DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 442 TM 026 499

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TITLE Determining the Effectiveness of a School Improvement Plan.
PUB DATE 21 Feb 97
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association (Hilton Head, SC, February 21, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Achievement Gains; Attendance; Cooperative Learning; Discipline; Educational Environment; *Educational Improvement; Feedback; *High Schools; Inservice Teacher Education; Integrated Activities; Low Achievement; Participative Decision Making; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; School Culture; Scores; *Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods; *Test Results
IDENTIFIERS *Georgia; Tests of Achievement and Proficiency

ABSTRACT

A plan was developed to improve test scores in a Georgia high school. A committee of teachers, students, citizens, and a curriculum consultant was formed to analyze the school's problems and the reason for low test scores and low achievement. Data on the school climate indicated that it was poor, except that the instructional leadership of the administration and the quality of instruction as rated by teachers were considered good. The educational climate was considered deficient in openness to new ideas, values, and beliefs, and in involvement in the decision-making process. The school district's central office had already decided that the type of instruction had to change, so teachers were asked to choose among four alternative teaching strategies: integrated instruction, cooperative learning, learning styles, and the Paideia approach. They settled on implementing integrated instruction, cooperative learning, and the recognition of learning styles. Seminars and activities were conducted on team-building and shared decision making, and inservice training in these methodologies was provided. Pretest data from 1994-1995 and posttest data from the end of the 1995-96 school year measured progress related to scores on the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) for approximately 150 students. Test scores did improve, as did scores for school climate on a measure developed for the study. Discipline problems appeared to be less frequent, although there was no improvement in student attendance for absences over 10 days. Test scores and teacher feedback indicate that the school improvement program was effective. Appendixes contain three figures of school data and a survey. (Contains four tables, three figures, and five references.) (SLD)

DETERMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

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Paper presented at the Eastern Educational Research Association Conference at Hilton Head, NC 2-21-97.

DETERMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Introduction

Suppose you are a high school principal and the superintendent tells you that you have to do something about test scores at your school. He tells you that the problem is the teachers who bore students because all they do is lecture. He wants that to stop and gives you a mandate to embark on a school improvement project that will improve test scores. What can you do? Top down change is difficult at best! As you reflect on how to proceed, you remember a strategy you learned in your graduate class for dealing with curriculum problems (Eisner, 1994; Longstreet & Shane, 1993). The strategy consisted of four steps: 1) analyze the problem; 2) design a plan to solve to the problem; 3) implement the plan; and 4) evaluate the results of the plan. In order to conduct the analysis, a committee was formed to decide how to attack the problem.

A committee of teachers, students, citizens, and a curriculum consultant from a neighboring university was assembled to analyze the problem. The committee decided that they would write a grant ($5,000.00) to get funds for the analysis and design stages. Funding for the grant was received from the Georgia State Department of Education. As part of the analysis stage, the committee decided that test scores and school climate data on the high school were necessary. After reviewing different climate instruments, the Tennessee School Climate Inventory (TSCI) and the Group Openness and Trust Scale (GOTS) were selected. These climate instruments had been used in another school improvement project with good results (Benton and Bulach, 1995). The committee, based on the research of Bulach, Malone, & Castleman, 1995, believed that school climate could be important for improving student achievement.

The climate data revealed that the overall climate of the school was very poor with two exceptions: 1) the instructional leadership of the administration and 2) the quality of instruction provided by the teachers were viewed positively by the staff. The climate was very poor in two areas. They were: 1) openness to new ideas, values, and beliefs and 2) involvement in the decision-making process.

The test data that was collected verified that scores were indeed below the state and national averages. Exceptions were ninth and tenth grade science scores and tenth grade social studies scores. The overall averages, however, were below state and national averages.

After careful analysis of the data, the committee established the improvement of school climate and test scores as goals for the high school. The curriculum consultant identified two other concerns for the committee to consider. They were the following: 1) the high climate scores on instructional leadership and the quality of staff instruction indicated that their teaching methodologies were perceived as effective; and 2) their low climate scores

on openness and lack of involvement in the decision-making process could result in adversarial relationships. Consequently, it was believed that there would be a great deal of staff resistance on attempts to change the instructional process. Their high scores on instruction and low scores on openness suggested that they felt instruction was already good, and they would not be receptive to new ideas. Members of the committee confirmed this and added that the teachers were angry at being told that they had to change the way they were teaching. Further, teachers believed that they would have little to say about the instructional improvement process. Based on these beliefs, the committee realized that any plan would have to involve the teachers in the process as much as possible.

The problem was that since the central office had already decided that the type of instruction had to change, how could teachers believe they had some say in the process? The committee believed that the design of the plan would have to give teachers some feeling of control if it were to be successful. Consequently, it was decided that each department would be allowed to select a new teaching strategy of their preference to implement. In other words, while they had to change, they at least had some control over the type of change. Further they did not have to change their teaching completely. The teaching methodology they chose could be used to supplement their existing teaching style.

Selecting the new teaching methodology was the next step. Teachers were surveyed and asked to rank their preference from a list of teaching strategies. Four teaching strategies were identified: integrated instruction, cooperative learning, learning styles, and the Padeia approach.

The next step was to have each department identify which of these four new teaching strategies they wanted to learn. It was believed that collegial support was necessary. This would be more likely to occur if everyone in a department learned the same teaching new strategy. Visitations were made by selected staff members to other schools where these teaching methodologies were being used. Further, one staff development day was used to bring in consultants who gave an overview of each of the four teaching methodologies. As a result of these experiences, the Paideia approach was dropped since it required everyone in the school to agree on the approach. The Paideia approach would not allow each department to do what they wanted. The three other teaching methodologies were to be implemented the following school year.

Purpose of the School Improvement Plan (SIP)

Based on the above, the committee decided to write another grant to secure funds ($10,000.00) to implement a plan that would: 1) train staff in each department in these teaching methodologies; and 2) improve school climate. Based on success in achieving these two goals, members of the School Improvement Committee believed that test scores and climate scores would improve. Three factors that could have affected student achievement and climate scores were absenteeism, office discipline referrals, and suspensions. It was believed that the school improvement plan would positively affect these factors. An

improvement in these areas should positively affect climate and student test scores. Consequently, collecting data on these variables was part of the school improvement plan as well. The grant was approved, but due to a delay in funding from the Georgia State Department of Education, the school improvement plan was not implemented until February, 1996.

The plan to improve school climate consisted of seminars and activities on team-building and shared decision-making. The plan to improve test scores included five days of in-service on the teaching methodologies chosen by the various departments, e.g., cooperative learning, learning styles, and integrated thematic teaching.

The series of seminars and other activities focused on team-building and shared decision-making, involved ten hours of training in human relations, ten hours of training in conflict management, and ten hours of training in group dynamics. The seminars were attended by representatives selected from each department. A one-day team-building activity was held at the end of the 95-96 school year and was attended by the entire staff. Additionally, a school climate committee was formed to plan activities for the staff designed to improve school climate. Faculty barbecues, breakfasts prepared by administrators, decorating of halls, pep rallies, making the lounge more appealing, and getting help with the copying were some of the planned activities.

Activities designed to improve school-based decision-making were integrated throughout the plan. For example, there were: the school improvement planning committee; each department selecting a teaching strategy; the seminars; and the team building activity. These activities were also designed to improve school based decision-making and school climate.

Due to the delay in funding, most of the training took place over the summer of 1996. Consequently, the complete effect of the school improvement plan (SIP) was not felt until the 96-97 school year. The data to measure the effectiveness of the plan were collected at the end of the 95-96 school year. This data will be collected again at the end of the 96-97 school year for a more valid measure of the effectiveness of this school improvement plan.

Results

Pre- and post-data were collected on the following indicators to measure progress related to test scores: Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP) scores, student absenteeism, suspensions, and office referrals. A t-test for independent groups was used on TAP scores to determine if the differences between the pre- and post-school improvement plan data were statistically significant.

TAP scores were collected on students who were in grade 9 and grade 10 during the 94-95 school year (pre-data). These scores were compared against their performance while in grade 10 and grade 11 during the 95-96 school year (post-data). The pre- and post-data

scores were compared for gains or losses during the 95-96 school year, i.e., the year of the school improvement grant. Appendices A and B are graphs that illustrate the results of these comparisons. Except for changes in enrollment due to withdrawals or new enrollees, these are the same students. The grade 10 and grade 11 students (95-96), however, were exposed to teachers involved in a school improvement plan while the grade 9 and grade 10 students (94-95) were not. The TAP scores show an improvement in all categories except science scores (see Appendix A). The tenth grade students (94-95) when compared with their performance as eleventh grade students (95-96) show a similar pattern. There is an improvement in all areas but one--reading (see Appendix B). The average score for all subject areas is higher than the average for the prior year. It would appear from this data that the plan to improve the quality of instruction and student test scores was successful.

A further check on TAP scores was calculated to control for withdrawals and new enrollees. The only grades for which test data were available for all students were grades 9 and 10. Consequently, these were the only grades measured by this procedure. Students in grade 9 during the 94-95 school year who were also enrolled during the 95-96 school year were compared on their composite TAP test scores using the t-test for independent groups. Students who withdrew before the 95-96 school year or who enrolled during the 95-96 school year were excluded from this comparison. The mean composite score on the TAP for these students as ninth graders was 53.6 compared to 54.4 as tenth graders (see table # 1). The t-score to test the significance of the difference for this comparison was .74 ($p > .05$). This showed that while there was a positive difference in scores it was not significant. The unit of analysis for this comparison was individual students. The unit of analysis for all other comparisons in this study was the school.

Table # 1. A comparison of TAP scores before and during the SIP.

Students	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t-score	Probability
Grade 9 pre-	53.6	28.0	.73	.46
Grade 10 post-	54.4	28.9		

n = 150
df = 148

The data on student absenteeism were collected on all grades for the entire school for the 94-95 and 95-96 school year. The enrollment increased from 890 during the 94-95 school year to 903 during the 95-96 school year. Only students who were absent 10 or more days were included in this comparison (see Table # 2). There were 261 students who were absent 10 or more days during the 94-95 school year compared to 384 students who were absent during the 95-96 school year.

Table # 2. Comparison of absenteeism before and during the school improvement plan.

Year	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
94-95	63	81	58	59	261
95-96	121	122	73	68	384

Office referrals for discipline is another category on which data was collected (see Table # 3). There were 970 students who were referred to the office during the 94-95 school year compared to 1086 students who were referred during the 95-96 school year. A major increase in referrals occurred for the grade 10 students, and there was also a major decrease in referrals for grade 11 and grade 12 students.

Table # 3. Comparison of office referrals for discipline before and during the SIP.

Year	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
94-95	95	143	459	273	970
95-96	96	448	372	170	1086

The data on suspensions shows a marked improvement (see Table # 4). In-school suspensions decreased from 522 during the 94-95 school year to 259 during the 95-96 school year. Short term suspension decreased from 104 during the 94-95 school year to 79 during the 95-96 school year. Expulsions, on the other hand, increased from two to 14 during the 95-96 school year.

Table # 4. Comparison of suspensions before and during the SIP.

Year	In-school Suspension	Short-term suspension	Expulsion
94-95	522	104	2
95-96	259	79	14

Discussion

We are at a loss to explain the increase in absenteeism, except to say that the school improvement plan did not improve absenteeism. Perhaps there would have been some improvement if the data had been collected on all absences instead of those students absent 10 or more days.

In discussing the data on referrals and suspension with school officials, it was learned that there was a different assistant principal during the 95-96 school year. Grade 10 students were a particularly unruly class that was not referred as grade 9 students because teachers perceived that the assistant principal then did not deal effectively with discipline. This probably accounted for the difference with the school improvement plan having a negligible effect if any at all. It was the feeling of the staff that discipline had improved during the 95-96 school year, because the new assistant principal dealt with student discipline problems. This could have accounted for more referrals since teachers believed something would happen. It would also have accounted for fewer suspensions because problems were dealt with before suspension was needed. Students who were habitual offenders were expelled and not returned to the classroom.

Discipline is also a component of school climate. If discipline really had improved, it should show up in the school climate data and it did. The school climate variable affected is called "order" (see Appendix C). While the improvement is not significant, it is an improvement from a score of 24.1 to a score of 25.4.

Pre- and post-data were collected on school climate to measure progress on this objective (see Appendix C). School climate data were collected on the following variables: group openness, group trust, order, leadership, instruction, environment, involvement, expectation, and collaboration. Pre-school improvement plan data were collected in October 1995, and post school improvement plan data were collected in May of 1996. The results show improvement on all variables comprising school climate--see Appendix C. The largest gains were in the areas of group openness and environment. The least change was in the variables order and involvement. A score of 28 means that the faculty agreed that the behaviors which measure a variable were present. A score of 21 means that half the faculty disagreed that the behaviors are present. The overall climate score, which combines the scores for all nine variables, is a score of 26.7. compared to a pre-school improvement plan score of 25.1. Overall, while there is room to improve, it would appear that the objective for improving school climate was met.

Further information on school climate was collected through interviews with selected staff. While the previous quantitative data was collected at the end of the 95-96 school year, the following qualitative data was collected at the start of the 96-97 school year. Since a great deal of the staff development occurred over the summer, there was a need to collect

staff reactions to further evaluate the school improvement plan.

Ten teachers were selected who were thought to be representative of the faculty. They were asked 14 questions (see Appendix D) and told that their responses were strictly confidential. Keep in mind that the school improvement plan required each department to learn one new teaching strategy.

Question one asked how they felt when they were told that they were going to be required to learn a new teaching technique. Five responded negatively with "they did not like it" and the other five responded positively with comments like "excited" and "a good thing--things were too static."

The responses to questions two and three which dealt with how they felt about each department being given a choice about the teaching strategy they wanted to learn were mostly positive. Only two negative responses were noted. One was that "we never really had a choice" and the other was that "we did not know we had a choice."

Question four asked if things got better as the year went on. Three teachers said no and the rest felt that there was improvement, e.g., "people made a conscious effort to make it better". One teacher said that many teachers took offense at being told they had to change.

Questions five and six dealt with the best and worst things that happened last year. The positive responses dealt with the more open communications and the seminars they attended. Other positive responses dealt with the kids and the teacher methodology training. One teacher dealt with both best and worst by saying "the realization that what we had been doing for years was no longer going to be tolerated." Other responses to the worst thing dealt with annual evaluations where administrators indicated areas needing improvement. Comments about the tension, the leadership, and the disappointing test scores were also mentioned.

Question seven dealt with what would have made things better. Three responses dealt with less pressure and if the change had not been dictated. The remaining responses dealt with improved communication, less backstabbing, and people should be more positive.

The responses to the question concerning the involvement of the university professor were mostly positive indicating that this gave them some direction. Two indicated that the involvement was neither a help nor a hindrance. There were no negative responses.

Questions nine, ten, and eleven dealt with the training they received, whether they were ready to try it, and if they were looking forward to it. All responses but one indicated that the training was practical, and that they were ready to try it and were looking forward to the new school year. One teacher said the training was redundant, but was ready to try it, and was looking forward to a good school year.

The next question dealt with what they were hearing from colleagues. All but two said that they were hearing positive things. One teacher said the feedback was mixed, and the other teacher said there was a faction that was negative and skeptical.

Regarding the question dealing with whether the changes would improve test scores, only three teachers believed this. Many teachers believe that test scores will only improve if the attitude of parents and students improves. Teachers perceive a great deal of apathy in the community toward academic achievement.

The last question addressed staff perceptions about school based decision making. All teachers but three felt that they had more of a say in what went on in the building. There was a feeling expressed by one teacher that they were pawns of the central office and the other two stated "no" to this question. A part of the school climate survey also dealt with teacher involvement in the decision making process. While the score on collaboration improved from 24.1 to 25.6. the score on the behavior "teachers need to be allowed to participate more in the decision making process" did not change. Consequently, we would have to infer that the goal on this objective was not achieved.

Conclusions

Based on the results of this data and the analysis, we concluded that progress was made on the goal of improving test scores and the quality of instruction. Improvement has also been made in improving school climate. Based on teacher feedback secured during the interviews and the school climate data, it would appear that discipline has improved although more students are being sent to the office. The area that still needs improvement is teacher perceptions of their involvement in the decision-making process. The committees are in place and there is school based decision making, but many teachers believe they can only make those decisions permitted by the administration and the central office.

The general tone among the staff as a result of the school improvement plan was very positive. The true impact will take place during the 96-97 school year. Teachers did not receive training on the new teaching strategies until the summer of 1996. Consequently, there was no impact of this training on the quantitative data collected at the end of the 95-96 school year. The qualitative data collected through the interviews after the start of the 96-97 school year was a measure of the training over the summer and a further check on school climate. This data was very positive and encouraging. There was a great deal of doubt at the start of the project that the school improvement plan would be successful because of staff resistance to being told they had to change. Two factors, in our opinion, reduced resistance: 1) allowing each department to choose a teaching methodology allowed some ownership and reduced psychological reactance; and 2) the combined effect of increasing involvement in shared decision-making and the seminars on human relations, conflict management, and group management. The seminars gave some staff members a better understanding of what was happening as they experienced the changes taking place. The

increase in shared decision-making gave them some feeling of control, although many still felt that they could only do what the administration allowed.

Limitations of the study

The delay from the State Department of Education in releasing the funds for this project severely handicapped school officials in carrying out the school improvement plan. The true impact of the school improvement plan will not be known until the end of the 96-97 school year when this data will be collected again. Also, the research design would be greatly improved if individual students were used as the unit of analysis instead of the school. For example, when school data on achievement were used it appeared that improvement had occurred. However, when individual students were used as the unit of analysis, it became very clear that while improvement had occurred, it was only a small improvement. Using the student as the unit of analysis increases the validity of the data comparisons.

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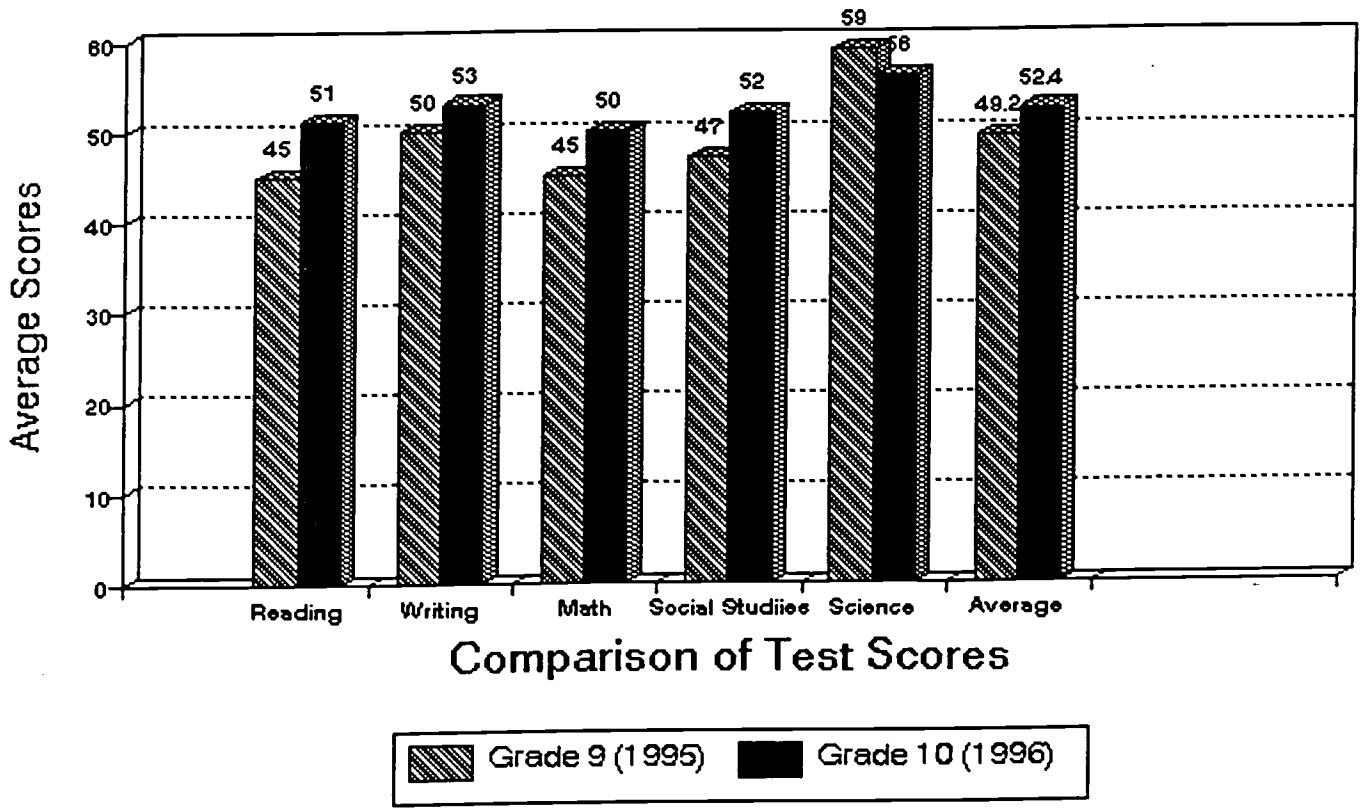
HARRIS COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL

1995-1996 School Improvement Plan



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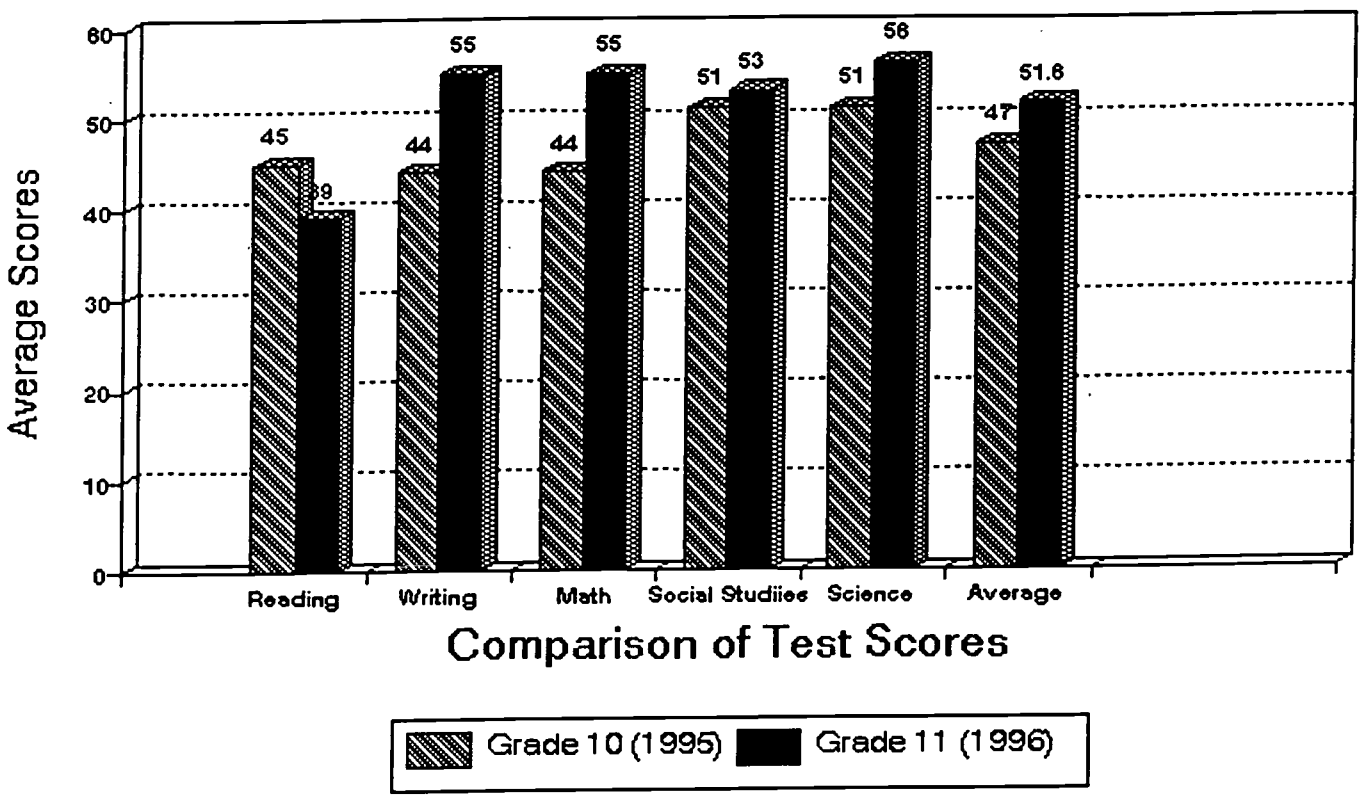

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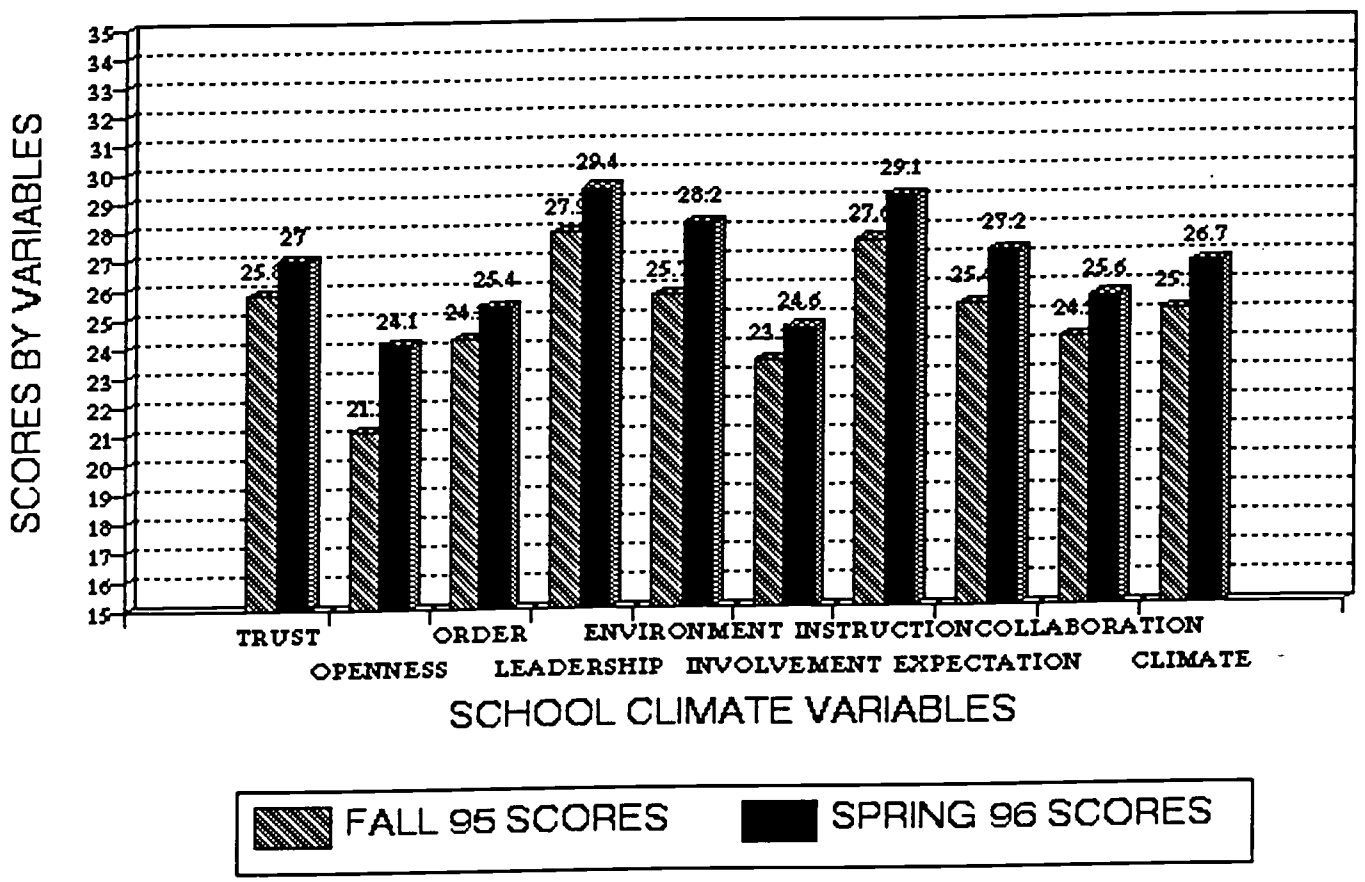

Appendix D

Harris County Survey
8-16-96

My role is to try and describe what happened at Harris County last year. Will you help me with that?

1. How did you feel when you were told that the grant had been funded and you were going to be required to learn a new teaching technique?

2. Did the fact that you were given a choice regarding which technique you could choose make you feel any better?

3. How did you feel about the whole department doing the same thing?

4. As the year went on did you see things getting better or worse? did the climate improve?

5. What was the best thing that happened last year?

6. What was the worst thing that happened last year?

7. What would have made the year better?

8. Was my involvement a help or a hindrance?

9. What did you think of the training you received?

10. Do you think you are ready to try a new teaching technique?

11. Are you looking forward to the new school year?

12. What do you hear from your colleagues? positive or negative?

13. Do you think the changes that have taken place will improve test scores?

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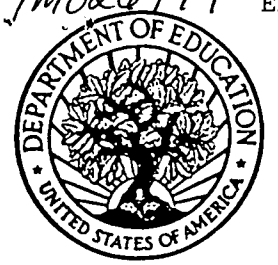

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