency, 1989). The schools we studied definitely evidenced high expectations for their students; however, they also evidenced high expectations for themselves. The school personnel knew that their students would achieve impressive results because they knew that they, as a school staff, would take whatever steps were necessary to ensure each student's success. Repeatedly, school staff evidenced a willingness to work diligently for long hours, often beyond the requests of their supervisors. Educators defined their jobs based on what needed to be done to reach challenging goals, not by traditional job descriptions and not by traditional notions of work days or work weeks.

Theme 3: <u>Experimentation</u>

Closely related to the "no excuses" theme, we found the 26 schools to be places where careful experimentation was encouraged. Educators felt such strong responsibility for ensuring the academic success of students that they eagerly sought ways to improve teaching and learning. If an approach was not working with one

student or any group of students, teachers were allowed, encouraged, and even expected, to try different approaches. Thus, experimentation flourished as individual teachers, grade-level teams, site-based decision-making teams, and entire school staffs considered new ways to stimulate the achievement of students.

Educators were very careful in their choice of experiments. They evidenced a great sense of responsibility for selecting courses of action that had a high likelihood of leading to improved student performance. Nonetheless, when experiments did not lead to the desired result, we did not see reprisals or negative consequences. Instead, educators were expected to use the failure experience as part of the improvement process. Teachers and other school staff had the opportunity to make a good try, fail, learn from the experience, and make modifications or refinements that led to improved results. Thus, educators often exuded optimism about eventually getting every student to attain the highest standards of performance.

Experimentation was evident at many levels. Schools often engaged in pilot tests of materials or strategies before considering adoptions by the entire school. Schools experimented with the organization of the school day, the acquisition and use of technology, the use of intersessions, and the assignment of support staff. Teachers often shared and cooperated in each other's experiments and dialogued about their findings. They learned from each other's successes and failures.

As teachers and administrators engaged in experimentation, they also encouraged students to experiment and identify new ways to accomplish tasks. Teachers often helped students feel that it was acceptable to try new ideas and approaches. If the approach failed, school personnel were there to assist the student in refining the approach. Thus, students were taught that failure is just a step that sometimes precedes success.

Theme 4: <u>Inclusivity: Everyone is Part of the Solution</u>

In the schools we studied, it seemed that everyone who might possibly come in contact with a student was a partner in ensuring that student's academic success. Job titles did not matter as much as one's potential to contribute. Thus, teachers at all grade levels in both regular and special programs, professional support personnel such as nurses and counselors, bus drivers, campus administrators, custodians, school office staff, cafeteria workers, instructional aides, librarians, parent volunteers, part-time personnel, community leaders, and students were often enlisted to be a part of the team that would lead a student to success at school. As such, everyone who worked at the school, attended the school, or sent children to attend the school had a strong sense of ownership.

Beyond their traditional designated roles, school personnel had broader roles as members of the school team. It was not unusual to see secretaries listening to students read, special education teachers problem-solving instructional strategies with grade-level teams of general classroom teachers, or librarians supporting parental involvement initiatives. The broadly defined roles allowed many individuals to assume

leadership roles. In several schools, everyone on the staff was part of at least one committee and most of the staff chaired a committee at some time during the year.

Effective schools studies (Texas Education Agency, 1989) and schoolwide program studies (Schenck & Beckstrom, 1993; U. S. Department of Education, 1994)) have placed considerable focus on the importance of parental involvement. At the schools we visited, school personnel did not wait passively for parents to become involved in various aspects of the school. In almost all of the schools there was a multi-faceted outreach to families that constantly encouraged and supported parents in ways that nurtured greater involvement in their children's education. Educators made special efforts to make parents feel welcome. Open-door policies and open-door attitudes were common. School personnel assumed responsibility for creating an environment in which parents wanted to become involved.

Often, in these schools, students were utilized as important resources for improving their own and each other's academic achievement. Students had important roles in directing their learning experiences and had input into a variety of decisions that influenced their school experience. Additionally, students often were involved in cooperative learning or peer tutoring strategies in which they worked together to facilitate their learning.

Theme 5: <u>Sense of Family</u>

Beyond the inclusivity evidenced by the schools we studied, we observed a powerful sense of family. Not only were students, parents, and all school personnel included as a part of the team, they were also included as part of the school family. Overwhelmingly, the most common metaphor we observed in the schools was the school as a family. Statements such as "We're a family here," or "These are all my children," were heard frequently.   Moreover, the actions of teachers, principals, students, parents, and other members of the school community frequently reflected the concern, dedication, involvement, respect, and love that one would expect to find in the healthiest of families. The school personnel saw the school less as an institution and more as a family.

In the schools we visited, students were treated with respect and concern. Teachers were concerned with the child's total development, not simply with student performance on the TAAS.   As such, we saw considerable attention to areas of endeavor beyond the traditional academics, in areas such as music, art, or physical education. Similarly, attention was given to the social and emotional needs of students. Counselors, nurses, social workers, and family liaisons often took leadership roles in ensuring that students' basic needs were met.   Traditional school roles were often blurred because educators were willing to do whatever was needed to ensure that their students were doing well physically, emotionally, and socially.

In many ways, the schools strove to communicate to students that they were valued individually and collectively. School activities, bulletin boards, and curriculum materials reflected and celebrated the cultural and linguistic diversity of the students. Similarly, hallways, classrooms, doors, and ceilings were often used to display student work. School personnel often created opportunities to recognize the academic and non-academic accomplishments of students. Students did not need to misbehave to get attention because school staff were engaged in so many efforts to attend to the positive contributions of students.

Students were treated with respect and courtesy.   Like family, the school provided a safe place for students to grow and learn responsibility. School personnel were able to empathize with students and relate to their personal experiences. In many of the schools, teachers and other staff grew up in the same neighborhoods and had similar backgrounds. Adults at the schools acted in ways that showed that they were happy that the students were there. When disciplinary issues arose (which generally seemed rare), the issues were handled consistently, quickly, fairly, and in a manner that still demonstrated respect for the individual student.   Although consistent, school personnel still recognized that there were situations when the rules did not seem appropriate. In such cases, school personnel chose to sacrifice consistency for the sake of a child, instead of the opposite.

Also, respect for students was reflected in a tendency to avoid or minimize the use of labels. When teachers grouped students, they were careful to avoid stigmatizing students. Thus, groupings were often heterogeneous or they were sufficiently fluid to avoid labeling.   Special programs were often located or organized in ways that minimized the separation or stigmatization of students.

Just as students were treated as valued members of the school family, so were their parents. In many of the schools, parents were provided a special place to help make them comfortable when they came to school. To help make sure that parents felt at home, office staff, principals, teachers, and other school personnel greeted parents warmly, usually by name. Parents at these schools knew they were welcome; they knew that they belonged as part of the school family.

It is hard to feel like a family member if you cannot understand the language. Therefore, school personnel made many efforts to accommodate parents who did not speak English. Bilingual office staff, the frequent use of interpreters, bilingual signs and banners throughout the school, and bilingual newsletters were among the strategies used to help parents feel comfortable at school, even when they could not speak English. Similarly, the tone and words used to communicate with parents was often one that reflected respect for the parents' language, dialect, and background. Teachers did not expect parents to understand educational jargon nor did they talk to parents in ways that were condescending.

Even when parents were having difficulty assuming traditional parenting roles, school personnel responded in ways that demonstrated their respect for the challenging situations parents faced. Teachers seemed to be able to empathize with the difficulties faced by some parents, and supported parents as they worked to improve their involvement in their child's academic life. School personnel focused more on seeking solutions than on blaming parents for the academic or social difficulties that students encountered.

The sense of family extended beyond students and parents to all members of the school staff. At the schools we studied, all school personnel, regardless of position or tenure, were perceived as important members of the school family. New teachers were valued for their fresh ideas and perspectives. Veteran teachers were valued for their experience and expertise. The importance of each staff member was based in part on his or her contribution to the mission of the school, but moreover, their importance was based on their worth as an individual. Staff members cared about each other's lives beyond the school, in addition to caring about their performance at the school.

Often principals took a lead role in finding a variety of ways to let school personnel know that they were appreciated and respected.   School personnel were acknowledged for their accomplishments, their expertise, and just for their membership as part of the school family. Each of the schools found ways to utilize both the personal and professional strengths of staff members, often beyond their traditional job descriptions.

As in any family, there were concerns, hurt feelings, and disagreements; however, the areas of disagreement were usually much smaller than the areas of agreement. When there were hurt feelings, people were quick to respond in ways that re-affirmed the value of the individual to the entire school family.

One of the characteristics that make these schools seem more like big families is the absence of an "us" versus "them" attitude. All of the members of the school family

worked to support each other. There was a powerful sense of belonging evidenced by students, parents, teachers, support personnel, and administrators. The school family was a support network that included many smaller support networks. The strong support of the networks enabled many students, teachers, parents, and other school staff to transcend difficult situations and achieve impressive successes.

Theme 6: <u>Collaboration and Trust</u>

Whereas theme four focused on the ways in which students, families, and school personnel were considered part of the team that would accomplish the school's mission, and theme five focused on the ways in which students, families, and school personnel were treated as valued members of the school family, this next theme focuses primarily on the way in which school personnel worked and learned together. Clearly, there is overlap because both the emphasis on inclusion and the sense of family influence the way school personnel work together. Nonetheless, the ways in which educators were working together, in cooperation and trust, seemed to substantially influence their success.

The importance of collaboration was emphasized in other studies of effective schoolwide programs (U. S. Department of Education, 1994). In the schools we studied, openness, honesty, and trust characterized most of the interactions among school personnel. School personnel openly shared concerns and successes with each other. They provided assistance to each other and learned from each other. Teachers seemed to prefer working in teams and did so frequently. Team teaching arrangements were used often. Thus, when problems arose, school staff generally did not need to respond alone. They had colleagues who helped discuss issues and provide ideas, feedback, and encouragement.

Although there was collaboration, there was also disagreement. Teachers and other school personnel frequently reported that they felt free to express their concerns about ideas or actions, without fear of reprisal. There were opportunities for staff to disagree and work out their disagreements in constructive manners. Although the schools typically acted as teams, they still respected each individuals right to disagree.

The openness of the collaborations allowed many teachers to feel comfortable sharing their areas of weakness. Often, teams of teachers helped compensate for each others' weaknesses. Teachers frequently explained partnerships that started with statements such as, "If you can help me with my math lessons, I'll help you with social studies."

Cooperation at these schools extended beyond their grade-span groupings. Frequently, teachers worked with those who taught subsequent grade levels to improve their understanding of each other's curricula and expectations. Even when the next grade level was at a different school, teachers often assumed responsibility for reaching out and establishing the collaborative relationships that would allow them to better ensure their students' future success.

Administrators at these schools made sure that teachers and other school personnel had many opportunities to collaborate and work together. There were

many formal and informal forums that provided school personnel with opportunities to openly discuss programs, policies, and programs. School personnel were encouraged to express their concerns freely, without fear of reprisal. Similarly, administrators often took responsibility for ensuring that teachers had the time to meet and plan together. Often school personnel credited administrators for setting the tone that helped the school become a place where staff worked well together toward common goals.

Theme 7: <u>**Passion for Learning and Growing**</u>

What happens when a teacher sets a challenging goal for a group of students and the students achieve the goal? What happens when the entire school establishes a difficult goal and achieves it? At the schools we visited, many lofty goals had been set and attained. Yet, we did not see people "resting on their laurels." We did not see people becoming complacent with their current ways of teaching, organizing, or leading. Although schools clearly took time to celebrate their successes, there was almost an immediate redefinition of higher goals. School staff continued to challenge and push themselves toward the attainment of even higher goals. Teachers sometimes expressed concerns about ceiling effects and similar measurement phenomena, but the "no excuses" attitude discussed in Theme 2 generally prevailed. Despite those concerns, school personnel continued working to improve teaching and learning.

The experimentation discussed in Theme 3 did not stop when the desired results were attained. Instead school staff focused on how they could improve upon strategies or identify new strategies that would allow them to succeed with even more students or that would allow them to take students to even higher levels of success. In these schools there is a continuous seeking after new horizons, new opportunities, new ways of operating. The process of such discovery and learning on the part of all participants is considered the central business of the school.

Planning for improvement is perpetual. At the schools we visited, there is an unyielding belief that improvement is possible. The pressure to improve was almost totally self-imposed. Yet, these schools were more focused on improving their performance than some schools with dramatically less success. We describe this phenomenon as a passion for growing and learning.

To actualize their improvement plans, school personnel were almost always engaged in learning activities. Professional development was not an event at these schools: it was part of the culture, part of the way of life. In the schools we studied, we frequently found school personnel engaged in extensive efforts to bring new information into the school. Federal, state, and local resources were used to send staff to attend conferences, to visit highly effective schools, and to critically observe promising programs. At the same time, teachers and other personnel shared journal articles and discussed educational literature that enriched their discussions about how to improve.

The frequent analysis of data (as discussed in Theme 1) allowed teachers to learn from their own practice, and the regular collaborations (as discussed in Theme 6) often

led school personnel to adopt approaches that built upon the successes of individual teachers or groups of teachers. Thus, teachers and other school personnel were often learning as much about teaching as their students were learning about reading, mathematics, and other areas of the school curriculum.

It was easy to see how the educators' passion for learning and growing had been transmitted to students. Students exhibited both confidence in their ability to improve and eagerness to grow intellectually. Similarly, parents were often engaged in learning activities. In most of the schools, parents participated in formal and informal efforts to improve their capacity to assist the school in ensuring their child's academic success. Thus, the inclusivity described in Theme 4 is an important element in the passion for learning and growing.

These schools can truly be characterized as communities of learners. As school personnel learned and grew, so did parents, and so did students. Learning, growing, and improving were the focus of thousands of interactions among students, parents, and school personnel. Nonetheless, these schools did not fail to remember that every participant in the community of learners was first an individual, an important and valued member of the school family.   This constant reaffirmation, support, and validation (as described in Theme 5) was probably responsible for individuals finding the strength to confront daunting barriers, overcome those barriers, achieve impressive goals, and then re-focus their sights on even higher goals for student performance.

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